

HUNGARIANS IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

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EUGENE PIVÁNY

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Although the Hungarian has but recently become an "element" in the great American "melting pot," he has been by no means a stranger on this continent. He seems to have even preceded here all European races except the Norsemen, for the Tyrker, or Turk, who, according to the Icelandic *saga*, discovered grapes at Vinland about the year 1000 A. D., could have been no other than an Hungarian¹. In Sir Humphrey Gilbert's ill-fated expedition to New Foundland in 1583 we find an Hungarian humanist, Stephanus Parmenius Budæus, who had been selected by Sir Humphrey, on account of his learning and his elegant Latin verse, to be the historian of the expedition. Even the "fake" Hungarian nobleman appeared quite at the beginnings of colonial history, the first known example of this, fortunately not very numerous, species being no less a personage than the redoubtable Captain John Smith, President of Virginia, Admiral of New England, etc. He alleged to have received a patent of nobility, or grant of arms, from Sigismund Báthory, Prince of Transylvania, a copy of which is on file in the College of Arms in London. Hungarian historians, however, pronounced it to be a forgery, and a very clumsy one at that.

¹ Most of the latter translators and commentators of the *Hæmskringla* take Tyrker to have been German. The question hinges on the translation of the Icelandic words "á thyrsku." It is difficult to see how they can be translated with "in German" instead of "in Turkish." (Turk and Turkish were then the appellations given to the Hungarians and their language.)

There are records of Hungarian settlers and travelers all through the colonial period and the first half-century of the United States. But they are only sporadic instances, as the Hungarians were not a sea-faring people and have never made any systematic attempt at colonization; in fact, all the energy they possessed was needed in their own country to hold their own against the encroachments of the Habsburgs on their liberties. Of the Hungarian travelers who visited the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, the most prominent was Alexander Farkas de Bölön, whose book, first published at Kolozsvár in 1834, and particularly his observations on the political institutions of the American republic, made a deep impression on the Hungarian mind, the more so as they had a direct bearing on the political reforms then advocated in Hungary. Farkas's book was, no doubt, also one of the causes that induced an ever increasing number of Hungarians to emigrate to the American Land of Promise in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century; they were, however, still too few to engage the attention of the statistician.

Hungary was then in the ferment of a grand liberal movement, in which the three greatest Hungarians of the century, Széchenyi, Kossuth and Deák, took a leading part. This movement culminated in the upheaval of 1848, which, starting in France, swept over the whole continent of Europe. It was successful only in France. The liberals of the German and Italian countries, with the exception of Venice, soon had to drop their swords. Hungary alone kept up the struggle for a year and a half, and was finally overcome only by the combined efforts of the two greatest military powers of the age. It was not merely the traditional military prowess and patriotic self-sacrifice of the Hungarians, admirable as they were, that made their magnificent struggle pos-

sible; in these qualities the other peoples may not have been much behind them. It was their inbred constitutional instinct; it was their possession of a constitution which, alone on the Continent, was not a single written instrument based on the experiences of others, or the gift of a benevolent ruler, but was—like the English constitution—the natural growth of many centuries, making the sovereign nation the source of all legitimate authority; it was their experience in self-government in the counties which—when the rest of Europe was groaning under the weight of feudalism—were semi-independent little republics; in short, it was their possession of free institutions and the memories of the blood and treasure which their fathers had spent in securing and defending them, that enabled the Hungarians to rally around their leader and to keep the banner of liberty flying long after the others had failed.

The glorious Hungarian Honvéd Army was the hope and the object of admiration of the whole civilized world, and nowhere more so than in the United States. President Taylor acted only in accord with public sentiment when he dispatched Ambrose Dudley Mann, of Virginia, as special and confidential agent to Hungary to ascertain the true state of affairs with the view of recognizing her independence. Mann's reports, published only recently² are eloquent testimonials of American sympathy for the Hungarian cause, and offer a refreshing contrast to the reports of Lord Ponsonby, the British ambassador to Vienna, who appears to have been the dupe of Prince Schwarzenberg.

