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Becoming Hungarian, Again: The Interwar Transformation of Hungarian National Identity

The seismic changes wrought by the end of the Great War in Hungary, and codified in the widely reviled Treaty of Trianon, not only truncated the Hungarian state, but initiated a crisis of meaning with regard to Hungarian national identity. Hungarians sought to reforge their sense of national identity in public venues, performing Hungarian-ness to their countrymen and to observers abroad. Many aspects of Hungarian life, from old established fields like physical anthropology, to young organizations like the international Boy Scouts, to new spectacles like beauty pageants, became politically charged and laden with cultural and national significance. Steven Jobbitt argues that the Hungarian Scouting Association used the international stage of the 1924 World Scout Jamboree to perform national mourning in the wake of the Treaty of Trianon, both to garner the sympathy of the outside world and to contribute to the inculcation of revanchism among the Hungarian youth.¹ The reformulation of Hungarian identity was contested in academic circles as well. Marius Turda details how Hungarian anthropologists sought to establish a racial basis for Hungarian national identity, a departure from the cultural-linguistic basis that had undergirded identity during the Empire. Finally, Louise Vasvári chronicles how the Hungarian-Jewish beauty queen Böske Simon's crowning as Miss Europa 1929 challenged the emerging racialized conceptions of Hungarian national identity.

¹ Steven Jobbitt, "Playing the Part: Hungarian Boy Scouts and the Performance of Trauma in Interwar Hungary," *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 4, (2011), 2.

The initial shock of Trianon – the indignity, confoundment, and sense of loss – among large swathes of Magyardom was the organic result of the promulgation of the 1920 peace treaty, but the lasting, politically-actionable “trauma” or “Trianon Syndrome” that would seep into the minds of nearly every Hungarian in the Interwar period was engineered, and the flames of *revanche* were fanned by the performance of national indignity and woundedness for audiences both domestic and international.² What Steven Jobbitt calls “coaching,” the intentional guidance of abstract feelings of having been wronged into concrete and actionable revanchist political sentiment, was frequently geared towards the youth of Hungary.³ This revanchist coaching was part of a generational project within a broader renovation of Hungarian national identity in the Interwar period. The youth of Hungary, like all youth, were the most receptive subset of the populace for the absorption of new ideas and were thus a natural starting place for the reformulation of Hungarian identity.

To illustrate the role of Scouting in the remaking of Hungarian national identity, Jobbitt focuses upon the 1924 second World Scout Jamboree, held in Denmark, while making no mention whatsoever of the fourth World Scout Jamboree, held in Gödöllő, Hungary in 1933. The total absence of the Gödöllő Jamboree from Jobbitt’s article is remarkable, yet never addressed.

Jobbitt recognizes the inherently nationalist character of Scouting delegations to the World Scout Jamboree but notes something peculiar about how the Hungarian Scouting delegation to Denmark was to present itself. Hungary, in light of the national humiliation wrought by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, was not to present itself with the patriotism and pride that so often characterizes the demeanor of Scouting. The *Prospektus* issued by the Hungarian

² Jobbitt, “Trauma”, 2-3, 13-14.

³ Jobbitt, “Trauma,” 3.

Scouting Association (*Magyar Cserkészszövetség*) called for a subdued, somber, nearly funereal attitude to be displayed by the Hungarian delegation.⁴ The Hungarian delegation was to grieve for the dismemberment of historical Hungary and to reinforce this sense of loss and desire for revanchism as core facets of Hungarian identity, directed both to sympathetic foreign observers and to the Hungarian masses themselves.

That the Hungarian Scouting Association found it necessary to include detailed instructions about the sobriety and woundedness that the Hungarian Scouts were to display at the 1924 World Scout Jamboree indicates, to Jobbitt, that such feelings of national dourness were not sufficiently ingrained in the demeanor of the Hungarian youth to be assumed.⁵ Jobbitt neglects to entertain the idea that the guidelines on somberness and quietude might speak more to the fact that the delegation was comprised of squirrely, rambunctious 14–17-year-old teenage boys lacking discipline and order rather than, or at least as much, as it spoke to a lack of revanchist feeling among Hungary's youth. The Hungarian Scouts were given a difficult and contradictory role to play. At once, they were to be both the proud, stalwart defenders of the easternmost March of Christian Europe and wounded, bereaved victims reeling from geopolitical forces beyond their small nation's control, with an Orientalist and romanticized Turanic mythos also woven in for good measure.⁶ The 1924 World Scout Jamboree marked the naissance of Hungary's interwar generation, which was intended to be a nationally and historically conscious

⁴ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 2, 4.

