

**HUNGARIAN VICTIMS OF THE STEEL MILLS
AND COAL MINES OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA:
AS REFLECTED IN THE ÉMIGRÉ POETRY OF THAT AGE¹**

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INTRODUCTION

At this very moment we are in the midst of commemorating some of the worst mine and blast-furnace disasters in Pennsylvania's history. These disasters occurred exactly one century ago, when hundreds of Hungarians and thousands of other eastern and southern European immigrants died under most horrible circumstances. They were victims of the rapid and uncontrolled industrial expansion in America, as well as victims of the simultaneous absence of protective laws that could have prevented these tragedies and of a social welfare system that could have cushioned the hardships that befell the families of the perished workers. At the same time, these immigrant Hungarians were also the victims of an empire—the Austro-Hungarian Empire ruled by the Habsburgs—that was unable to offer them a decent life, supported by decent wages. For this reason they were forced to emigrate and thus become the victims—but in the long run, also the beneficiaries—of an ever-expanding industrial society that was on its way to dominating the Western world.

Contemporary newspapers—including ethnic newspapers—are filled with descriptions of these horrible catastrophes. But they are also remembered and recorded in the poetry of that period. Much of this poetry is of modest aesthetic quality, written by those who wielded the pen not so much because of their poetic abilities (which were usually limited) but because they witnessed the misery of their fellow Hungarians. The best known of these poets were Gyula Rudnyánszky (1858-1913), László Pólya (1870-1950), György Kemény (1875-1952), György Szécskay (1880-1958), László Szabó (1880-1961), Árpád Tarnóczy (1884-1957), Károly Rácz-Rónay (1886-1927), and Pál Szarvas (1883-1938), who wrote under the pen name of "*Indián*." These writers generally made their living by serving their ethnic communities either as pastors and/or as journalists. Of these eight poets, the Pittsburgh-based György Szécskay and the Cleveland and Detroit-based György Kemény devoted more attention to the Hungarian victims of Pittsburgh blast furnaces and Western Pennsylvania coal mines than any of their other fellow poets. After portraying the social scene in which they lived and worked, we will quote some of their relevant poetry, which depicts well the wretched lives of these early-20th-century immigrants from Hungary, and thus from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

THE IMMIGRANTS

In the period between 1880 and 1914 close to 25 million—mostly south-, central-, and east-European impoverished peasants and unskilled workers—emigrated to the United States from Italy, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, Scandinavia, and the Balkans. Of these 25 million immigrants, about four million came from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and nearly two million from the Kingdom of Hungary, which was a partner in the Empire of the Habsburgs. Of the latter two million, about one-third (650,000) were Magyars, while the other two-thirds belonged to such nationalities as Slovaks, Rusyns, Croats, Romanians, and even some Germans.

These immigrants came to this "land of promise" with much hope for a better life. But initially they found only exploitation and the constant presence of death in the blast furnaces and coal mines of Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Naturally, most

of those who survived these initial years eventually “made it” in American society. After some very hard years they joined the ranks of the American working class. Some of their offspring went beyond the world of their immigrant parents by becoming professionals. This was a phenomenon that would have been difficult to attain in the very class-conscious society of their original homeland.

BLAST FURNACE EXPLOSION IN PITTSBURGH

The year 1907 was especially horrendous in the life of the Hungarian immigrants. It began with the explosion of a blast furnace at the Jones & Laughlin Steel Works in Pittsburgh, and it ended with an even more horrible explosion at the Darr Mine in Van Meter/Jacob’s Creek, Pennsylvania, about thirty miles southeast of the “Steel City.”

The explosion at the Jones & Laughlin Steel Works occurred on January 10, 1907, while the Darr Mine explosion took place on December 19 of the same year. In the first of these explosions about thirty-five or more Hungarian immigrants were killed by the molten steel, while in the second explosion over three-hundred miners, among them at least 131 Hungarians, were torn apart or suffocated in the two-mile deep mine shafts of the Darr Mine.