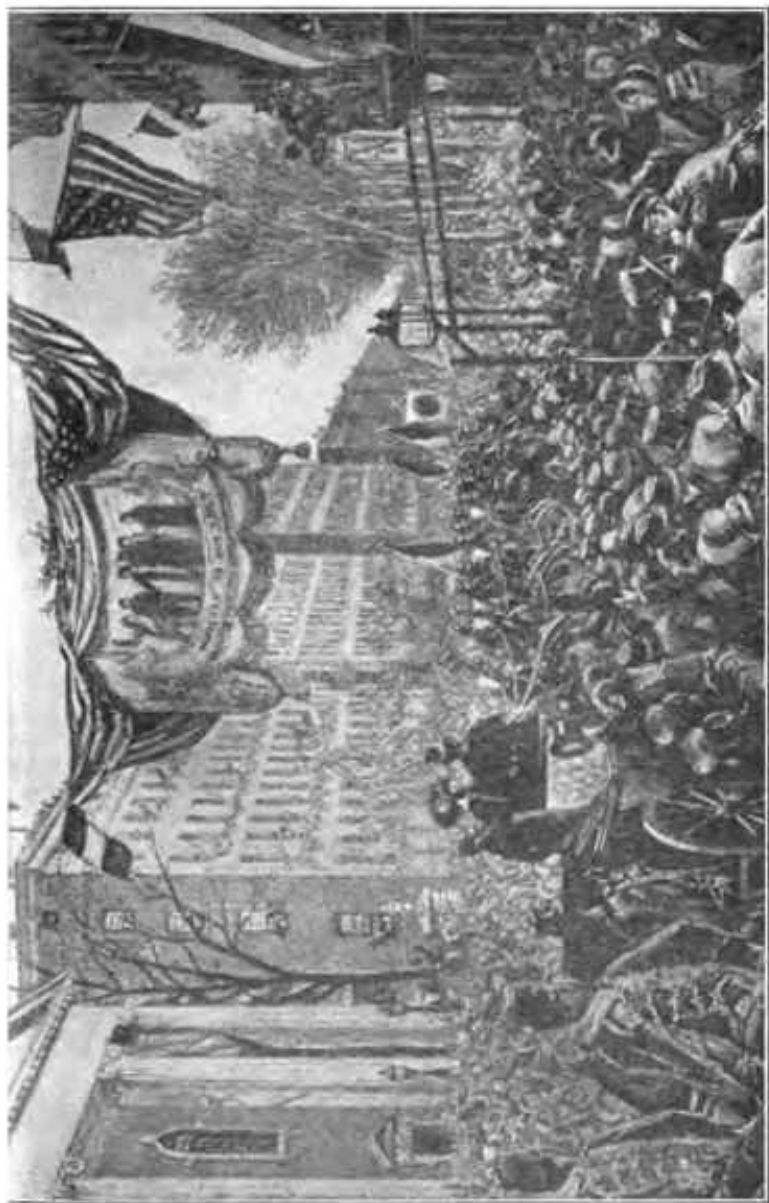
Hungary, at last, had to yield to the overwhelming power of Russia. Some of the patriots went into exile at once; others fell the victims of Austria's insane vengeance; still others, seeing the

² Senate Document No. 279, 61st Congress, 2nd Session. See also Senate Document No. 48, 51st Congress, 1st Session.

fate of their brothers who had staid at home, kept in hiding, waiting for an opportunity to flee to foreign countries. Most of those who followed Kossuth to Kutahia and Bem to Aleppo eventually came to the United States to join, or to be joined later by, their fellow-exiles who had found refuge first in Turkey, Italy, France or England. Louis Kossuth himself was freed from his confinement in Kutahia by the United States and taken on board a national vessel. There was a veritable Hungarian cult in America in 1849 and the early fifties, which, when Kossuth reached New York harbor in December, 1851, "had become almost a frenzy."

Since the Hungarians who, a decade later, offered their lives for the preservation of the American Union, came mainly from among these refugees, some observations on the character of this Hungarian immigration will not be out of place. It stands in a class by itself among all the immigrations of the nineteenth century. Its causes were purely political; its members came mostly from the middle and upper classes, and were thus superior in education and character to the average immigrant; they had received knowledge of self-government as an inheritance from their ancestors; they had seen actual service on the field of war; they were firm believers in democratic institutions, and they considered the United States as truly the Land of the Free.

