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## Introduction

The existence, the very survival, of the Hungarian people and their nation state in the Carpathian basin is a miracle of European history. There are few, if any, nations whose image has been shaped by so many and such contradictory clichés, spun during the course of centuries and epochs, as that of the Magyars. How did “child-devouring cannibals” and “bloodthirsty Huns” become the defenders of the Christian West and heroic freedom fighters against the Mongols, Turks and Russians? Who were these “Asiatic barbarians” who had spread dread and alarm during their forays from Switzerland to France and from Germany to Italy, yet did not sink into oblivion with the last migratory wave from Asia?

Their ancient homeland, their origins, the roots of their language, and the reason for their migration and settlement are still subjects of controversy. However, it can hardly be doubted that, except for the Albanians, the Magyars are the most lonely people of Europe with their unique language and history. Arthur Koestler, who dreamed in Hungarian but wrote his books in German and later in English, once said: “The peculiar intensity of their existence can perhaps be explained by this exceptional loneliness. To be a Hungarian is a collective neurosis.” This many-faceted loneliness has remained the decisive factor in Hungarian history ever since the Conquest around 896. The fear of the slow death of a small nation, of the Hungarians’ extinction and of the consequences of the forced amputation of entire communities due to lost wars (every third person of Hungarian origin lives abroad) forms the background of the prevalence of death images in poetry and prose.

Myths, legends and folk traditions concealed or distorted reality, but at the same time these myths shaped history in this region, moulding the concept of the nation. A varied relationship, at times crowned by brilliant successes and at others shaped by tragic

conflicts, was set in motion between locals and conquerors, newcomers and the excluded under the crown of St Stephen as the symbol of the so-called “political nation”. The interaction between open borders and isolation, between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, between the feeling of aloneness and sense of mission, between fear of death and rebellion against stronger adversaries, was impressively mirrored in the changing times and culture of Hungary’s history. A long chain of crucial defeats strengthened the sense of defencelessness (“We are the most forsaken of all peoples on this earth,” said Petöfi, the national poet) that has imbued almost every generation of Magyars with deep-rooted pessimism. The devastation of the country after being repeatedly left in the lurch by the West during the Mongol invasion of 1241, the catastrophe of Mohács in 1526 with the consequent Ottoman occupation lasting a century and a half, the crushing of the War of Independence in 1848–9 by the united forces of Austria and Russia, the destruction of historical Hungary through the harsh terms of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, more than four decades of Soviet rule and Communism after the Second World War, together with the bloody suppression of the October revolution of 1956—all were catastrophes, which time and again intensified the feeling of abandonment. Yet who could dispute this people’s endurance and mastery of the art of survival?

Despite the threefold carving up of the country during centuries of foreign occupation, the Hungarians managed to preserve their national identity. It was passionate love of their country that gave them the strength to survive when surrounded by Germans and Slavs, without relatives and isolated by the “Chinese Wall” of their language, and to weather these catastrophes. One of the keys to understanding the rise and fall of Hungary from the Conquest till the end of the First World War, but also the rapidly alternating radical changes between 1920 and 1990, is the exhortation (drawn up around 1030, probably by a German monk) addressed by the first Christian king from the Árpád dynasty, St Stephen, to his son:

The Roman Empire has won significance, and its rulers became famous and mighty, because numerous nobles and sages from various countries congregated there. [...] As settlers come from various countries and provinces, they bring with them various languages and customs, various

instructive concepts and weapons, which decorate and glorify the royal court, but intimidate foreign powers. A country which has only one language and one kind of custom is weak and fragile. Therefore, my son, I instruct you to face [the settlers] and treat them decently, so that they will prefer to stay with you rather than elsewhere, because if you were to destroy all that I have built and squander what I have collected, then your empire would doubtless suffer considerable loss.

Thus as early as the eleventh century Germans arrived in upper northern Hungary and Transylvania at the invitation of the dynasty. Over the centuries not only the defeated nomad peoples such as the Pechenegs and Cumans, but also Germans and Slovaks, Romanians and Croats, Serbs and Jews were, in a sense, absorbed by the Hungarians. One of the most astounding traits of Hungarian history, subsequently suppressed or flatly denied by nationalistic chroniclers, is that the makers of the national myths, the widely acclaimed heroes of the Ottoman wars, the political and military leaders of the War of Independence against the Habsburgs, the outstanding figures of literature and science, were totally or partly of German, Croat, Slovak, Romanian or Serb origin. Considering that at the time of Emperor Joseph II Magyars formed merely one-third of Hungary's population, but that this had increased by 1910 to 54.5 per cent, the dynamic of linguistic and political assimilation by old Hungary was extraordinary. According to statistical estimates the number of Germans regarding themselves as Hungarian exceeded 600,000, of assimilated Slovaks more than half a million, and of Jews who had become Magyars some 700,000. It has been estimated that already before the First World War the proportion of assimilated Germans, Slavs and Jews made up more than a quarter of statistically established Magyardom.

The Hungarian idea of the state, based on a totally unrealistic vision of the role of a great empire under the Crown of St Stephen in the Danube region, and including the suppression of the nationalities, was not racist but had an exclusively cultural motivation. Everyone who professed to be Hungarian had an equal chance of upward mobility. That included, of course, those Jews who, as Hungarians of Jewish faith, already identified with the Hungarian language and culture at the time of the national movement of 1848 and the subsequent decades. Moreover, Hungary needed loyal subjects to improve the Hungarian proportion within the lands of the

Crown of St Stephen, who would be willing at the same time (together with the Germans and Greeks) to engage in commerce and finance as well as the professions—fields consistently rejected by the Hungarian middle and lower nobility. The unique relationship between Jews and Magyars shaped the radical change in commerce and culture after the *Ausgleich* (Compromise) with Austria in 1867.

