

VÁRDY BÉLA, *Magyarok az Újvilágban: Az észak-amerikai magyarság rendhagyó története* [Hungarians in the New World: The Unorthodox History of the Hungarians of North America]. Budapest: A Magyar Nyelv és Kultúra Nemzetközi Társasága kiadása, 2000, 840 pp., bibliography, chronology, name and geographical place index, about 250 in-text illustrations, 33-page English language summary.

Those interested in the history of Hungarian Americans are generally familiar with the name of Béla Várdy, who in his English language works publishes under the name Steven Béla Várdy. He ended up in the United States as an offspring of immigrant parents, and is a member of the generation of Hungarian-American historians that is hall-marked by such well known scholars as John Lukács and István Deák.

Várdy has been teaching East European history in Pittsburgh for decades. During this time he has authored or co-authored seventeen books and many hundreds of scholarly studies, essays, and reviews. His scholarly works deal mostly with historiography, the development of Hungarian liberalism, the intellectual world of the Habsburg Empire, certain specific episodes of the Hungarian Middle Ages, and the Hungarian-American past. His predecessors in the area of Hungarian-American historical research include Jenő Pivány (1873-1946), Géza Kende (1880-1933), Ödön Vasváry (1888-1977), Emil Lengyel (1895-1985), Elemér Bakó (1915-2000), and József Széplaki (b.1932). His *Magyarok az Újvilágban* [Hungarians in the New World] is the author's most significant work to date. It is the result of several decades of research, presenting a comprehensive picture of Hungarian-American history, from the second half of the sixteenth to the end of the twentieth century.

In light of the work under review, one may ask the question: How does Várdy's scholarship differ from those of his predecessors and contemporaries. For one, most of his predecessors among Hungarian-Americans were amateurs in the discipline of history. They were mostly journalists, Calvinist clergymen, and librarians, although their ranks also included diplomats, such as Andor Sziklay, who was known in the United States as Andor C. Klay (1912-1997). These pioneer historians have waged a heroic struggle in collecting and publishing sources of Hungarian-American history. They also published

monographs and detailed studies about certain specific episodes of Hungarian-American history, its prominent personalities, and on the relationship between Hungarian-Americans and their brethren in the Old Country.

Some of the worthy examples of these efforts include Géza Kende's two-volume *Magyarok Amerikában* [Hungarians in America] (1927), Edmund Vasváry's bilingual *Lincoln's Hungarian Heroes — Lincoln magyar hősei* (1939), and Emil Lengyel's *Americans from Hungary* (1948). These enthusiastic emigré historians collected much information on their topics, but were generally unable to produce acceptable scholarly historical monographs based on their research. They were basically dedicated and enthusiastic amateurs, who lacked the appropriate scholarly training and consequently produced somewhat superficial works. These volumes lack the necessary documentation in the form of extensive footnotes and comprehensive bibliographies. Notwithstanding these limitations, however, the published works of these pioneer authors are still very helpful. At the same time they have to be used with caution and circumspection. A number of these pioneer historians also tried to produce major syntheses of the Hungarian-American past, but they were unable to do so on a level required by contemporary professional historical scholarship.

Simultaneously with the activities of the above authors — and to a large degree even today — the majority of professional historians of Hungarian birth or origin declined to do research on the Hungarian-American past. They were and are more inclined to study the history of Hungary and of East Central Europe, which they believe to be more useful for their professional advancement as professors of history. Some went even further, for they abandoned the study of Hungarian history altogether in favor of American history. They research and publish only on the history of their host nation, without any reference to Hungarian or Hungarian-American history.

Although Várdy also began his professional career by writing only on Hungarian and East Central European topics, by the 1970s he decided to turn some of his attention to the history of Hungarian-Americans. By doing so, he stepped on a path that has been tread by a number of scholars in Hungary. But his predecessors among the latter were scholars who studied primarily the process of emigration from Hungary and certain aspects of Hungarian-American historical connections. During the 1980s, for example, several major works have appeared on this topic in Hungary. The best known among these are Julianna Puskás's *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban, 1880-1940* [Emigré Hungarians in the United States, 1880-1940] (1982), which was also published in an abbreviated English version: *From Hungary to the United States, 1880-1914* (1982); and Miklós Szántó's *Magyarok Amerikában* [Hungarians in America] (1984). These works,

however, carry the marks of contemporary Marxist scholarship, with all its implications. Moreover, the authors of these works left a number of important topics untouched. Thus, they failed to consider how Hungarian-Americans have contributed to the social, cultural, and scientific life of the United States — especially through their most talented scholars and scientists.

It was after such antecedents that Várdy undertook to produce the first scholarly and up-to-date synthesis of the history of Hungarian Americans, which, for the first time also covers the history of post-World War II emigration.

This monograph appeared in 1985 in Boston under the title *The Hungarian-Americans*. It was soon followed by a briefer, but heavily illustrated version under the same title, published in New York in 1989.

