

Julianna Puskás

Hungarian Academy of Sciences,
Budapest

Priljeno: 21. 11. 1987.

THE DIVIDED HUNGARIAN LEFT: 1917—1935

SUMMARY

Analyzed in the paper is the Hungarian emigration in the 1917—1935 period. Its purpose is to show the tradition and culture of national groups, along with the development of migrants pertaining to the society of origin and that of reception may influence the formation of radicalism in a workers' movement. Since 1919, with the emergence of communists, the Hungarian left has changed substantially, and a rearrangement of its groupings has also taken place. In this connection the question of to what an extent the adaptation has affected change in the migrants' political culture is raised. Another question put forward concerns the meaning to themselves of a change of their migrant worker status into an immigrant status, the development that has taken place since the 1920s.

The history of the labor movement of different immigrant groups provides a fruitful point of departure for the study of a number of issues: I would briefly like to explore some aspects of the *interrelation of the problems of ethnicity and class* in Hungarian immigrant groups. Especially those involved in the labor movement in the United States between 1917 and 1935, that is, the year of America's entry into the First World War and the October revolution in Russia and 1935, the year of the introduction of industrial unionism, the establishment of the CIO. I chose these dates, as they provide useful reference points in an exploration of changes which *determined the character of Hungarian immigrants' labor movement groups*.

First I would like to outline the characteristics of the Hungarian groups in the United States involved in the labor movement prior to 1917.

From relatively early on — from the 1880s — followers of socialist principles among the Hungarian migrants began to form organizations. These were usually skilled workers and craftsmen who had already been active in the labor movement in Hungary prior to emigration. The cultural traditions and common language of the members provided the cohesion for these early groups. They referred to themselves as »Hungarian-speaking socialists«, although they were always open to fellow immigrants from other ethnic groups coming from Hungary.

By the 1910s the Hungarian socialists had divided into the following groups: those belonging to the Socialist Party, those to the Social Labor Party, those sympathetic to the latter but in organizationally independent groups, plus those Hungarians belonging to the I. W. W.

What changes took place among the Hungarian radicals between 1919 and 1921?

During this period, the division of the Hungarian left was changed substantially and their groupings rearranged. The most important episode in all of these changes was the establishment of a communist group in 1919. The motivation for and characteristics of this rearrangement cannot be explained simply in terms of the immigrants' American experiences. Rather, they were also influenced by events taking place in the »old country«, e. g. the 1918 bourgeois democratic revolution, the creation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Hungarian Soviet Republic established in the spring of 1919, and its fall a few months later.

Among the changes which took place in Hungary in the autumn of 1918, the bourgeois democratic revolution led by Mihály Károlyi was warmly greeted by all Hungarian immigrants' groups. They had personal contact prior to the war with Mihály Károlyi and some leaders of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, who visited the Hungarian settlements in order to gather financial and moral backing for the opposition bourgeois democratic program.

On the other hand, the reaction to the news of a Hungarian Soviet Republic was not altogether positive. But we can emphasize the fact, that all the various groups involved in the labor movement hailed it as the great victory of the proletariat (In March and April 1919, Hungarian membership in the SP soared. According to one source, applicants for membership would line up outside the SP office in New York every Sunday!)

Soon, however, news arrived of the overthrow of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In response, on August 30th, there was a mass demonstration in New York by Hungarian immigrants living in the city and outlying communities. It was led by the leaders of the various labor movement groups.

The Hungarian Socialists belonged to the left wing of the Socialist Party in the US. When the communist group was established the core of the group was made up of those who had been expelled from the Socialist Party. But they were joined by former Social Labor Party and I. W. W. members as well. For a short time the »Hungarian language group« was an independent organization. At their congress — held November 1—3, 1919, — they declared »politically we will follow the Communist Party line and will take over the economic program of the I. W. W.« (*Elöre*, November 8, 1919).

At that time, it seemed that practically the whole left wing was represented at this congress. But unity was shortlived!

1919 to 1921, these were the years when the »searching a better way«, finding the right ideology characterized the Hungarian radicals. Those belonging to one or the other trend within the labor movement either joined forces or separated from one another, alternatively. From the summer of 1921, it is again division that prevails: the communists, the SLP, the SP, the I. W. W. all belong to separate groups — fighting against each other, and among themselves, as well.