As reported by the *New York Times* the next day, at the Jones & Laughlin explosion “tons of molten metal were showered around the furnace for a radius of forty feet. Out of the force of thirty-five men who were at the furnace, three of them were killed [...], seven are in the hospitals fatally injured, and twenty-four others have not been accounted for.”² As it turned out, the latter were all “cremated in the molten metal.” As recalled by one of the fortunate nearby survivors: “Suddenly there was a terrific roar, and I immediately started to run. Molten metal was falling and streaming in all directions. I reached a place of safety not a minute too soon. I don’t know what happened to the other men. I did not see any of them after the explosion. If they did not run quickly they are buried under six feet of molten metal.”³

The investigation conducted immediately after the explosion ascertained that virtually all of the men died. “The bodies of twelve men have been recovered, from fifteen to twenty men are missing, it being generally believed that their bodies were consumed by the hot metal, and ten are in hospitals terribly burned. Four of them are expected to die. Deputy Coroner Laidley says [that] one foreigner became crazed by his injuries, and before he could be prevented, [he] leaped into a pot of molten metal and was incinerated.”⁴ Thus, in effect, according to this report, at least 31 to 36 men died in this explosion, and a dozen others, if they survived, were probably maimed for life.

Already two years before this major blast-furnace explosion, there were reports that in some Pittsburgh-area steel furnaces “those workers who suffer major injuries are

² *New York Times*, January 11, 1907. Quoted in “Division of Labour,” September 1, 2009 <http://divisionoflabour.com/archives/003413.php>

³ *New York Times*, January 11, 1907.

⁴ *New York Times*, January 11, 1907.

cast into the molten steel and thus are incinerated.”⁵ The majority of the people who read these reports did so with some degree of incredulity. But when these rumors were substantiated even by Joseph G. Armstrong (1867-1931), the Coroner of Allegheny County, who subsequently became the Mayor of Pittsburgh (1914-1918), even the incredulous had to believe it.

While the *New York Times* article does not mention anything about the nationality of the perished workers, Hungarian sources reveal that the majority of them were Hungarians. This is readily evident from the reports published in the Cleveland daily *Szabadság* [Liberty], some of which reports have been reprinted in a collection of relevant articles and studies edited by Albert Tezla.⁶ Based on these reports, it is evident that this powerful explosion took the lives of thirty-five to forty Hungarian immigrants. And this was only one of many such blast furnace explosions, which ended the lives of hundreds of immigrants almost every year. Naturally, these explosions also impacted upon the families of the deceased, who were never compensated for their losses. In fact, in most instances they were harshly dealt with by the coal and steel companies, who soon evicted them without mercy from their company-owned houses.

One should also recall that the suffering of the steel workers who were not killed immediately by the blast was so intense that it can hardly be verbalized. It is even difficult to describe the dead corpses, let alone the sufferings and looks of those who were in the process of dying. Many of the corpses were fragmented and incomplete, and they were also distorted by the heat of the liquid steel.

As articulated by one of the reporters of the Cleveland *Szabadság*, “it is impossible to describe even approximately the horrible looks of the corpses. Burned into charcoal, hard as stone, without any flesh, [and] body parts torn to pieces. One corpse consists only of a head and a waist, his other body parts having been consumed and never found. Not until the day of my death will I ever be able to forget the image of the burned and terrifying bodies of these poor Hungarians.”⁷ Another correspondent described the scene as follows: “The face was coal-black and hard as stone with no trace of skin. There were two burned-out hollows in place of eyes, and the nose was missing. The corpse spread an unpleasant burned odor into the low, dimly-lighted room.”⁸

These scenes were being repeated from year to year. Not until the coming of F. D. Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s, did things change for the better. Starting with 1933,

⁵ See the article: “Elevenen megégetett magyarok” [Hungarians Who Were Burned Alive], in *Kivándorlási Értesítő* [Emigration Review], vol. 3, May 9, 1905. Reprinted in Albert Tezla, ed. *Valahol túl meseországban: Az amerikai magyarok, 1895-1920* [Somewhere in a Fairyland: Hungarian Americans, 1895-1920], 2 vols. (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1987), II, 20-25; hereafter, Tezla, *Valahol túl meseországban*. See also the shortened article: “Hungarians Burned Alive,” in Albert Tezla, *The Hazardous Quest. Hungarian Immigrants in the United States, 1895-1920*, trans. and ed. by Albert Tezla (Budapest: Corvina, 1993) 311-13; hereafter Tezla, *Hazardous Quest*.

