Hungarian Activities in Western Pennsylvania

Andrew A. Marchbin

Every immigrant group originating from Austria-Hungary and settling in the last fifty years in western Pennsylvania has a history belonging to two continents. Every ethnic unit during its settlement in this region has built up separate religious, labor, fraternal, and social institutions that should be considered as centers of the several groups. The activities of such organizations are really an important part of the history of the particular group and, as such, a part of local history. The second phase of the history of these immigrant groups is their activity on behalf of their compatriots who were struggling under political, social, and economic disabilities in Austria-Hungary. That is an important part of European history.

The people of Austria-Hungary and the immigrants who came to the shores of North America from there were not members of a homogeneous group, members of the same ethnic unit. They were politically Austrians or Hungarians, but from an ethnic, cultural point of view they belonged to a dozen different groups. Those of Hungarian nationality could be members of Hungarian, Slovak, Polish, Ruthenian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Vendish, Rumanian, German, and Gypsy cultural groups. From a religious point of view they were divided into denominations whose forms differed even more widely. There were Roman and Greek Catholics; Greek Orthodox; Protestant followers of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli; and Orthodox and Reformed followers of Judaism. Each one of these groups brought along traditions that were guides to their later activities.

The first problem that the historian faces in writing the history of the

1 This brief survey of the subject and of sources available for its further study is an outgrowth of a broader investigation of the history of the southeastern European elements in this region begun by Dr. Marchbin as a fellow of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey in 1931-32. — Ed.
Hungarians in western Pennsylvania is the impossibility of establishing the numerical strength of this group. After all, even though one possesses materials on certain of their activities, one ought to know something of the scope of such activities in terms of the number of people concerned or affected. There is a difference if the expression of the group is that of a few or that of several hundred thousand. The United States censuses of the past fifty years, which should enlighten us on this question, are unreliable. From 1870 to 1900 the population is listed according to national origin—in this case simply as Austrians or Hungarians. We know today that most of the Hungarians of the above-mentioned years were really Slovaks whose settlement in this region was much earlier than that of the Hungarians. The census of 1910 gives the mother tongue for the population in cities over one hundred thousand. Here we find the first picture as it relates to the numbers of various ethnic groups coming from Austria-Hungary. The census of 1920 cannot be used for our purpose, since the designation “country of origin” places many ethnic Hungarians in the national groupings of Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Austria, and Jugoslavia. Thus one of the most important sources, which should serve as a guide to the writer of a history of the Hungarians in western Pennsylvania, is of little or no assistance.

In a study that the writer made of the immigrant population in twenty-two counties of western Pennsylvania, it was found that the only possible way to solve the problem described above would be to go over the original census sheets of each county for a given census year and, from the information entered under the headings, “place of birth” and “name” of the individual, make a new classification. Such a work naturally cannot be done by a single individual. For that reason any Hungarian, or member of any other ethnic group originating from Hungary, who might look to the census as a basis for historical or sociological research would find nothing more than a source that is misleading to the advantage of the Hungarians until 1910 and to the disadvantage of the other groups coming from Hungary.

Before 1900 the Hungarian settlement in western Pennsylvania consisted mostly of industrial laborers engaged in mining and in the manufacture of iron and steel. Every new industry that accepted or invited cheap unskilled immigrant labor became a base for the future immigrant
group. Pittsburgh mills have engaged Hungarian immigrant labor since the eighties. They appeared later in the first mills of McKeesport in large numbers. In Homestead, after the strike of 1892, the management increased the number of immigrant laborers. Hungarian labor thus found employment there and became the nucleus for the later enlarged settlement. Most of the Hungarians who came to America before 1900 were single men belonging to the productive age group, nineteen to thirty-five. They came from regions where overpopulation was always a serious problem, as in northern Hungary, or from sections such as the Hungarian plain, Alföld, where the great landholders barred them from acquiring sufficient land to become self-supporting. Because they usually received lower wages in America than the members of the native group, these immigrants were forced to live in "boarding houses," which were usually owned by one of their compatriots who already had his family here. These boarding houses would be worth describing in a special study for they played an important part in the immigrant community and as such are a part of the social history of this region. Special local conditions produced them, and the life there was typical of the condition in which the newcomers lived. These boarding houses were the homes of from twenty to thirty men who usually slept in "shifts," according to their periods of rest. The mistress of the house was a kind of adviser and "banker" for her boarders. The boarding house was a center of vice, bred in the new environment. It was a naturalization center from which the agents of corrupt political parties brought their unlawful naturalized voters. It was also a gold mine for the squires and other lower police functionaries, who preyed on the ignorant boarders of the slum sections.