⁵ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 2-4. This alternative reading appeals to me as a former squirrely, rambunctious teenage Boy Scout. The imposition of discipline and order, of somberness and mourning, resembles very closely my own experiences as a Boy Scout during the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks. There was no lack of woundedness in our feelings about 9/11, but that was not why the mood of bereavement was enforced. The introspective and subdued mood was enforced to maintain discipline within the troop so that the memory of the national traumatic event could be given proper respect, not to make up for a lack of national traumatic feeling. Children, even children in the throes of historical traumas, remain children, and children love few things more than to squirm and be joyous.

⁶ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 4.

group united by opposition to the Treaty of Trianon and imbued with the spirit of revanchism. Jobbitt asserts that the hope of Ferenc Fodor, the leader of the Hungarian Scout delegation, was that the Hungarian delegation would catalyze a wave of sympathy for the plight of the Hungarian nation, out of respect for their proud, Western-aligned past, or perhaps out of pity for their present wretchedness.⁷

Beyond the 1924 World Scout Jamboree, efforts were made by politically conscious Hungarians to engender a sense of traumatization by the Treaty of Trianon among the youth of Hungary. The most frequent method by which this sense of national trauma was inculcated was by the daily recitation of a Magyar Credo, an oath repeated each morning in the manner of the American Pledge of Allegiance that avowed a tripartite belief in the Christian God, in justice, and in the resurrection of historical Hungary.⁸ Repetition and spectacle were the two most salient methods by which feelings of traumatization were introduced to the youth of Hungary. these, together with stirring emotions, were crucial to garnering support for Trianon revisionism, both in Hungary and abroad. To illustrate, Jobbitt employs a 1930s account by an English observer of a doleful dance performed by a troupe of young Hungarian women. In it, they organized themselves into the shape of prewar Hungary, then acted out its dismemberment, demarcating Hungary's much reduced borders with black-clad dancers, with the dancers representing the partitioned portions flinging themselves to the ground in mourning and defeat.⁹

Among the scholarship Jobbitt engages with to come to understand national trauma is on its intergenerational nature, drawing from the work of Cathy Caruth, Jacques Lacan, Svetlana

⁷ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 3, 4, 6.

⁸ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 7.

⁹ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 4-5.

Boym, and Paul Hanebrink.¹⁰ Jobbitt also asserts that the apocalyptic thinking of post-Trianon Hungary was nothing new, with antecedents of Hungarian existential anxiety going back at least as far as the aftermath of the disastrous defeat in the 1526 Battle of Mohács.¹¹ Jobbitt claims that the post-Trianon generation inherited the existential anxiety and trauma that already existed in the Hungarian consciousness. In pursuing this worryingly essentialist position, Jobbitt does not hazard a guess as to when, if not at Trianon, the Hungarian people came to be burdened with their trauma, retreating into mystification by regarding trauma as an unquantifiable and essential component of Magyardom. Jobbitt's article goes on to detail the intellectual development of Fodor, but its conclusions are not suitable for wider generalization, beyond illustrating that Hungarian national existential anxiety existed before Trianon and, rather than being introduced by the dismemberment of historic Hungary by that Treaty, was simply intensified in its wake.¹²

The existential anxiety felt by many Hungarians in the Interwar period was born largely out of fears of demographic displacement. Hungarians were a small and isolated cultural group, a Uralic island in a vast Indo-European sea and, as such, the question of who could be considered Hungarian gained existential importance. In the Interwar period, a shift occurred in Hungary from the preference for the cultural-linguistic basis of national groups to a racial-biological basis. Marius Turda engages with the context, causes, and consequences of this shift in the article, "Entangled Traditions of Race: Physical Anthropology in Hungary and Romania, 1900-1940."¹³ The field of physical anthropology was a prominent tool used to legitimize national identity with a scientific veneer and to transfigure national identity from a contested social construct to an

¹⁰ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 8.

