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FORMATION OF A NEW LITERARY IDENTITY WITHIN A NEW STATE. HUNGARIAN LITERATURE IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The early 20th century was a very turbulent period of time especially for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – the Central Powers were defeated in World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy disappeared from the maps and new states were created. After signing the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, more than one million Hungarian people found themselves living behind the borders of Czechoslovakia. For the Hungarians living in minority, the establishment of specific culture was crucial.

World War I deepened the antagonism between the Germans and the Czechs within the Czech Lands. The Germans lent full support to the war effort of the Central Powers, but among the Czechs the war was unpopular, because they realized that a German victory would terminate their hopes for political autonomy. However, Czech opposition to the war was uncoordinated. The Young Czech leader Karel Kramář, a neo-Pan-Slavist himself, desired Russian troops to occupy the Czech Lands and install a Russian grand duke as the future king of Bohemia. His future political rival Tomáš Masaryk preferred a pro-Western orientation.

In exile in Western Europe, Masaryk was joined by Edvard Beneš and Milan Štefánik. Masaryk, envisioning a political union of the Czechs and the Slovaks, established contacts with Czech and Slovak emigrants living in Allied and neutral countries, especially the United States. In October 1915, in a public lecture at King's College, London, he called for the establishment of small states in East-Central Europe, based on the principles of nationality and democracy and directed against German plans for European hegemony. He argued that divided nationalities, such as the Poles living in three countries and the Czechs and Slovaks living in two, should be allowed to form nation-states and become allies of the West. In 1916, the Czech National Council (later renamed the Czechoslovak National Council) was established in Paris under Masaryk's chairmanship.

The achievements of the Czechoslovak Legion, noticed favorably by the Western governments and press, gave the Czechoslovak cause wide publicity and helped its leaders to gain official recognition. Masaryk left Russia for the United States, where, in May 1918, he gained solid support from Czech and Slovak organizations. A declaration in favor of a political union of the Czechs and the Slovaks, containing a guarantee of Slovak rights to their own parliament, legislation, and administrative language, was issued at Pittsburgh, Pa., on May 31, 1918.

Throughout 1918, dealings with the Allies progressed more successfully. Added to the favorable publicity of the Siberian campaigns were increased activities at home demanding a sovereign state “within the historic frontiers of the Bohemian lands and of Slovakia” (the Epiphany Declaration; January 1918). An anti-Austrian resolution adopted at the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities, held in Rome in April, helped to disarm conservative circles in Allied countries that had opposed a total reorganization of the Danubian region. Eventually, France recognized the Czechoslovak National Council as the supreme body controlling Czechoslovak national interests; the other Allies soon followed the French initiative.

On September 28, Beneš signed a treaty whereby France agreed to support the Czechoslovak program in the postwar peace conference. To preclude a retreat from the earlier Allied declarations, the Czechoslovak National Council constituted itself as a provisional government on October 14. Four days later, Masaryk and Beneš issued a declaration of independence simultaneously in Washington, D.C., and Paris.

Meanwhile, events were moving rapidly toward total collapse of the Habsburg monarchy. The last attempt to avert it, a manifesto issued by Charles on October 16, brought no positive results. Afterward, Vienna had no choice but to accept Wilson’s terms. A domestic political group called the Prague National Committee proclaimed a republic on October 28, and two days later at Turčiansky Svätý Martin (now Martin in Slovakia) a Slovak counterpart, the Slovak National Council, acceded to the Prague proclamation.

When the new country of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed on October 28, 1918, its leaders were still in exile. Masaryk was chosen as president on November 14, while he was still in the United States; he did not arrive in Prague until December. Beneš, the country’s foreign minister, was in Paris for the upcoming peace conference, as was Karel Kramář, who had become Czechoslovakia’s first prime minister. (The Slovak leader and first war minister Štefánik died in an airplane crash in May 1919.) Masaryk and Beneš remained in charge of foreign relations, and the leaders of five major parties dealt with home affairs.

The first task of the new state, to establish its borders, was undertaken at the Paris Peace Conference, where the historical frontiers separating Bohemia and Moravia from Germany and Austria were approved, with minor rectifications, in favor of the new republic. Several disputes soon surfaced, however. The political spokesmen of the Germans in Bohemia and Moravia advocated cession of the area known as the Sudetenland to Germany or Austria, but, because neither Germany nor Austria was in a position to intervene with armed troops, the Czechs, backed by the Allies, occupied without much bloodshed the seditious German-speaking provinces.

The delineation of the Slovak boundary was another serious problem, as there was no recognized linguistic frontier between the Hungarian and Slovak populations in the south. Since none of the successive Hungarian governments was prepared to give up what they considered ancient Hungarian lands, the new frontier had to be redrawn by the force of arms. Hungary’s communist government – which in March 1919 had taken power in Budapest under the leadership of Béla Kun – sent troops to eastern Slovakia, where a sister communist republic was proclaimed. The Hungarian communists and their Slovak allies wished to reattach the Slovak “Upper Lands” to a multiethnic communist Hungary, to which

the Russian Bolsheviks promised military assistance. With Allied help, however, the Czech military asserted itself in Slovakia as well as in the new province of Subcarpathian Ruthenia (comprising the mostly Slavic northeastern portion of prewar Hungary), in December 1918 Kassa (Košice) and Pozsony (Bratislava) were seized by the Czechoslovak Legion led by Italian general Piccione, in mid-January 1919 taking control over the territory of Southern Slovakia was finished.