Of course, there were many immigrants of other races in the same class, and the relations of the Hungarian, German, Bohemian and Polish refugees were very cordial, if not fraternal. But the other refugees were only a small minority of their countrymen who, particularly the Germans and the Irish, immigrated in the fifties in unprecedented numbers, being assisted therein by societies organized especially for that purpose. Some German dreamers even conceived fanciful plans



When Knowlton rode up Broadway, December 6, 1851.

for making German states out of Missouri and Wisconsin.

The Hungarian immigration was entirely unorganized. The refugees generally arrived in small groups and, more often than not, met with a sympathetic reception, helpful advice or even financial assistance from noble-hearted Americans. Not unfrequently they were ceremoniously welcomed, entertained by the authorities, and lionized by Society. At first they hoped to be called back soon to take up anew the fight for the independence of their country, but before long they realized that events in Europe were drifting in an unfavorable direction for such action. Within a few years they were scattered all through the free states as farmers, engineers, journalists, lawyers, merchants, teachers, clerks, etc., ultimately attaining more or less success and becoming respected citizens of their several communities.

Very few of them settled in the slave-holding states, except Missouri, as they instinctively detested slavery and were unwilling to employ slave labor. Probably the most prominent of the refugees was Ladislaus Ujházy, the scion of a noble race, former Lord Lieutenant of Sáros County and Commissioner of the District of Komárom, who in America was generally called "Governor" Ujházy. He first founded a Hungarian settlement named New Buda in Iowa, but, having lost his wife there, moved to Texas where he and his children built their own house and cultivated their own land. He did not take part in the Civil War, having been appointed United States Consul at Ancona by President Lincoln in 1861.

Another distinguished refugee was Col. John Prágay who had been Adjutant-General of the Honvéd Army. He arrived in New York in December, 1849, and, assisted by a fellow-exile, Cornelius Fernet, immediately set himself to the task

of writing a history of the Hungarian War³. This was the first English book on the subject, it had a wide circulation and, although necessarily imperfect and partizan, it was used as an authority in the subsequent flood of English literature dealing with the Hungarian question. Noble Prágay! He found an opportunity sooner than most of his fellows to offer his sword for the cause of liberty. He joined Narciso Lopez's ill-fated expedition for the liberation of Cuba, was severely wounded in the engagement at Las Pozas on the second anniversary of the surrender at Világos (August 13, 1851), and, to escape the ignominy of the *garote*, ended his life with his own hand before the Spanish soldiers could take him prisoner⁴.

II

When the conflict between national unity and states' rights and between freedom and slavery came to an issue which could be fought out only on the field of battle, the Hungarians in America responded liberally to the call for volunteers. They came of a race proud of its military qualities; most of them, as we have seen, had taken part in the Hungarian War, some of them also in the Crimean and Austro-Italian Wars; they were devoted to the cause of liberty; they felt grateful for the sympathy shown their native land in its hour of distress and for the honors showered upon their late chief, Louis Kossuth. No wonder they were eager to enlist in the Union Army; no wonder they did useful, honorable and glorious

³ *The Hungarian Revolution*. By Johann Prágay. New York, G. P. Putnam, 1850. 12-mo., 177 pp. An abridged German edition was simultaneously published by J. Helmich, New York, under the title *Der Krieg in Ungarn*.

⁴ A full account of this expedition by Louis Schlesinger, one of the participants, can be found in the *Democratic Review* for Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec., 1852. The final instalment of the series, dealing with the fate of some of the prisoners in Ceuta, was not published, because the magazine was discontinued. In Hungarian the matter is ably treated by Dr. Géza Kacziány in the *Scabadság*, Cleveland, Dec. 21, 1911. The Hungarians in the party were: John Prágay, as lieut.-general and chief-of-staff; Major Louis Schlesinger, Captain Radnics, Lieutenants Bontila, Eichler and Palánk, and Privates Biró, Nyikos and Virág.