¹¹ Jobbitt, "Trauma," 7-10.

¹² Jobbitt, "Trauma," 9-12.

¹³ Marius Turda, "Entangled Traditions of Race: Physical Anthropology in Hungary and Romania, 1900-1940." *Focaal* no. 58 (2010), 3.

unassailable biological, natural, fact. In the Interwar period, Hungarian anthropologists such as Lajos Bartucz, Mihály Malán, and János Nemeskéri revisited the prevailing Empire-era assessments of the socio-cultural makeup of Central Europe. Previously, anthropologists such as Antal Herrmann had analogized the many groups cohabiting the Empire to geologic layers in a soil sample, each remaining distinct while contributing to the whole.¹⁴ Even prominent craniologists, such as Aurél Török, expressed doubt that discrete races could be distilled from the observation of physical characteristics, a doubt that would be shelved as politically inexpedient in the new phase of nation building after the conclusion of the Great War.¹⁵

The trepidation of older anthropologists about the empirical tenability of a distinct Hungarian race was overshadowed by the emergent need to redefine Hungarian national identity in visible and qualitative terms to support the Hungarian case in ethnic and territorial disputes in the Interwar period. To Lajos Bartucz, a leading Interwar Hungarian anthropologist, “One of the ... problems of anthropology is to establish the characteristic of the Magyar race.”¹⁶ The quest to distill one Magyar race out of the diverse and multifarious area populated by Hungarian speakers and their neighbors was a hopeless endeavor. Interwar Hungarian anthropologists were able to describe a general Magyar racial type but came short of declaring this indicative of a Magyar race.¹⁷ To define a race is a much stronger claim. To define a race is to make a prescriptive claim, whereas to illustrate a racial type is merely a descriptive statement. Skull measuring had shown itself to be insufficient to distinguish a Magyar race so, in the 1930s, the study of blood types and groupings supplanted craniology, but was met with similarly dismal results.¹⁸

¹⁴ Turda, “Race,” 2-3.

¹⁵ Turda, “Race,” 6-7.

¹⁶ Turda, “Race,” 8. Proximate citation to Lajos Bartucz (1927), 211.

¹⁷ Turda, “Race,” 8-10.

¹⁸ Turda, “Race,” 10-11.

Turda posits that the role of physical anthropology in Interwar Hungary had been reoriented from what it was during the Empire. During the days of the Empire, physical anthropology scientifically justified liberal policies of assimilation, toleration, and harmonious co-existence, but the discipline was reoriented during the Interwar period to justify exclusive racially-based rights to land to bolster Hungary in territorial disputes by searching for a unified and transnational racial *Magyarság*.¹⁹ On the eve of the Second World War, “Hungarian ... physical anthropology more closely resembled a nationalist program than a scientific research agenda.”²⁰ Hungarian physical anthropology had always been political, but never was it more brazenly so than during the Interwar period. In the same vein as the Hungarian Boy Scouts’ theatrical and emotional displays, many Hungarian anthropologists in the Interwar period employed physical anthropology as a means to reinvent Hungarian national identity.

The growing racialism at the core of the new Hungarian identity was not confined to the halls of university eugenics departments but found its expression in popular culture as well. In the years following the conclusion of the Great War, beauty pageants came to prominence as international spectacles of consumerism.²¹ Hungarians took part in local, national, and international pageants in this period. In 1929, a young Hungarian debutante from a well-to-do Jewish mercantile family from Keszthely, Böske Simon, captured the hearts and eyes of the world with her dazzling string of pageant victories, claiming the local crown of Miss Keszthely, the national crown of Miss Hungaria, and, at the peak of her success, the crown of Miss Europa in Nice, France.²²

¹⁹ Turda, “Race,” 11.

²⁰ Turda, “Race,” 12.

²¹ Louise Vasvári, “Böske Simon, *Miss Hungária* and *Miss Europa* (1929): Beauty Pageants and Packaging Gender, Race, and National Identity in Interwar Hungary,” *Hungarian Cultural Studies* vol. 12 (2019), 214-215.