Footnote: In the seventies of the last century on account of the emigration of agricultural workers, the wages of skilled as well as unskilled labor went up in Hungary. The managers of the large estates, having complained of their inability to find sufficient able-bodied laborers to harvest the crops, requested the government for permission to import Chinese coolie labor. This attitude of employers induced the government to prohibit emigration, and any propaganda on its behalf was declared a criminal act. Yet the underground propaganda of steamship agencies was successful, and thousands left the country for North and South America in successive years. Near the turn of the century this illegal emigration induced the government as well as leading economic bodies to study the problem. The printed literature in Hungarian for and against emigration is quite extensive, but until the archives of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior are opened, the most valuable material on the background of Hungarian emigration will be unavailable. At present, the most reliable materials on this subject are the United States consular reports.
The boarding house also had a laudable side. The single man was with members of his own group, who could extend to him some help in case of distress. In these homes the immigrant was a solid part of a group with whose members he could talk over his personal problems as well as those vital to the group. The lonesomeness of a stranger, in a new environment with totally different cultural patterns, was thus dispelled.¹

As the number of the Hungarians increased, two forces were at work to organize them around some institution. The first was the church, especially the home missions of the various denominations. The second comprised the various factions of the labor movement. The Hungarian immigrant was a kind of raw material ready to follow any friendly call. Coming from backward sections of agricultural Hungary, he professed to be a member of a Christian denomination, not on account of firm religious convictions, but because the church with its forms was a part of his cultural pattern. He left Hungary chiefly on account of economic problems and arrived in the New World where he had to face new economic difficulties, such as temporary unemployment, low wages, and social discrimination. Both interests employed Hungarians as organizers. Each one appealed to the worker as a fellow Hungarian who wanted to help him and was prepared to solve his problems. The first, religion, came to the immigrant with the traditions of the past. The latter, labor, put his daily problems before him. Religion found a ground prepared for its work but was handicapped by the competition between the various denominations. Labor was handicapped because the Hungarians had no tradition for labor organization and came from the highly individualistic agrarian class in Hungary. For twenty years no organized movement could make any headway with the Hungarians. The missions could not build their own churches, having only a handful of followers. Labor could not induce them to enter its organizations, because it was opposed by industrial management. Instead, members of two or three boarding-house groups would combine and create small fraternal organizations, insuring their members against sickness and accidents. Many of these early fraternal organizations disappeared quickly, since they were unable to fulfill their financial obligations under the ever increasing number of accidents occurring in the mine and steel industries.

¹ Conditions in the boarding houses have thus far received very scant study, though often portrayed by fiction writers in the immigrant press.
From these mushroom fraternal organizations was created in 1904 in New York the Workingmen’s Sick Benefit and Educational Society. The fraternal organization leaders were imbued with the Socialist ideals of the time and included in the organization’s commitments financial help for the daily Socialist newspaper published in the interest of the working class. The Hungarian Socialist daily Előre (Forward), published in New York, received a regular financial contribution from the fraternal order. The “Forward” represented the Social Democratic faction of Hungarian labor. The Hungarian followers of Daniel de Leone at this time established a Hungarian faction of the Socialist Labor Party with a paper named Népakarat (People’s Will). Since the fraternal organization would not give financial support to the new organ of Hungarian labor, several hundred followers of the Socialist Labor Party created a new fraternal organization in 1906 and named it the Hungarian Workingmen’s Sick Benefit Federation. The Socialist Labor Party, having a strong nucleus of followers in East Pittsburgh, and having elected several officers of the fraternal organization from this region, decided in 1908 to transfer the headquarters of the same to Pittsburgh and later to East Pittsburgh. The Hungarian Workingmen’s Sick Benefit Federation exerted great influence over Hungarian labor in western Pennsylvania. By 1912 it began to publish a monthly, Összetartás (Unity). The organization is well managed and has in the post-World-War period reached a membership of over ten thousand. In opposition to the Socialist Labor party, the Hungarian Social Democrats have built on the North Side and in McKees Rocks a strong organization. The conflicts within the ranks of labor in the post-war period also had repercussions here. The followers of the Second and Third Internationals divided into separate organizations. The fraternal organization in East Pittsburgh has published a monthly magazine regularly since 1912, the files of which contain materials important to the history of Hungarian labor in this region. Since this organization has its headquarters in East Pittsburgh, the material could be utilized by students of this locality.4

4 Lipot Somlo, A Munkás Betegsegélyenő Szövetség Harminc Éves Évszövetség, 1–33 (East Pittsburgh, 1936). Since 1938 the organization has become independent of all political formations of labor.
information for the period from 1904 to 1921, and the Ujelőre from 1921 to 1937 for the followers of the Third International.