Following the appearance of these books, Várdy continued his broadly based research and publication activities in a wide variety of fields. He published many detailed studies on the Hungarian-American past, but at the same time he also authored books and scholarly articles on Hungarian history proper. The latter include such volumes as his *Attila the Hun* (1990), and his 840-page *Historical Dictionary of Hungary* (1997). At the same time he continued his work on the history of the Hungarian-American past by publishing — among others — a number of studies on the history of the Hungarian-American press. Many of these writings appeared both in English and in Hungarian.

*Hungarians in the New World* is a major and unique synthesis created out of the combination of a great number of studies that Várdy had published both in Hungary and in the United States in the course of the 1990s. In other words, many of this volume's chapters, or sections of the same, have already appeared in print as articles or essays in scholarly and popular periodicals. At this time this thick volume is the largest and most comprehensive Hungarian-language work on this topic. It is richly illustrated and describes the history of Hungarian-Americans, while also covering their relationship to the mother country. The book is directed at audiences both at home and abroad. Its style is varied. Although it is basically a scholarly volume with extensive source documentation and bibliographical references, at times it reads like a popular essay. It also contains anecdotic chapters that are a pleasure to read. The author handles a huge amount of material with ease and skillfulness. His analyses are objective, professional, and free from the customary ideological biases. The author is in possession of a vast amount of knowledge, which is based at least partially on his own personal experiences. Such experiences are essential for a true understanding of the organizational life and mentality of an immigrant community. And these experiences can only be possessed by one who has been an active participant in Hungarian-American life for an extended period of time.

In many ways, Várdy's work complements the scholarly literature produced in Hungary, for it covers topics that have not really been treated by Hungarian scholars. Thus, in addition to dealing with the development of Hungarian-American churches, religious life, fraternal, political and social organizations, newspapers, and even Hungarian-American literature, it discusses the activities and roles of various emigré leaders, and it does so in accordance with their relative significance within the Hungarian-American world. We can learn from this book about the everyday life of the early immigrants, as well as about the relationships and conflicts among the various emigré waves that had arrived in the United States during different epochs of its history. Most of all, however, we can clearly discern the direction toward which the Hungarian ethnic group is unavoidably moving.

This tendency, by the way, is not very promising, and this reviewer tends to agree with this assessment. He has personally observed and experienced the pessimistic portrait painted by the author toward the end of his book. It tells us that the Hungarian-American community is on the verge of complete assimilation. Its institutions, its organizations, its religious congregations, and its ethnic city quarters — the so-called "Little Hungaries" — have all become depopulated, and they are disappearing at an alarming rate. This also holds true for the Hungarian ethnic press, which is likewise fading very rapidly. So do the linguistic skills of the native-born generations of Hungarian-Americans.

We have to accept the fact that without a new "supply" of immigrants from Hungary, the future of the Hungarian-American community is very bleak indeed. Its individual members may find happiness and satisfaction in life, but their collective ethnic consciousness will undoubtedly fall victim to the melting pot of American society. While we may bemoan this process, we would be our own nation's greatest enemy if we were to hope for the replenishment of the ranks of Hungarian-Americans. That would imply another wave of mass emigration from Hungary, a phenomenon that our shrinking nation can hardly afford.

While nowadays multiculturalism is in vogue in the United States, it does not advance the cause of Hungarian-American survival. Multiculturalism is a boon only to the largest and heavily concentrated ethnic groups, such as Latino-Americans (36 million), African-Americans (35 million), and perhaps Asian-Americans (10 million). By virtue of their massive numbers, their assimilation is difficult, and it may not even be possible. It will certainly take much more time than the absorption of the relatively small Hungarian ethnic group.

Finally, let us say a few words about the author's attachment and dedication to the study of the Hungarian-American past. To him, and to his wife and collaborator — the literary scholar dr. Agnes Huszár Várdy — the preservation of Hungarian language and culture has always been a central question. The two

of them have done a great deal for the advancement of Hungarian Studies on the university level. For many years they were also in the forefront of the effort to establish and to nurture cultural relations with their counterparts in Hungary. And they did this in spite of the fact that such efforts were frowned upon by many of the emigré spokesmen. For this very reason the Várdys were often criticized and castigated by some of the less-than-enlightened spokesmen of the political immigrants.

The book under review exudes the author's love for his nation and for the country of his birth. This is evident from the way he castigates Hungarian-Americans who are reluctant to reveal their Hungarian identities to American society. But it is also clear from the way he faults the immediate post-communist Hungarian Government for failing to mobilize its resources to help preserve the national identities and cultural traditions of overseas Hungarians.

It should not be left unmentioned that the author has donated his extensive collection of Hungarian-American newspapers to the Vasváry-Collection of the Somogyi-Library of the City of Szeged, and thereby demonstrated his desire to save these important sources of the Hungarian-American past. All Hungarians, but in particular the members of the Hungarian historical profession, should be grateful to the author for his many decades of scholarly activities, his numerous publications, and his varied teaching activities on the university level. All of us should be grateful to him for having produced this major synthesis of Hungarian-American history. The next step is to publish it in English, so as to make this major synthesis available also to the English-speaking world.

*András Csillag*