⁶ *Szabadság* [Liberty], January 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 18, 1907. Reprinted in Tezla, *Valahol túl...*, II, 38-56. A few of these reports are also reproduced in the shorter English language version of this book, mentioned above: Tezla, *Hazardous Quest* 326-39.

⁷ *Szabadság*, January 14, 1907; quoted by Tezla, *Valahol túl*, II, 145.

⁸ Quoted in Tezla, *Hazardous Quest* 330.

protective laws were introduced, and a welfare system was established to help the women and children who were left behind.

EXPLOSION AT THE DARR MINE IN VAN METER/JACOB'S CREEK

Hungarians of the Pittsburgh region had hardly enough time to digest the extent of their tragedy at the explosion of the Jones & Laughlin Steel Works, when eleven months later an even greater tragedy befell them. It was the explosion at the Darr Mine in Van Meter/Jacob's Creek, where the number their countrymen who died exceeded about four times the losses they had sustained at the steel furnace explosion less than a year earlier. On December 19, 1907, barely eleven months after the Pittsburgh tragedy, the Darr Mine at Van Meter/Jacob's Creek exploded and killed over three-hundred miners. Nearly half of those who perished were Hungarians, among whom were a number of 12- to 14-year-old boys.

Rescue work was undertaken almost immediately, but because of the size and location of the explosion two miles into the mountain, this rescue consisted only of collecting and removing most (though not all) of the corpses and various body parts of the deceased miners. Eventually, 239 bodies were removed. But because of many unrelated body parts that were mixed together, it was impossible to count them all. Moreover, the lurking dangers in the gas-infested mine shafts prevented the rescue workers from searching all areas of the mine to find all the bodies of the killed miners. Consequently, many miners were never found, while others were brought up only in several pieces. Some seventy and eighty years after the tragedy, an old local miner still found some human remains in various sections of the mine he visited.

As was customary in those days, the inquest produced the expected results: the Pittsburgh Coal Company was totally exonerated from responsibility. In fact, all of the blame was laid squarely on the shoulders of the perished miners. And this conclusion was reached in spite of the fact that a few days before the explosion two men in leadership positions—Superintendent Archibald Black and Fire Boss David Vingrove—resigned and left the mine “on account of the gaseous nature of the mine [...]. They notified the officials [that] the mine was unsafe for men to work in,”⁹ but the officials took no action. The unscrupulous administrators were willing to risk the lives of hundreds of miners simply to increase their profits. After the explosion the only thing they were willing to do was to bury the dead—including those who could not be identified—at the company's expense.

Two years after this catastrophe the Hungarian American Federation, founded in 1906, erected a large slab stone in the local Olive Branch Cemetery with the following inscription:

⁹ “*Daily Reporter*,” December 20, 1907, Washington, PA. Quoted in “Darr Mine Disaster, December 19, 1907,” by Raymond A. Washalski, et. al., September 1, 2009 <http://patheoldminer.rootsweb.com/darr2.html>

“To the Memory of the Martyrs
The Darr Mine disaster, Dec. 19. 1907
Erected by the Hungarian-American Federation 1909.”¹⁰

This large slab was complemented in 1994 by an inscribed bronze plaque erected by the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission, which displays the following text:

DARR MINE DISASTER¹¹
On Dec. 19. 1907, an explosion killed 239 men and boys, many Hungarian
immigrants, in Darr coal mine near Van Meter. Some from the closed
Naomi mine, near Fayette City, which exploded on Dec. 1, killing
34. Over 300 miners died in Dec. 1907. The worst month
in U. S. coal mining history. In Olive Branch
Cemetery, 71 Darr miners, 49 unknown,
are buried in a common grave.