The fate of assimilation-keen Jewry belongs to the most dazzling and later, in the inter-war period and particularly after the German occupation of 1944–5, the darkest chapters of Hungarian history. An absurd yet logical consequence of officially promoted anti-Jewish legislation was that many of the greatest talents, among them eight Nobel Prizewinners, achieved their pioneering successes in science and art, finance and industry, not in their homeland but mainly in Britain or the United States.

The relationship between Hungarians and Germans became, and remained, close after the marriage in 996 of St Stephen to the Bavarian princess Gisela, sister of the later Emperor Henry II. German priests, knights and nobles who arrived in Gisela's retinue played a leading role at the court of the first Hungarian king, who looked upon Germanic institutions as models. So too did his successors of the Árpád dynasty by systematically encouraging the formation of larger German colonies; in the words of a Hungarian historian of the nineteenth century, "The Hungarians created the state, the Germans the towns." The attitude towards the Germans of the Magyar upper crust fluctuated between unconditional admiration and deeply-rooted mistrust.

As for the Germans, the royal free cities dominated by German citizenry were spared by the Ottoman wars. While their first large groups were brought by the Hungarian kings into the northern parts of the country and the Saxons into Transylvania, the Habsburgs in the eighteenth century settled them principally in the southern Hungarian regions of Bácska and Bánát. It was the privileges granted to the German burghers which in part aroused jealousy in the disadvantaged Hungarians. However, the movement led by nationally minded nobles and literary figures at the beginning of the nineteenth century aimed at the preservation and renewal of the Hungarian language endangered by Germanization, was politically far more significant. At the time it was thought by many Hungarian

families to be bad form to converse in their mother tongue or to mention Hungarian poems or novels. The poet Károly Kisfaludy, who at first corresponded in German even with his own brother, and who had almost to relearn his mother tongue, warned: “People who do not possess a mother tongue do not have a fatherland either.” In a fiery speech at the Academy of Sciences in Budapest on the eve of the Revolution in 1848 the writer József Bajza said:

“The German language and culture are a threat to our nation. We should at last come to our senses and realise that this fashion leads us to ruin, and that the penetration of the German language in particular means the end. [...] We should not hate the Germans, but we should be on guard against them. [...] I am not a barbarian, nor do I want to inveigh against education. [...] Nonetheless I regard it as a sin if a nation pays for its education with its own existence.”

When the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy came into being after the *Ausgleich* in 1867, and Hungary attained considerable independence within the framework of existing possibilities, the country went the way of an accelerated, indiscriminate and increasingly unbridled Magyarisation. This prompted Franz von Löher, in an aggressive polemic, to accuse the Hungarians of being “a nation without culture” because “the entire thousand years’ history of the Magyars is nothing but a yawning void. Help can come only from the diligence and culture of the Germans in Hungary.”

It was this dichotomy between cooperation and conflict, alliance and collapse, community of interests and the aspiration for a distinct direction that henceforth moulded the mutual relationship. The more than half-million-strong German minority of rump-Hungary became during the Third Reich at first an obviously privileged tool of the National Socialist regime, and then, with their mother country’s final catastrophe, a casualty when half of their number were expelled. For the next decade the remaining minority suffered unjust discrimination.

It is therefore no wonder that during the 1,000-year history of the Magyars the eternal question “Who is a Hungarian?” or “What is a Hungarian?” continues to arise. The answers have never been unambiguous. It also happened that, depending on the prevailing political climate, the same literary historian Julius von Farkas, who was much quoted especially in the German-speaking areas, extolled

great Hungarian writers and scientists, only to ostracise them a few years later for their “outlandish race” and “harmful influence” on the nation. That these ostracised literary figures, much maligned as “anti-Hungarians”, often wrote Hungarian much better than their tendentious critics belongs just as much among the ludicrous aspects of Hungarian history as the fact that in Hungary ethnic exclusivity in literature and politics was almost always expressed by representatives of totally or partly “foreign races”.

This was already pointed out by Antal Szerb, author of the still unsurpassed *History of Hungarian Literature*. He gave as an example the famous general and poet Count Miklós (Nicholas) Zrinyi. A Croat by birth, Zrinyi declared himself (in contrast to his younger brother Péter, who translated his great poems into Croatian) to be Hungarian. Szerb emphasised that one of the greatest heroes of Hungarian history had thus proved that nationality was the result of an attitude, a matter of choice. Szerb himself fell victim to the Holocaust.

Who is aware that the Hungarian pioneers of modern times played a considerable part in the invention of the atom bomb, the computer and Hollywood; that the Hungarian genius, of whatever ethnic or religious background, has helped to mould—often decisively—science and art, economies and industries all over the world? The contradiction between brilliant individual achievements and repeated collective national failure remains one of the most fascinating traits of this formerly nomadic people. Is it therefore impossible for the Hungarians as eternal losers to hope for a peaceful union of the mother nation with the dispersed third of its people under foreign rule? Or do they turn out time after time to be at once victors in defeat, victims and masters of *savoir-vivre*, romantics and realists? The writer Tibor Déry remarked after the defeated Revolution of 1956: “What is Hungarianness? A joke dancing over catastrophes.”

This book is a personal attempt to acquaint the non-Hungarian reader with the Hungarians and their varied fortune by way of a mixture of historical overview, biographical sketches and vignettes. As a native Hungarian of Jewish origin, transformed into an Austrian after sixty years in Vienna, the author feels that he is immune to taboos, and can describe the Magyars with friendly eyes but at the same time from a critical distance.



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