Persecution caused by the »Red Scare« also began, and it decimated the ranks of the Hungarian radicals. On the other hand, though not arriving in large numbers, political emigrants, communists and social democrats coming to the US helped replenish the depleted ranks of the movement in the early 1920s. Unfortunately, there are no statistical data available of the figures. Conservative estimates, however, would give them as no more than a few thousand. All this gives a peculiar feature to the Hungarian radicals in the 1920s.

A bitter factional dispute of the communists broke out between the »old timers« and the newly arrived »nineteeners«. In years it became so fierce that the US Communist Party actually had to intervene to stop it. At the Hungarian congress, held in 1925, the »nineteeners« emerged victorious, getting themselves elected as leaders. Their role within the American communist movement increased: in addition to their revolutionary past they also had direct contacts with the Third International in Moscow through the Hungarian communist emigration. In 1922, the Third International sent the Hungarian Jozsef Pogany to the United States who worked under the name of John Pepper. A few other Hungarians also came to the US from Moscow (which is probably why Milton Cantor in his book *The Divided Left* mistook the Bulgarian Dimitrov for a Hungarian).

In spite of their differences, what was common in the attitudes of the Hungarian radicals in the 1920s?

Every group involved in the labor movement reported extensively on the Hungarian White Terror and the anti-semitism of the Horthy regime. The demonstrations and protests against it acted to unify not only the divided radicals but to create bonds between the radicals and groups outside the labor movement as well. It should be mentioned at this point that the majority of Hungarian radicals, at least among the communist and socialist activists — were Hungarian Jews. This fact helped facilitate the establishment of contacts to bring about concentrated political action against the Hungarian counter-revolutionary regime with such liberal bourgeois groups as the Federation of Hungarian Jews located in New York.

Another characteristic of the labor movement groups was that each tried to incorporate the historical experiences of the Hungarian Soviet Republic into its own political culture. As a historical event it became a frequent theme of poems, short stories and plays. Their newspapers detailed the significance of the Republic and analysed the reasons for its collapse. Naturally, as the latter was concerned, opinions varied.

There was another problem facing them. Of the Hungarians who had emigrated to the US, many came from those parts of the country which were subsequently handed over to the newly established states bordering Hungary as a part of the Trianon peace-treaty in 1920. These changes in the former territory of the country were regarded as an injury by the masses of Hungarian immigrants. It was this feeling that the Horthy regime tried to keep alive through its revisionist propaganda. The groups of the labor movement, however, partly because of their strong internationalist ideology and partly because of their dedicated opposition to the counter-revolutionary regime, did not deal with the national question arising from this new situation. They were therefore accused of being insensitive on this issue (and were isolated from the masses of the emigrants.)

In connection with all that I have said up to now, I would like to emphasize, that it would be very timely to make a comparative study of the following questions: in what ways and to what extent did the events taking place in the »old country« influence the development of the various ethnic labor movement groups of those emigrated from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy? Did they start their organizations together (as in Hungary) or have they gone their separate ways right from the beginning? If so, what were the causes that influenced their separation? Did the other ethnic groups also incorporate the lessons

of 1918—1919 into their political culture? And finally, in what direction did the events of the »old country« influence the ideology of the other groups between 1919 and 1921?

Let me now a few words on *the fraternal organizations of the Hungarian divided left*.

It is an interesting feature that the Hungarian socialists had two fraternal organizations. In the 20s, striking changes characterized them, it was at that time a definite differentiation took place in their goals and attitudes. One came under the leadership of the small-sized communist group. The other estranged itself first from the political parties, but later with held even from supporting the labor movement. It is instructive to follow up these changes, as they show the various processes of the shaping of class-consciousness.

I would particularly draw attention to the fact, that whilst a pitched rivalry and constant skirmishing developed between the leaders of the two workers' relief organizations, yet, at the same time, the rank and file of the respective branches kept close ties and attended one another's social events. It happened quite often that an individual would be a member of both groups or that a single settlement would choose the same person as secretary for both local fraternal organizations. It is worth noting that, at the level of rank and file, when it came to choosing one organization or the other, a bigger part was played by cultural traditions and personal relationships — and the emotions which these aroused — than by political ideology.

