

Conference of Hungarian and American Historians

David Montgomery

Yale University

The first of two proposed conferences of historians from Hungary and the United States took place in Budapest August 23–26, 1982. The meeting was small and informal, involving 21 Hungarian participants and 11 historians from the United States. Two subjects were on the agenda: the interaction between elite and popular cultures during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and rural-urban migration and assimilation during the same epoch. Because most papers had been circulated in advance of the meeting, the sessions were devoted largely to discussion of these subjects.

Both parts of the discussion proved to be very useful for the American participants. When dealing with elite and popular cultures the participants concentrated their attention on music, dress, architecture, the use of urban space, and the social formation of intellectual elites in both Hungary and the U.S. Exciting presentations by Carl Schorske on the music of Gustav Mahler and Carl Ives, Lawrence Levine on the place of Shakespeare in early American culture and the later expropriation of that playwright by the bourgeoisie, Miklós Lackó on the “new folklorism” of early twentieth-century Hungary, and Tamás Hofer on the nineteenth-century transformation of Hungarian rural culture set the tone for the analysis of all papers on a high conceptual level. Péter Hanák and Istvan Déak offered differing analyses of the questions of assimilation and cultural interaction in imperial Hungary, but both of their papers neatly bridged the two subjects of the conference and posed questions which historians of the United States found relevant and revealing for their particular interests.

Discussion of migration and assimilation focused on quantitative analyses of the formation and transformation of the working class in both countries, and on the use of oral history, memoirs, folklore, and letters to reconstruct the mentalities and self-identification of working people. Of special interest to the Americans were the special character of the assimilation question in Hungary (i.e., assimilation in the urban context into the culture of a landed ruling class), the comparison of Jewish experience in the two countries, and the thorough studies done by Julianna Puskás of Hungarian immigrants in the United States.

The conference was organized through the joint efforts of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Among the Hungarian participants were György Ránki, Miklós Lackó, Péter Hanák, Károly Vörös, Julianna Puskás, Zsuzsa Nagy, Dániel Szabó, Péter Sipos, János Kende, and Tamás Hofer. The participants from the United States were George Barany, Thomas Bender, John Bodnar, Ira Berlin, Istvan Déak, Herbert Gutman, Lawrence Levine, David Montgomery, Carl Schorske, William Taylor, and Virginia Yans. A second meeting to be held in the United States is being planned for sometime in 1984.