Of the religious denominations the Catholics were at first the most successful in organizing a Hungarian church. As early as 1900 they were publishing the Hungarian weekly Magyarok-Vásárnapja (Hungarian Sunday) in Cleveland. Besides their press, the rules of the Catholic church providing that any mission or ordained priest be automatically under the supervision of the local diocese helped their activity. As soon as the Irish and German Catholics realized the increasing problem of the new groups, they asked the Catholic Church of Hungary to transfer priests who could preach in the vernacular of the various ethnic groups. Financed by the local diocese and being able to utilize any Catholic church near to the Hungarian settlements, the Hungarian Catholics were well organized by 1900. A Hungarian convent, which purchased a large tract of land near McKeesport (Buena Ventura), became the first Hungarian Catholic educational center. Sisters sent over to this institution from Hungary became the instructors of the Catholic Hungarian children of this region. McKeesport built the first Hungarian Catholic church in this region. The priest Kálmán Kovács, a fiery exponent of militant Catholicism, soon established the weekly Magyar Csillag (Hungarian Star). This weekly not only expressed the opinions of militant Catholicism, but was also opposed to the aspirations of labor, and to the nationalistic agitation of Slovak, Ruthenian, and other minority groups coming from Hungary. The Hungarian Star followed a clerical pro-Hapsburg program. It was Kovács's aim to establish a strong Hungarian Catholic church and to be the leader over other ethnic units in America by way of Catholicism. The files of his magazine are still preserved in the Hungarian convent near McKeesport. It is a file of very valuable factual material relating to the activities of the Hungarian Catholics of western Pennsylvania in the years from 1900 to 1915. Besides this magazine, the official correspondence preserved in the local Catholic diocese, relating to the establishment of other Hungarian churches and to the transfer

5 Hungarian labor in this region at present is represented by the Social Democrats, the Socialist Labor Party, the I. W. W. (Industrial Workers of the World), and the Communist Party. The mouthpiece of the first group is Az Ember (New York); of the second, A Munkás (New York); of the third, Bérmunkás (Cleveland); and of the last, Magyar Jóvő (New York).
of Hungarian priests to these localities, is the most important material available.

The Protestant church had to pass over many critical years before it was able to get a foothold in the Hungarian community. Most of the ministers were at first small-salaried home missionaries whose congregations were unable to support ministers of their own. The Protestant Hungarians were also more inclined to follow the directions of the Hungarian labor leaders who, true to their European traditions, were agnostics. The early struggle of the Hungarian Protestants in Pittsburgh was described in a monograph by Rev. S. Kalassay in *Husz Ev* (Twenty Years). Kalassay is a Protestant minister who was brought by the Home Mission to Pittsburgh as early as 1896. The monograph is so important that an English translation of an extract from it should be published in the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* with explanatory footnotes. It would give the local historian an insight into the problems that the Hungarian Protestant community was facing at the turn of the century. The difficulties of the Protestant Hungarians were also experienced at the same time by other newly arrived Protestant groups from southeastern Europe. By 1890 the Protestant Hungarians had a place of worship in the downtown section of Pittsburgh, the first of its kind in this region.

The industrial depression of the nineties in the United States must have shaken the Hungarian population of western Pennsylvania and the church membership of this locality to such an extent financially that the Protestant minister, János Kovács, decided in 1893 to emigrate with several hundred Hungarians to the Canadian prairies, where he founded the settlement of Békevár in Saskatchewan. Rev. Kovács reorganized and renewed the efforts to create a Hungarian agricultural settlement in Canada. The first movement of Hungarians from industrial Pennsylvania to agricultural western Canada had begun in 1885. The movement was started by Count Paul O. Eszterházy (not the one involved in the Dreyfus affair) with the support of the Canadian government. The writer has studied the documents relating to this movement in

---

6 The source was published by the author in Pittsburgh in 1912. Another monograph by the same author, *Twenty-five Years of History of the American Hungarian Reformed Association, 1896–1921*, was published in Pittsburgh in 1921.
great detail and has published a short article on it in the *Slavonic Revue.*\(^7\) An article on this subject has also been published in the *Annals of the Canadian Historical Society.*\(^8\)