Having buried the bodies of the victims, life went back to normal. The Darr Mine continued to function and continued to produce coal right up to 1919, although in 1910 it was merged with the nearby Banning No. 3 Mine, and thus its name was removed from the maps of Western Pennsylvania. The victims were slowly forgotten, except in the writings of a few Hungarian American poets, who gave vent to their personal and ethnic sorrows, and to the bitter recriminations of the suffering wives and orphaned children.

THE BARDS OF HUNGARIAN-AMERICAN SUFFERINGS

From among the previously mentioned poets, György Kemény was the first to express this bitterness, and to describe the wretched life of the survivors, including not only family members but also those who had been maimed for life. He did this in his poem “Talyigás Kis Péter” [Péter Talyigás-Kis], which was first published in 1908 in a volume entitled *Száz vers. Magyar énekek az idegenben* [Hundred Poems. Hungarian Songs in a Foreign Land].¹² This poem deals with the tragedy of a coal miner who had lost one of his legs in a

¹⁰ “Remembering the Darr Mine Disaster: The American Hungarian Federation.” September 1, 2009 www.americanhungarianfederation.org/news_darrmine.htm

¹¹ “December 1907—Remembering the Darr Mine Disaster and the Deadliest Month in American Mining History.” Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. September 1, 2009 <<http://www.dep.state.pa.us/newsletter/default.asp?NewsletterArticleID=9807&SubjectID=>>; and Raymond A. Washalski, et. al. “Darr Mine Disaster, December 19, 1907,” <http://patheoldminer.rootsweb.com/darr2.html>

¹² György Kemény, *Száz vers: Magyar énekek az idegenben* [Hundred Poems. Hungarian Songs in a Foreign Land] (Cleveland, Ohio, 1908), 54. It is to be noted here that as a result of an error committed by Géza Hoffman in his book *Csonka munkásosztály* [Mutilated Working Class] published

mine accident soon after his arrival to America. He became a beggar, for he never had the courage to tell his wife about his misfortune. He continued to write to her—and lie to her—about his life of plenty in the “Land of Promise.”

TALYIGÁS KIS PÉTER

Talyigás Kis Péter egyszer csak elindult
Nagy Amerikába.
Jólelkű magyarok hamar beszerezték
A szenes bányába.
A második héten Talyigás Péternek
Ott maradt a lába.

Koldus lett belőle, gyámoltalan koldus,
Olyan világterhe.
Idegen országban, fiatal korában
Jaj, de meg van verve!
Bús sorsát megírni a feleségének
Ugyan hogy is merje?

Nem is írt felőle, nem is üzent róla
Szegény asszonyának.
Mankón támaszkodva kiállt a sarokra,
Ahol sokan járnak.
Így ette kenyerét Talyigás Kis Péter
Az aranyországnak.

Ha az asszonyának levelet írt néha,
A sorsát dicsérte:
„Jó módom van itten, nem dolgozom ingyen,
Mégfizetnek érte.”
És a könnye hullott dicsekvő koldusnak
Mindegyik levélre.

in 1911—wherein he mistakenly assigned this poem to György Szécskay—the authorship of this poem has been debated and confusing. Some began to attribute it to Szécskay. This was also true in the case of Ernő Rickert in his *Amerikai magyar költők* (A Magyar Jövő Ifjúsági Irodalmi Rt., Budapest, 1920). But Kemény's above-cited work, which appeared in 1908 and contains this poem, makes it unquestionable that this poem was written by György Kemény.

PÉTER TALYIGÁS-KIS¹³

Peter Talyigás-Kis one day departed
 To America
 Generous Hungarians helped him to get a job
 In the coal mines.
 But already in the second week Péter Talyigás
 Lost his leg.

He became a helpless beggar
 A burden of the world.
 And while still young, in a foreign land.
 He is really damned for life!
 How could he tell his wife
 About his miserable fate?

He did not write, nor speak about it
 To his poor wife.
 He sat on the corner with his crutches
 Where many walked by.
 Thus did Péter Talyigás-Kis eat the bread
 Of the golden land of promise.

