THE PUZZLE OF A PITTSBURGH STEELER:
JOE MAGARAC'S ETHNIC IDENTITY

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EVERYONE who has heard of Pittsburgh and who knows anything of American football is familiar with the Pittsburgh Steelers, but, sad to say, not all these people know much about Joe Magarac (or Joe Muhgu-rutz). Sad because if ever there was in American history or in American folklore a prototype for the rugged, sturdy, determined Steelmen from Western Pennsylvania, it had to be Joe Magarac. Sadder still, perhaps, is the fact that even some professional historians and some very well-known folklorists do not know all they should about this legendary Man of Steel. Indeed, they might even exemplify Mark Twain's saying that the trouble with some people is they know too many things that "just ain't so." Some of the things that even leading folklorists have wrongly stated about Magarac — things that just are not so because they could not be so — include his nationality or ethnic background, the language he might have spoken and, in general, his identity. To note some of these errors, to offer a partial explanation of them, and to help establish the true identity of Joe Magarac is the purpose of this brief article.

But, first, let us basically identify Magarac for those who may have forgotten what they knew about him or even those who may have avoided his fame. Very briefly, what Paul Bunyan was to lumbering and logging, Joe Magarac was to the steel industry; what Bunyan was to the North Woods, Magarac was to the mills of Western Pennsylvania. And to locate our hero in time: Magarac first became known to the general reading public when Owen Francis wrote an article for the November 1931 issue of *Scribner's Magazine* entitled, "The Saga of Joe Magarac: Steelman." While some of what Francis wrote might be subject to challenge, it is commonly acknowledged that Joe Magarac got his first real measure of fame following Francis's article. Benjamin Botkin in his *A Treasury of American Folklore* follows the *Scribner's* piece in de-

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veloping his account of the steel giant, as he does again in 1950 in the widely-known *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*. The noted and controversial historian-folklorist Richard Dorson states simply that Joe Magarac was “hatched in the fancy of Owen Francis.”  

Be that as it may, the point to make here is that Owen Francis, Benjamin Botkin, Richard Dorson, and almost every writer who mentions Magarac gives the Pittsburgh folk-hero an ethnic identity of sorts, but with what accuracy remains to be seen.

Botkin in the already mentioned *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* suggests a general Central European origin for our subject, contending that “In Hungarian and Slovak *magarac* means jackass.” Elsewhere, Botkin — again following Francis — explains the reason for the name: “Sure! Magarac. Joe. Dat’s me. All I do is eatit and workit same lak jackass donkey.”

Botkin then has suggested “Hungarian and Slovak” origins of Magarac because of what he says the word means in these two languages. But Botkin is less specific when he quotes Francis’s assertion that Magarac was “conceived in the minds of Hunkie steel-mill workers.” Dorson, using the same source, has a different ethnic emphasis (in an expansion of his already cited observation): “Joe Magarac, widely touted as an industrial folk hero of Hungarian steelworkers, hatched in the fancy of Owen Francis, who named his hero with the Slavic word for jackass. . . . ” Now the experts have introduced a new term, “Slavic.”

Before any further complications appear, we should perhaps review Francis’s article against Botkin’s and Dorson’s claims and see whether he ever actually mentions either Hungarian or Slovak. Francis mentions *Slavs* and talks of *Hunkies*, though he certainly does not use the terms in a pejorative sense. Rather he describes the “Hunkies” as the “best workers within our shores.” He recalls that one of the “many Slavs” who worked in the steel mill used the term “Magarac” to a fellow Hunkie worker but confesses that he was ignorant of the mother tongue they spoke (except for the meaning of the word “Magarac”), though he knew also “from the tone

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2 *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1950) has Benjamin A. Botkin’s article on Joe Magarac. Volume 1 was copyrighted in 1949; both volumes were edited by Maria Leach and Jerome Fried.


of voice and the manner in which it [Magarac] is used, that it was seldom used derisively." But the term \textit{Hunkie} would be misrendered sometimes as Hungarian, \textquote{\textit{Slav}} would sometimes be made specifically into \textquote{\textit{Slovak}}, and the popularizers of folklore, such as Walter Blair, would vividly portray the life of Magarac and his fellow Hunkies. In a 1944 work, Blair provides this setting: \textquote{This would be Hunkietown, so called because the Hungarian steel workers lived there in the rows and rows of brick houses”} and then describes \textquote{\text{a day the people of Hunkietown never will forget.”}} The unforgettable day was one when Steve Mestrovic staged the contest to see who among the steelmen would be allowed to wed his daughter, Mary. \textquote{Mary Mestrovic was a prize worth trying for,” wrote Blair. \textquote{Her eyes were as blue as the flames of a blowtorch; her cheeks were as red as a hunk of red-hot iron, and her hair was the color of melted steel.”} 6 According to Blair’s account (which largely follows Francis’s), competitors came from Homestead, Monessen, Duquesne, and even Johnstown, but of course the winner proved to be the stranger, identifying himself as Magarac, which he says, according to Blair, means jackass in Hungarian.