How did the different Hungarian labor movement groups react to the New Deal and the CIO?

»No single movement of America's Hungarian immigrants aroused such general interest in such a short time than the action instituted for a right solution of social security« — this is how the social-democratic newspaper *Ember*, which became an ardent supporter of the New Deal, reported the reception of Roosevelt's social program among the Hungarian immigrants.

It was not only the communists and the socialists who encouraged the members of their own fraternal organization to support the CIO, but the leaders of the »national« fraternal organizations as well, for instance those of the Verhovay Mutual Aid Benefit Society with its approximately forty thousand members. At the 1935 congress, debating the Social Security Bill, 150 of the 3,000 delegates represented Hungarian organizations. (*Uj Elöre* N. 1936, 28.)

On the other hand, those small groups of Hungarian followers of the IWW and the SLP, which adhered to radical doctrines saw only the maneuvers of the capitalists in Roosevelt's social program and the betrayal of the revolutionary industrial unionism by the industrial organization of the CIO.

Naturally, those groups which supported the CIO did not have identical expectations either. The socialists and the communists looked upon the CIO with expectations in the political sphere as well. They hoped for an industrial organisation of the workers and the establishment of a unifying workers' party with socialist goals, a disciplined and organized force on which they would be able to base their anti-capitalist and anti-fascist struggles anticipated in the coming years.

But the majority of the Hungarian immigrants who supported the CIO did not set political goals. They wanted collective contracts in defense of every worker, regulated wages, a change in the conditions of organizing and the opening of the doors for the union. For them it meant their release from the com-

pany unions which had taken advantage of ethnic conflicts and from the despotism of the foremen. To what degree this represented a historical change in their immigrants' lives, is shown by the fact, that — when retelling their life-stories — they periodized their recollections accordingly.

For a short while, the isolation of the left — at least of the communists and socialists — from the vast majority of the Hungarian immigrants came to a stop. This was the first time when the Hungarian radicals did not only identify with, but could instill the fight for, the workers' everyday interests. It was the period of the 1930s, no doubt, when class-consciousness was put before ethnicity.

To conclude: In my opinion, a methodical comparative study of the questions I raised in my paper could be a common undertaking. It would bring about a deeper insight into the problems of ethnicity and class concerning specially migrants from a multinational country.

Well, I guess, this is how I concluded my paper at the Budapest Conference. Still, I cannot help but think that this is the one and only way to get us as near to the truth as possible.

REFERECES

1. *Az Ember*. March 9, 1932.
2. *Bérmunkás*. a) January 4, 1936 b) March 27, 1936.
3. Cantor, Milton. *The Divided Left. American Radicalism 1900—1975*. New York, 1978.
4. *Előre*. November 8, 1917.
5. Gárdos, Emil. »Az amerikai magyar munkásmozgalom történetéhez, 1919—1929«, *Párttörténeti Közlemények*, 1968, 4, 7—108.
6. Kun, Béla. »Az amerikai magyarsághoz«, *Előre*, June 1920.
7. Puskás Julianna. *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban, 1880—1940*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982.
8. Puskás, Julianna. — Interviews taken in Detroit in 1983 and 1985. (On tape in the archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History).
9. Somló, Lipót. »Az amerikai munkásmozgalom erjedése«, *Az Ember*, Jubilee Number 17, 1936.
10. *Uj Előre Naptár*. 1932.

PODIJELJENA MAĐARSKA LJEVICA: 1917—1935

SAŽETAK

U referatu se analizira mađarska emigracija u razdoblju 1917—1935, s namjerom da se pokaže kako tradicija i kultura nacionalnih grupa, te odnosi migranata prema društvu porijekla i društvu prijema djeluju na formiranje radikalizma u radničkom pokretu. Od 1919, s pojavom komunista, mađarska se ljevica značajno izmijenila, a došlo je i do prerasporeda njezinih grupacija. U vezi s tim postavlja se pitanje koliko je adaptacija djelovala na mijenjanje političke kulture migranata i što je za njih značila promjena njihova statusa od radnik-migranta u useljenički status što se zbivao dvadesetih godina.