If he wrote occasionally to his wife
 He praised his good fortune:
 "I live in plenty, and don't work for nothing.
 They pay me well."
 Yet, the tears of this bragging beggar
 Were shed on all his letters.

György Szécskay, a Pittsburgh poet, soon joined Kemény with his poem "A levél"
 [The Letter],¹⁴ which reports in a matter-of-fact tone the death of a simple miner:

¹³ Translated by the authors of this study.

¹⁴ Reprinted in Rickert Ernő, ed., *Amerikai magyar költők* (Budapest: A Magyar Jövő Ifjúsági Irodalmi Rt., 1920) 90-91.

A LEVÉL

Kovács Mihály meghalt // Megölte a bánya.
Épp a szenet vájta
Serényen csákánya, // Mikor gyilkos szikla
Zuhant le reája.

Összetört a teste, // Piros, nagy cseppekben
Szivárgott ki vére,
Messze idegenben, // Idegen országnak
Fekete földjére.

Magyar földön, otthon, // Egy asszony csak várja,
Az ura, hogy mit ír.
Gondol-e még rája? // S ringatva gyermekét
Gyakorta sokat sír.

Messziről egy levél // Jön is valahára
S meg van írva rendben:
„Kő zuhant Mihályra, // Már el is temették
Messze idegenben.

THE LETTER¹⁵

Mihály Kovács is dead, // The mine killed him
Right when he diligently dug
Coal with his pick // The mine crushed down
Upon him.

His body was crushed, // In large red drops
His blood oozed forth
In a distant strange country, // In a foreign land,
Onto the black earth.

Back home on Hungarian soil // A wife is waiting
Curious what her husband writes.
Is he still thinking of her? // She rocks her child
While weeping often.

Finally from afar a letter // Arrives at last
Wherein her husbands fate is revealed.
“Rock plunged upon Mihály.// He is already buried
In a foreign land far away.”

¹⁵ Translated by Albert Tezla, *Hazardous Quest* 348; revised by the authors of this study.

In another of his relevant poems, “Téli hajnal a bányatelepen” [Winter Dawn on a Mining Place],¹⁶ Szécskay describes the misery of living in a remote mining place, similar to Van Meter and Jacob’s Creek, the site of the huge mine explosion in December of 1907.

TÉLI HAJNAL A BÁNYATELEPEN

Bús téli hajnalon száguldó szél zokog,
Fagyos, vak ablakon a tél bevigyorog.
S az öntudat didergő kínja int felém,
Hogy új nap fáradtság sorsom – az enyém.

[...]

Meghajszolt test! A létem rabszolgája, te,
Amely robotját kedvtelen szolgálja le,
Föl...! Föl: Elhagyni itt is éji vackodat,
Hadd lódítson tovább a fáradt gondolat.

Rivalg a bányakürt is már parancsolón,
S fények villannak máris az ablakon,
Melyek mögött is ott az utált ébredés,
Miben csak baj, megúnt teher a létezés.

Fanyar, imbolygó éji testszagok között
Verejtéktől nehéz ruhába öltözött
A bányász..., és új izzadásra készen áll,
S indul, mire a kürt másodszor is dudál.

És már megy is, szöges bakancs már kopog
A föld kemény fagyán, miként egy árva dob,
Jelezve a lét harcát, amely színtelen.
Óh, mert halál jele, ahol e harc pihen.
[...]

¹⁶ *Szécskay György harmadik könyve* [György Szécskay’s Third Book] (Pittsburgh: A Pittsburghi Magyar Társaskör Védnöksége, 1938) 95.

WINTER DAWN AT A MINING PLACE¹⁷

On a sorrowful winter dawn the wind weeps,
Winter looks in through the frozen, blind window.
The pain of my freezing conscience beckons me
That my fate is the pain of a new day.

[...]

Exhausted body! You slave of my existence
Who fulfills its robot obligations reluctantly.
Up...! And up! Leave your nightly den,
Let the tired thought carry you on.