For some time the Hungarian Protestant group in Pittsburgh used the place of worship of the Reformed Church of the United States on Webster Avenue, which for a long time was also known as the Church of All Nations. The Hungarian ministers had to preach also in the languages of other southeastern European groups and see to it that the children received religious instruction in their own mother tongues. But as soon as the Hungarians felt that they were able to build their own church, the minister of Hungarian mother tongue refused to preach in Slavic vernaculars. This narrow nationalistic tendency of the Hungarian clergy, coupled with the agitation of the Protestant Slovaks for the preservation of their own group culture, brought about a break between the two groups in 1891, each forming an independent congregation. The Hungarians built their church in Pittsburgh, the Slovaks, in Braddock. This separation between the Protestant Hungarians and Slovaks in western Pennsylvania had interesting repercussions which belong to the history of Hungary. The Slovak Protestant Church in this region became the center of Slovak nationalism. A fiery propaganda developed against the rule of the Hungarians in Upper Hungary, which was settled by a Slovak majority. The propaganda emanating from this region had such an effect on the Slovaks that the Hungarian Government was forced to look for some remedy against the growing dissatisfaction directed from America.

Thus the Hungarian Protestant missions in the United States were chosen as a medium to contradict the separatist ideas of the Protestant Slovaks. The Hungarian missionaries who had been sent out to America by the Hungarian church and who were receiving very meager financial remuneration from the Home Mission of various Protestant denominations in the United States now were officially recognized as representatives of the Hungarian church. The salaries of teachers and missionaries were sent to them from Hungary, and the Hungarian government increased its subsidies to the Reformed Church of Hungary, enabling the

latter to take care of its newly acquired responsibilities. Under the cover of religion, nationalistic groups began to fight each other. Each one claimed a place under the sun for his compatriots in Europe. The Hungarians claimed that the Protestant Slovaks were tools of Panslavistic propaganda, financed by Russia. The Protestant Slovaks accused the Hungarians of wishing to exterminate the Slovaks' group culture. This racial duel of Hungarians and Slovaks in this region was later extended to other religious denominations and ethnic groups, but none of them fought with such vehemence as the Protestants.

Materials for a study of the Hungarian version of this development may be found in the daily newspapers Népszava (People's Voice) of New York, Szabadság (Liberty) of Cleveland, and Orállo (Watcher), the first Protestant publication, which after 1904 was published under the name of Magyar Reformátusok Lapja (Hungarian Reform News). But the most important source of information is the correspondence probably preserved in the files of the Hungarian Ministry for Public Worship at Budapest.

Between the years of 1900 and 1910 the various religious denominations of Hungarians expanded in western Pennsylvania. New churches appeared in smaller industrial and mining communities. Numerous Hungarian Roman and Greek Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Baptist churches appeared on the horizon. It is interesting to note that industry has contributed large sums to the building funds of the churches. It appears that for the building of the First Hungarian Reformed Church in Pittsburgh the minister, Rev. Kovács, collected $237.35 from members, but L. P. Hanna gave $500, Laughlin and Company, $250, J. T. Hamilton, $250, the Linden Steel Company, $250, and six other industrialists, $600. The Hungarian newspapers Szabadság and Népszava usually published the list of contributors to the building funds of the churches, and the Hungarian labor leaders of the time accused the church of cooperating with industry in exploitation of the immigrants. An investigation of this charge would be an interesting contribution to American economic history.

Events of the years 1912 and 1913, during the Balkan Wars, significantly affected the local Hungarian community. The latter had become

9 A short history of the Hungarian churches is to be found in G. D. Berko, Az Amerikai Magyar Népszava díszalbuma 1899–1909 (New York, 1910).
more or less stabilized because many workers had brought over their families and had decided to remain permanently in America. The crisis that followed the Balkan Wars brought along a new wave of immigrants who had been influenced by the political ideas prevalent in Hungary. The struggle between social democracy and middle class capitalism, agrarian radicalism and reactionary landlordism in Hungary was transplanted to this locality. The struggle of the constitutional opposition in the Hungarian parliament against the autocratic methods of Count Stefan Tisza's government, of the idea of an "Independent Hungary" versus the "Dual Monarchy," was discussed profoundly in this community. The current opinion expressed by the Hungarians in the United States was so important for Count Tisza that he stationed several well-paid agents in American cities whose purpose was to create a favorable opinion toward his strong-arm methods. In general, before the World War the opinion of American Hungarian groups favored the nationalistic aspirations of the democratic opposition in Hungary. A delegation of the opposition parties of Hungary came to the United States in February, 1914, under the leadership of Count Michael Károlyi, to tour the Hungarian settlements and acquaint them with the struggle of the opposition parties. This journey would have had important repercussions in the future democratization of the Hungarian parliament had not the World War begun in the summer of the same year. Károlyi was received as the leader of the Hungarians, as the true exponent of the desires and aspirations of the lower and middle classes. He appeared in Pittsburgh, Johnstown, Erie, McKeesport, Beaver Falls, and other communities of western Pennsylvania. Since this American journey of representatives of the Hungarian opposition parties is an important part of the history of the Hungarians' struggle for democracy, it would be worth while to collect the opinions expressed by the local newspapers in this region. It would be interesting to see how the Hungarian Count was received by the English press, with its various economic interests, and to learn of the attitudes of the immigrant groups as expressed in the foreign-language press.

