

Szörnyeteg Felső-Magyarországon: Grünwald Béla és a szlovák–magyar kapcsolatok története [A monster in Upper Hungary: Béla Grünwald and the history of Slovak–Hungarian relations]. By József Demmel. Budapest: Ráció, 2021. 283 pp. / Ľudožrút v Hornom Uhorsku: Príbeh Bélu Grünwalda. Bratislava: VEDA, 2020. 288 pp.

Before this book, József Demmel had written three other monographs about men who, in different ways, maneuvered in between the conflicting Slovak and Hungarian identity projects of the 1860s and 1870s: the Evangelical pastor Gustav Adolf Seberini/Gusztáv Szeberényi, the senior county official József Justh, and the members of the so-called “New School.” This time, he chose a protagonist from the same period whose commitment to a militant, state-sponsored Magyar nationalism was solid and unwavering. Béla Grünwald (not to be confused with the painter of the same name) was both an eminent historian and a theoretician of public administration, but he is known first and foremost for his nationalist pamphlet from 1878, *A Felvidék* [Upper Hungary]. Demmel’s book concentrates on his earlier career, also drawing on Grünwald’s previously unexplored personal papers.

Demmel first paints a portrait of the elites of Zólyom County, where Grünwald’s career unfolded. The 1840s saw the emergence of two parallel local public spheres, one in Hungarian consisting of nobles and one in Slovak of a priestly-commoner character. The latter was more numerous. More locals read Ľudovít Štúr’s journal *Slovenské národné noviny* than the organs of the Hungarian press, and the citizens of Zvolen elected Štúr to the 1847 diet. After 1848–49, the tide briefly turned in favor of the Slovak cause. Slovak was introduced into the administration and became the language of instruction in the local Catholic grammar school. By the time Grünwald arrived in the county in 1867 as its freshly elected chief county clerk, the political winds had shifted again, and the local strongman Antal Radvánszky had forced several Slovak cultural institutions to take refuge in neighboring Turóc County.

As Radvánszky’s protégé, Grünwald placed the fight against the Slovak movement at the center of his concerns. He coordinated the Magyarization of the Banská Bystrica gymnasium, fulminated against the Nationalities Act when it was passed in 1868, and later bombarded the government with memoranda demanding a crackdown on the national minority movements. In 1873, he launched the Slovak-language *Svornost’* with government aid, which he edited and partly wrote in a pro-Magyar spirit. The following year, already as the *alispán*

(top elected official) of Zólyom County, he came to national fame by initiating a government investigation against the then-existing four Slovak grammar schools, an unusual move given that none of them operated in his jurisdiction. Demmel provides a detailed account of the infamous process that led to the closure of the four schools. He emphasizes that, contrary to popular belief, it had little to do with Kálmán Tisza and mostly took place under the watch of Prime Minister István Bittó.

Turning to the dissolution of the *Matica slovenská* in 1875, Demmel again stresses that it was not Tisza's plan so much as the result of Grünwald's intrigues. While the procedure against the Slovak high schools was already underway, Grünwald had started fomenting public outrage against the *Matica* in the Budapest press. Based on Grünwald's manuscripts, Demmel identifies him as the author of several denunciatory articles. Through private channels, Grünwald later also gained access to confidential investigation materials and, appealing to a public opinion increasingly riled up against the minorities, he put pressure on the government to suspend the association. Since the *Matica* operated in Turóc County, the incident allows Demmel to open a parenthesis and describe local political life since the 1840s, which diverged considerably from the trends in Zólyom County.

The book is arguably the least successful as a work of psychohistory. Demmel motivates much of his inquiry by the goal of understanding what turned Grünwald into such a passionate enemy of the Slovak identity project and what secret personal trauma drove him to commit suicide. The array of facts that he digs up in the process are unquestionably suggestive of the political and social milieu, but they don't answer these questions. To uncover Grünwald's Slovak roots and present his anti-Slovak fervor as the fanaticism of a convert would be facile, given that only his uncle Anton Majovský/Antal Majovszky seems to have flirted with the Slovak movement for a while in the 1860s. Grünwald's many love affairs, on the other hand, made him the butt of small-town gossip, involved him in at least one duel, and left him with one illegitimate child. In particular, the Slovakist Viliam Paulíny-Tóth's anonymously penned mock-heroic lampoon in *Národné noviny* in 1873–74 ridiculed his love escapade with a married woman. It sold out instantly in Banská Bystrica, where everyone could identify the characters. Demmel may be right that the popularity of this satire forced him to relocate to Budapest, and it may even have cost him his relationship with his son's mother. But Demmel goes too far in projecting a causal link between Grünwald's suicide and Paulíny-Tóth's politically motivated snipe at him 16 years earlier.

Demmel does not hide the fact that, in his endeavor to uncover Grünwald's secret trauma, he takes a hint from Mihály Lackó's brief biography of Grünwald, an early Hungarian representative of the psychobiography genre (*Halál Párizsban: Grünwald Béla történetész művei és betegségei* [1986]). It remains something of an enigma, however, why Demmel feels the need to convince his reader that Grünwald was not an anomaly, the lonely Slovak-bashing "monster" (as he is described in the title), or, more perplexingly, that "his chauvinist nationalism was not rooted in his low character" (p.237). Demmel implies the existence of a scapegoating narrative in Hungarian historiography that blames Grünwald for the oppression of Slovaks. However, he does not specify where he sees this narrative, which lends his reasoning a slight strawman character.

One could note other controversial points. For example, Demmel takes it as proven that the use of Slovak as the language of instruction in the four gymnasia did not disturb the Magyar political elite. But his reference to existing German high schools makes a weak case, because German soon had to retreat from high schools in Hungary (although not in Transylvania). Moreover, he backs up his statement that the four gymnasia functioned as training bases for the Slovak national idea with the following innocuous quote from the headmaster of the gymnasium in the town of Martin: "follow your faithful leaders and be grateful to those who want to lead you towards enlightenment and education" (p.173).

But these are either relatively minor or superficial details, which do not lead the argument into fruitless digressions and are greatly outweighed by the merits of the book; its useful biographical clarifications, a rich portrayal of political life and elite sociability in two counties over the course of three decades, a lucid account of the closure of the Slovak gymnasia, and insights such as the impacts of inter-county rivalry on the Slovak national movement and the creation out of nothing of a Magyar public sphere in Zólyom County. Demmel reconstructs "the extent to which the Hungarian character of the county was just a smokescreen" (p.24). At pains to present a Hungarian image to the outside world, the local liberal nobility of the 1840s began to speak Hungarian in county assemblies and social events, which obviously required serious effort and excluded many monolinguals. As a result, however, they were able to blot out the Slovak world of the country from the view of the wider Hungarian public. They actively sustained such a vision to convince their co-nationals of the county's loyalty, which also made them keener to silence the Slovak opposition than the central authorities were.

Last but not least, Demmel deserves plaudits for a terminological innovation. He uses the word “magyar” in inverted commas for denizens of contemporary Upper Hungary with a pro-Magyar cultural and political outlook and calls their opponents “Slovak enthusiasts.” While unhyphenated Magyars without Slovak ancestry were indeed few and far between in the Zólyom County of the 1870s, the latter term may sound oddly archaic or even condescending. On second thought, however, its looseness can recommend it as an alternative to the narrow and reductive “nationalist.” Certainly, this binary opposition gives more justice to the politics of identity choices in the given context than a crude contrast between “Magyars” and “Slovaks.”

The book was published in parallel Hungarian and Slovak versions.

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