The mine's horn has sounded off demandingly,
And already lights flicker through the windows,
Behind which there hides the detested waking,
Which makes existence into a detested disease.

Amidst tart and flickering body odors
He puts on his clothes made heavy by his sweat.
The miner is ready for new day of exhaustion,
And he starts amidst the second blow of the horn.

There he goes, as his spiked boots rap
On the frozen earth like a lonely drum,
Signaling the struggle for life, which is permanent.
The sign of death appears, where this struggle ends.
[...]

The same idea is expressed by Károly Rácz-Rónay in his lengthy ballad entitled "Megint a bánya" [Again the Mine],¹⁸ of which we quote here only a small initial segment:

¹⁷ Translated by the authors of this study.

¹⁸ Rickert 89-90.

MEGINT A BÁNYA

Megint a bánya! És megint a bánya!
 Irtózatossors, keserű kenyér!
 Nyitott sírjába életért leszállva,
 Nem tudjuk, a halál mely percben ér.
 Mondják is otthon az elköltözőnek:
 Testvér ne menj! Mert vissza sohse jönnek,
 Kik mennek a kőszén odúiba,
 Egy temető egész Amerika.

AGAIN THE MINE¹⁹

Again the mine! And the mine again!
 Horrible fate, bitter bread!
 Lowered into his grave to make a living,
 We don't know the moment Death will reach us.
 Back home they say to those departing:
 Brother, don't go! They never come back,
 Those who enter the hollows of the coal mines.
 To them, all of America is a graveyard.

György Kemény, who wrote the first significant poem about the Darr Mine tragedy of 1907, also authored the most influential ballad about the harsh life inside some of America's iron works. His "South Bend-i kőszőrűsök" [The Grinders of South Bend]²⁰ had such a frightening impact upon the immigrant workers that many of them left the South Bend grinding factory permanently. Moreover, the Verhovay Fraternal Association, the largest Hungarian fraternal society in America, refused to accept membership applications from anyone who continued to work in the South Bend factory. In this ballad, of which we are quoting two short segments, Kemény describes the lives of the Hungarian steel grinders of that city, who were slowly grinding themselves to death under the most inhuman conditions. While shaping the plowshares, they were burying their own souls into the steel. The completed plowshares never forget the misery of their makers. Upon going to work in the hands of farmers, they continued to recall repeatedly the misery and slow deaths of the grinders of South Bend.

¹⁹ Translated by Albert Tezla, *Hazardous Quest* 347; revised by the authors of this study.

²⁰ György Kemény, *Élet könyve—Book of Life, 1892-1942* (Detroit: Magyars in America, 1944) 157-58; and Rickert 85-87. The latter contains a very interesting note about the birth and impact of this ballad.

SOUTH BENDI KÖSZÖRŰSÖK

Szántóvető ekevasa
Csillog a napfényben,
Pacsirta zeng a magasban,
Napsugaras égen.
Szántóvető éles vasa
Mikor sorát írja:
Úgy tűnik fel olykor-olykor,
Mintha a vas sírna.

Nagy, fekete gyárban zuhog a kalapács,
Veszetten kattognak a rohanó gépek,
Véres verítékkal vonszolják a vasat
Megfeszített izmú, kormos képű népek.

[...]

Hatalmas köszörűk zúgnak, mint a sárkány,
Acélos ekevas csak úgy nyög alattuk.
Fojtó párázatban alakok mozognak,
De alig van egy kis emberi kép rajtuk.

Görnyedező háttal élezik a vasat,
Alig is felelnek már a magyar szóra.
Néma bűvöletben csak a vasat látják,
Mely tüzes szikrákban halál magvát szórja.

Jól megtermett ember fitymálgató daccal
Néz a lassan járó, de biztos halálba.
Mellette a másik nádként ingadozik.
Alig bírja szegényt megroggyanó lába.

Barátom megszólal: „Ez a szépszál ember
Nagyhamar olyan lesz, mint halvány szomszédja.
A fehér halálnak országa ez itten,
Hol a magyar ember csak szótalan préda.”