²² Vasvári, “Simon,” 195-196.

Simon was generally supported by the Hungarian entertainment press during her path to Nice, but she was always a controversial figure to the Hungarian right. Simon had been born in Hungary, spoke Hungarian, and was not particularly religious, but her Jewish heritage earned her the ire of Hungarian nationalists, such as a far-right student group who heckled Simon's carriage shortly after her return to Hungary from her tour abroad.²³ More mainstream, traditional conservatives took issue with Simon as well. The critiques of the traditional right were not rooted in antisemitism directly, as were the jeers of the radical right students, but were chiefly critical of the vapid consumerism, and the deleterious effects this was held to have on the youth of the nation, of beauty pageants at large.²⁴

Louise Vasvári, who writes principally about literature, treats at considerable length Simon's biography, with lengthy sidebars concerning, for example, the Austrian-Jewish beauty queen Lisl Goldarbeiter.²⁵ Simon bested Goldarbeiter in the contest to be crowned Miss Europa, but Goldarbeiter went on to win Miss Universe the same year in Texas, at a pageant Simon did not attend at the urging of her father. Vasvári writes with flowery, winding detail, likely influenced by her professional background in literature. While this makes her piece an engaging read, it unnecessarily inflates the page count of what could have reasonably been a 15-page article to an unwieldy 45 pages.

Vasvári's account of Simon's life is most useful in its illustration of the souring attitudes of many Hungarians to their Jewish countrymen in this period. Simon was fêted by the French press and public after her victory at Nice and was warmly received by the high societies of Paris and Vienna. Initially, with the exception of the demonstration by the right-radical students,

²³ Vasvári, « Simon, » 200.

²⁴ Vasvári, "Simon," 197.

²⁵ Vasvári, « Simon, » 209-214.

Simon received a similarly hospitable reception in her native Hungary. However, Simon began to fade rapidly from the public eye, her descent from celebrity hastened by the often-vicious antisemitism of the rightwing press. Vasvári considers that antisemitism was the primary factor in Simon's rapid fall into obscurity, but does not consider that, while antisemitism played its role, the primary factor in Simon's fall from grace was the inherently ephemeral fame of a beauty queen.

Despite its too-great length and excess of miscellanea, Vasvári's article is nonetheless useful for its rich collection of primary sources, generously linked to still-live websites. Vasvári's analysis adds a crucial dimension to the understanding of Hungarian society as described by Jobbitt and Turda. Jobbitt and Vasvári's work intersects in their analyses of the fetishization of the youth and youthfulness in Interwar Hungary, interpreting the obsession of many Hungarians with the moral fiber of the Trianon generation, which they upheld as the vanguard of Hungary's future revival, in the context of international exhibitions. Vasvári's work also shares many themes with that of Turda in considering the ever-shrinking space for Hungarians of Jewish heritage in Interwar Hungarian society as Hungarian conceptions of national identity became more and more racialized.

The defeat of Hungary in the Great War was sealed with the universally detested Treaty of Trianon, the effects of which triggered a crisis of meaning within Hungarian national identity. To relocate a sense of Magyartdom, Hungarians engaged in public displays of national identity in public venues in order to promulgate the qualities of the new, post-Trianon Hungarian. Once anodyne phenomena became battlefields of a culture war, from campgrounds in Denmark to university classrooms in Transylvania to fashion runways in France, all in service of renovating the discredited Empire-era idea of the Hungaian into a new, 20th-century modern iteration.

Jobbitt illustrates how the Hungarian Boy Scouts used the 1924 World Scout Jamboree to perform national mourning in the wake of the Treaty of Trianon to introduce revanchism to the Hungarian youth and enlist foreign support for the cause of revision. Academic circles debated intensely the new direction that Hungarian identity was to take in the Interwar period. Marius Turda lays out how anthropologists in Hungary endeavored to determine the racial basis of Hungarian-ness, a distinct break from the Empire era basis of culture and language. At the close, Louise Vasvári illustrates how the 1929 coronation as Miss Europa of Böske Simon's, an assimilated Hungarian Jew, existed in tension with the racialized conceptions of Hungarian national identity then finding greater currency.

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