The singular Hungarian character of our protagonist seems further strengthened in the introduction of the section, \textquote{\text{Joe Magarac, the Man of Steel,” in the Life Treasury of American Folklore, \textquote{\text{The god of all steelworkers is Joe Magarac, a brawny Hungarian who could squeeze out steel rails barehanded.”}}} 7

Again, a popular folklore account from the 1960s has Adrien Stoutenberg asserting that the legendary steelman \textquote{appeared among the Hungarian steel workers in the part of Pittsburgh called Hunkietown.”} A specific ethnic coloration was given with the assertion that he ate \textquote{Hungarian meat soup and cheese noodles.”} 8

But other accounts challenge these unique Magyar claims. In a popular 1941 book by Anne Malcolmson, one reads this description of the famous contest for the hand of Mary Mestrovic: \textquote{As her friends knew well, Mary was in love with Pete Pussick. But in the custom of Slovakia, from which Steve had come, a girl had nothing to say about her marriage. Her father decided that for her. It had always been that way.”} 9 Here, the Slovaks are the \textquote{\textit{Hunkies}} in \textquote{Hunkietown.”}

\footnotesize{6 Walter Blair, \textit{Tall Tale America: A Legendary History of Our Humorous Heroes} (New York, 1944), 232-43.  
7 \textit{The Life Treasury of American Folklore} (New York, 1961), 261.  
9 Anne Malcolmson, \textit{Yankee Doodle’s Cousins} (Boston, 1941), 29-35.}
A similar 1958 work by Irwin Shapiro likewise emphasizes the Slovak heritage of the steelworkers like Steve Mestrovic and his friends: "Long, long ago, Steve lived in the Monongahela valley in a town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. He was a Slovak fellow with a big moustache. Like the other Slovak fellows, Steve worked in the steel mills." 10

But this Slovak emphasis does not square with the observation on "Ethnic Groups and Their Folkways" in *Pennsylvania: A Guide to the Keystone State*: "The workers of the steel industry, too, have produced a host of folk tales and legends. . . . Most famous of all the tales is that of Joe Magarac, a character created by the Hungarian steelworkers of Allegheny County." 11

At this point, the accumulated confusion demands a solution to the Pittsburgh puzzle. First, just what is incontrovertible about the folktales of the saga of Joe Magarac? This much: that the Magarac tradition is associated with the steel industry in the Pittsburgh area among European immigrants and that the significance of the name "Magarac" is that it is said to mean jackass or donkey in Hungarian and/or Slovak and/or "Slavic." This last point is probably the place to begin since it is relatively easy to check with dictionaries and with European and North American-born people who speak these various Old World languages. And here it is revealing that a perusal of Hungarian-English and English-Hungarian dictionaries reveals no word remotely like "magarac" to mean the work animal. Moreover, conversations with Hungarian-Americans at the numerous ethnic festivals in Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, disclosed no such vocabulary, nor did consultation with two professors of languages — one Hungarian-born and the second American-born. The natively fluent pastor of the Hungarian church in the historic Delray section of Detroit also verified this, stating he had never heard of such a Magyar word and adding: "Perhaps it is Croatian." 12

Again, an examination of dictionaries in Slovak and conversations with local (Detroit) Slovaks indicated no word like "magarac" meaning jackass, ass, or donkey. A similar result accrued from lexicographic and personal contacts with Polish, Russian, Ukrainian,

and other Slavic sources. This despite the fact that Dorson contends Owen Francis “named his hero with the Slavic word for jackass.” But, there is no single “Slavic” language, rather various ones, and Hungarian is not a Slavic language. In fact, Hungarian is not even an Indo-European language and is totally unrelated in vocabulary and grammar to any of the various Slavic languages. Perhaps Dorson was using “Slavic” in the manner some people formerly used, or misused, “Slavish.” A 1924 publication states in its preface: “This SLOVAK SELF-TAUGHT is for the Americans who are almost daily in touch with the Slovaks (incorrectly called Slavish people).” But that publication cites no word like “magarac” meaning beast of burden. So Botkin and Dorson and others are proved wrong on linguistic grounds, and we must look elsewhere.

Fortunately, an answer is provided by George J. Prpic in his 1971 study, The Croatian Immigrants in America. Prpic considers what Owen Francis and Botkin wrote about Magarac and concludes that Joe could only be Croatian. He supports his contention with linguistic evidence ignored by the half-dozen or so writers cited above. He writes, “The name Magarac is a Croatian word for ‘donkey’ (other Slavs use ‘osel’ and derivations of ‘osel’ for the word donkey).” Indeed this comports with the findings mentioned above. Conversely, Croatian dictionaries from Europe or America (including one published in Pittsburgh) invariably list Magarac with the appropriate meaning. Prpic notes, too, the Croatian names in the story: Mestrovic and Pussick, asserting “Mestrovic is a Croatian name, not known among other Slavic people.” Finally he concludes of Magarac: “The Croatians believe that he came from Croatia, from the centuries-old mining region of Petrova Gora. There is still a village in that region of Croatia where many people have the family name Magarac; one such Joso or Josip is believed to have gone to America and came to be known as Joe.”

A forgiveable filiopietism may slightly tinge Prpic’s account, but one cannot deny the basic linguistic evidence supporting his claim and contradicting certain other claims. Surely, one must agree with Prpic in this: “The saga of Joe Magarac was thus not conceived by anonymous Hunkies.” Rather, the saga was conceived by memorable

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13 S. Morivek, Slovak (Slavish) Self-Taught (Wilkes-Barre, Pa., 1924).
14 F. A. Bogadek, New English-Croatian and Croatian-English Dictionary (Pittsburgh, 1926). See also my own pocket dictionary, Dzepni Srpskohrvatsko-Engleski Recnik (Belgrade, 1965).
“Hunkies” — if we underscore that that term was used to describe the “best workers within our shores.” Through the decades, some Americans have regarded these workers and have found distinctions between Hungarians, Croats, Slovenians, Slovaks, Poles, and other Slavic peoples to be puzzling. One point, though, should be not at all puzzling. Rather, this point should be self-apparent; namely, a number of these diverse peoples, some whose ancestral language includes the word Magarac, a number of these Hunkies, if you will, with great strength, perseverance, and endurance did in very great measure build Pittsburgh — and America.