Through the writer, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania has in recent years acquired complete files of the New York Hungarian dailies, Népszava and Szabadság, from the inception of the World War until 1926. These papers contain weekly columns about events of the Hungarian community in western Pennsylvania and give a fairly clear
picture about the social conditions of these communities.

In the post-war period, after the division of Hungarian territory between the successor states, the Hungarian government and the official Reformed Church of Hungary were unable to finance further the church's activities in the United States. The local communities here were still unable to procure the necessary amount of money from the membership, which had been especially hard hit by unemployment. The Union of Hungarian Churches was thus forced to look for aid from richer Protestant organizations in this country. By 1922, the Reformed Church of the United States was willing to finance the Hungarian churches through its Home Mission, paying the salaries of teachers and ministers on condition that after ten years the subsidy would cease and all the property of the Hungarian Protestant communities would go over into the possession of the Reformed Church of the United States, whose church dignitaries would be recognized as the highest authorities in church matters. An agreement to that effect was ratified by a majority of the Hungarian Protestant ministers in America, and the Protestant authorities of Hungary were glad to transfer all their property in America to get rid of a heavy financial burden.

Personal elements and financial matters, however, brought the minority to a stage where they were not willing to accept the majority's decision, and they decided to remain independent. They emphasized that there were certain formal differences between the teachings of the Hungarian Reformed Church and those of the Reformed Church of the United States. They said they preferred to remain a part of the Hungarian Church even without receiving any aid. In the larger settlements, for that reason, two Reformed churches came into existence—one that belonged to the "United" faction, the other to the "Independent" one. The first and major one called itself the "Hungarian Reformed Church," the latter called itself the Independent American Hungarian Reformed Church. A careful study of this split leads to the conclusion that economic interests have had much greater influence in dividing the group than intellectual or religious ones. It was a question of leadership and of benefits to be measured in dollars and cents. This division was most violently fought in Allegheny County, since the leaders of both factions were living in this region—Reverend E. Sebestyén in Duquesne, and Rev. J. Melegh in McKeesport. For over ten years they fought with
every possible weapon, and local courts often had to make the final decision. This matter is a very interesting one and an important part of church history. Somebody with independent thought, not influenced by sympathy for either side, could write a very interesting master’s thesis on this subject. The sources would be Magyar Egyház (Hungarian Church), a monthly of the Independent group, and Amerikai Magyar Reformátusok Lapja (American Hungarian Reformed News) for the unification faction. Reverend Sebestyén’s correspondence as well as that of Reverend Melegh is available and could give much interesting information on this matter. L. A. Kalassay, who has written a doctor’s thesis on the Hungarian Protestant Church, mentions only some of the formal religious differences, but leaves the economic phases untouched. As far as the Hungarian Jewish community is concerned, the establishment of one of the greatest orthodox Jewish places of worship in Pittsburgh is to be attributed to them. They organized themselves as early as 1880 in Pittsburgh, and their present synagogue is located in Squirrel Hill. It is called Poale Zedek. Those living in Hazelwood created in 1910 the Ahavath Zedeck Congregation. In McKeesport, Johnstown, and Rochester, Hungarian Jews were the leaders of orthodox Judaism in opposition to the Reform ideas of the German Jews, and it was they who organized the orthodox Jewish groups. The synagogues have still preserved some of the correspondence which could be utilized in a study of Hungarian Jewish activities.

A very important contribution, from a cultural as well as from a social point of view, is that of the Hungarian Cultural Association, which has existed for nearly thirty years in this community. It has regularly brought Hungarian lecturers and artists to this city, created a valuable library, and arranged social affairs which have attracted the middle class of this group. The association is non-sectarian, but its membership consists of the Hungarian Jewish middle class element. The association has lost its former glory, since the older generation is dying out, and their sons have no desire to segregate themselves around Hungarian culture. The association’s minutes and some of its correspondence should be utilized by future historians.