[...]

Tágas, téres rónaságon
Szántóvető ballag...
Barázdákba hasadozik
Előtte a parlag.
Miért sír az ekevasa?

Ne is kérdezd tőle!
 A South Bendi köszörűsök
 Lelke sír belőle.

THE GRINDERS OF SOUTH BEND²¹

The tiller's plowshare
 Glistens in the sun.
 The larks sing on high in the air,
 In the sundrenched sky
 When the plowman's sharp blade
 Plows its furrow.
 At times the blade
 Appears to be weeping.

In the murky factory hammer-blows descend,
 Busy machines clack ragingly
 Grim-faced men with bulging sinews
 Drag iron pieces, while drenched in bloody sweat.

[...]

Mighty grindstones whirl like dragons,
 Steel plowshares moan beneath them.
 Human forms move about in choking vapors,
 Betraying hardly any human features.

Backs bent, they sharpen the iron blades,
 Barely taking notice of Hungarian words.
 In moot bewitchment they only see the blades,
 Which sow death-seeds in their fiery sparks.

A brawny man looks scornfully defiant
 Upon the slow-moving, but certain death.
 Next to him, another worker wavers like a reed,
 Just barely held up by his staggering legs.

My friend speaks up: "This brawny fellow
 Will soon be like his staggering comrade.
 This is the land of the snow-white Death
 Where Hungarians are mere silent prey."

[...]

²¹ Translated by Albert Tezla, *Hazardous Quest* 255-57; revised by the authors of this study.

On wide and spacious plains
The plowman trudges along.
Furrows open up before him,
And so do the fallow lands.
Why weep the plowshares?
Don't you ever ask him.
Within those shares weep the souls
Of the South Bend grinders.

Kemény described the hard and exacting lives of the Hungarian immigrant workers in many of his other poems as well. Among them is his "Bluefieldi temetőn" [In the Cemetery of Bluefield],²² which describes the final resting place of those Hungarians who fell victim to the mines and blast furnaces of West Virginia.

BLUEFIELDI TEMETŐN

Bluefieldi temetőn sírgödröket ásnak
Hej, mennyi gödör kell sok szegény bányásznak,
Kiket haragjában megfojtott a bánya,
De magyarok voltak, hát senki sem bánja!

Kopasz dombok alatt, piszkos folyó mentén
Szórja lángcsóváit a vasgyár az égre.
Sűrű füstfelhővel beborítva minden.
Néha úgy tűnik föl, mintha a füst égne.

Zúg, morog, zakatol, dübörög rémesen,
Mintha a föld lelke ordítna belőle,
Hogy méhét meglopva, magzatát bedugták
Tüzes lángon sülő, vasolvasztó csöbe.

[...]

Nagyot durran egyszer, ágyúnál is jobban,
Mintha csak a vén föld kínjában köhögne.
Futnak az emberek, csengős kocsin jönnek,
S viszik a sok embert holtan vagy hörögve.
Elmúlik mihamar, tovább folyik minden,
Húzzák a munkások a rettentő jármot,
Mintha csak a halál nem is szedte volna
Rövid óra előtt a borzasztó vámot.

²² Kemény György, "Bluefieldi temetőn," in Rickert 84-85.

AT THE CEMETERY OF BLUEFIELD²³

A grave is being dug in the cemetery of Bluefield
 The poor miners need lots of such graves.
 They were suffocated by the mine, and because
 They were Hungarians, nobody cares.

Below the barren hills, along a dirty stream
 The factory spews its jet of flame toward the sky.
 Everything is covered with thick soot.
 At times it seems that the soot is burning.
 It rumbles, rattles and murmurs horribly,
 As if the soul of the very earth would cry out
 Believing its own child to have been stuck
 Into a sweltering tube, where it is being fried.

[...]

Suddenly an explosion, louder than a cannon,
 As if the earth would cough in its agony.
 Men are rushing forth, as do the ambulances,
 Collecting the corpses and the moaning dying.
 Suddenly, all is ended, and life resumes as before.
 The workers are dragging the horrible yoke,
 As if death would not even have appeared
 To take its share only an hour earlier.

We would like to end this brief exposé with a moving short poem written by György Szécskay, who bemoaned the passing of a simple day worker, who had fallen victim to his desire for a better life. Not even in death could they separate him from his shovel, which was his only possession and only permanent companion in life.

NAPSZÁMOS HALÁLÁRA
 (A pittsburghi tetemnézőben)

Tetemnéző hús márványasztalán
 Mogorva némán fekszik a halott.
 Arcán dacos leszámolás fagyva,
 Mít a haláltól – útra – ő kapott.

²³ Translated by the authors of this study.

Napszámban húzta az igát, míg élt,
S igában érte a végpillanat:
Lapátja, mit eldobni sem tudott,
Kihűlt, meredt kezében ott maradt.

Körülvéve a többi robotos,
Mikor a rögre holtan lebukott,
S kopott szerszám kezébe merevült,
Nyeléhez nyúlni egyik sem tudott.

Elhozta hát a hullaházba is,
Halálban is társa e lapát,
S a hulla itt is híven őrzi
Egyetlen megmaradt tulajdonát.

THE DEATH OF A DAY WORKER²⁴
(At the Pittsburgh Mortuary)

Upon the cold marble table of the mortuary
Lies silently the somber corpse.
His face depicts a frozen defiance
Given to him by death for his last journey.

While alive, he bore the yoke of a day worker,
And death also found him in that yoke.
His shovel, which he was unable to let go,
Remained in his cold and frozen hands.

Surrounded by his fellow laborers,
He fell upon the earth that he belabored.
The tattered shovel remained frozen in his hands,
And no one was able to remove it.

He brought it along to the mortuary,
For this shovel is his companion in death.
And the deceased guards it faithfully,
His only remaining possession in death.

²⁴ Translated by the authors of this study.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE “VICTIMS OF AN EMPIRE”

Early 20th-century economic immigrants from the Austro–Hungarian Empire were to some degree victims of that empire, which had failed to provide for them the livelihood they would have needed to remain at home in the midst of their families, friends, and their customary way of life. Most of them started on their long journey to America only as “guest workers,” hoping to return to their homeland with sufficient funds to create an acceptable way of life for themselves and their families. Given the archaic economic, political, and social realities in their country, and the opportunities in the New World—in spite of the hardships they had to sustain during the initial years—if they survived these initial years, 75% of them stayed and transformed themselves into permanent settlers.

Naturally, they suffered from homesickness, and for this reason they all tried to recreate the atmosphere of their native villages in their new country. Most of them also wanted to be buried with Hungarian soil above their hearts. In the course of time, however, an increasing number of them forsook even this ritual. They did so to a large degree because they came to conclude that their old country refused to reciprocate their love and attachment.

As described in 1908 by a reporter of the socialist émigré newspaper *Népakarat* [People’s Will], “about the Hungarian soil which was placed on their bodies upon death, these people only knew that it produced crops for aristocrats, bishops, and the military cast, but not for the poor [...]. They emigrated to America to escape famine [...]. Many of them perished amidst horrible sufferings for the daily wage that the ‘sweet homeland’ was unable to provide for them [...]. Let the native soil therefore remain with those who even today make merry and engage in drunken revelry from the income this soil produces. That handful of [Hungarian] soil would only remind the immigrants that even this fistful was given to them only after the American mines have collapsed on top of them, and the fire of the methane gas in the mines had burned them to death.”²⁵

There is much to be said for the above statement. And one is not far from the truth, when one concludes that these early-20th-century immigrants from the Austro–Hungarian Empire were in fact victims of that same empire. It is too bad that those states that took its place after World War I represented very little improvement over the defunct Austro–Hungarian Empire. At the same time, they increased the inter-ethnic rivalry and brought about the Balkanization of Central Europe.

²⁵ “Ne bánstuk a halottakat” [Let Us Not Bother the Dead], in *Népakarat*, 6. évf., 1908. február 18; also quoted in Tezla, *Valahol túl...* 129.