Speaking of the Hungarian literatures of Hungary, Romania, (Czecho)Slovakia, Serbia, all belong to the literature of one nation: the literature of the Hungarian nation. There is one national literature, just as the historical changes since the constitution of new Central European states did not bring about the development of different Hungarian identities either. On the contrary, every Hungarian community detached from the mother country in 1918–1920 considers itself an authentic part of a Hungarian nation that is homogeneous as regards its language, culture, history, and traditions. Therefore, the polycentric model of Hungarian literary culture derives from the fact that, beside the literature of the mother country, the ethnic Hungarian minorities also developed their own literatures – not the least to preserve their national identity.¹ The minority Hungarian literatures developed in the neighboring countries after the establishment of the new republic had two sources to draw from: regional and universal national literatures. The background of this duality was in part “literary ontological” and, in part, literary historical. On the one hand, the Hungarian minority literatures relied on their own regional traditions, since these traditions – the historical and cultural traditions of Pozsony (Bratislava), Kassa (Košice) – offered solid resources. The richer they were, the more natural the foundation of minority literatures could be. On the other hand, the whole of the Hungarian literary tradition and contemporary literature in Hungary played a fundamental role in the early stages and the development of the Hungarian minority literatures. Not only the former homogeneous national literature but also the values, endeavors, and institutions brought about by their separate development enriched the new, minority literatures.² Given its geographic proximity to Budapest and that most of its talented writers came to settle in the Hungarian capital, the region’s Hungarian literary traditions and institutions were much less developed earlier.

The evolution of literary life was set back also by other factors such as the political uncertainty of the first years of the new republic and the forced exile of intellectuals; Vienna, Paris, Berlin and London became literary centers for Hungarian ethnic literature.

Under minority circumstances, literary criticism, literary history, literary periodicals, readership, and literary societies fulfilled the role of the most important institutions.

In the first decade of its existence, aesthetic and poetic principles were established, literary societies, publishing companies and readership were founded and manifestos were published. As for the Hungarian literature in Czechoslovakia, this literature lacked every institution and also the basic conditions for a functioning literary life. Authors of greater importance did not

¹ Béla Pomogáts, “Hungarian Minority Literature (Hungarian Literature in Transylvania and the Historic Upper Hungary),” *Minorities Research* 7 (2005), 79.

² *Ibidem*, 80.

live in Czechoslovakia; talented and promising writers had already left the country and had gone to Budapest. Although small local editorial offices existed, they lacked professional editorial staff, so they were not able to take intellectual leadership or impact on literary life. Zoltán Fábry called this period of time the era of “naked freedom.” Since there was no institutionalized book publishing, most of the political newspapers created columns for literature and critical review.

A significant turn in the intellectual life of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia came with the arrival of the émigrés (Pál Ignóty, Lajos Hatvány, Lajos Kassák, Lajos Barta, Sándor Barta, Illés Kaczér).³ Between 1919 and 1921 progressive thinking and leftist intellectuals were persecuted and forced to exile from Hungary. They found shelter in Czechoslovakia, but most of them stayed there only transitionally and settled down in other countries.

They brought the dilettantes face to face with the their delusions and the low quality of their writings. The émigrés were proclaiming that the literature created under minority circumstances should set an example regarding formal and intellectual niveau; because of its close relation with the culture of other ethnical groups, they were emphasizing the responsibility of written words.

The first decade of Hungarian ethnic literature was characterized by the constitution of literature and the battle against dilettantism and periphery thinking resulting in dilettante/amateur literature.

On the other hand, the important role of regional authors such as Ferenc Sziklay, Pál Rácz, Marcell Jankovics, Sándor Telek A., Gyula Alapy, Károly Szeredai Gruber and János Kersék in shaping of new literary approach was indisputable.⁴ By means of their literary works, the importance of survival/subsistence of the Hungarian ethnic group was accentuated; to the émigrés this aspect was irrelevant.

The leftist authors became opinion leaders – they wrote sociology, literature of facts, documentary prose, proletarian literature. The “Sarló” [Sickle] Movement was founded by the Hungarian students studying at Czech universities and gathering around “Szent György Kör” [Circle of St. George], as well as by intellectuals gathering around the journal *Mi Lapunk* in order to organize sociographic journeys and self-educational seminars. “Sarló” was a movement of large influence, which mobilized young people in the whole country. Its members organized ethnographic researches across the villages of Czechoslovakia, and findings were published in newspaper articles, journals; sociographic works, such as “Tíz nap Szegényországban” [Ten days in the Land of the Poor, 1930], depicted the common life and everyday reality of the people living in the villages. This type of literary work laid the foundation of the “documentaristic” literature.

³ Their names are linked with newspapers and periodicals such as *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* [Prager Hungarian Newspaper] (1922–1938), *Bécsi Magyar Újság* [The Viennese Hungarian Newspaper] (1919–1923), *Kassai Napló* [The Kassa Diary] (Kassa/Košice, 1884–1929), *Tűz* [Fire] (Bratislava, 1921–1923), *Fáklya* [Torch] (Košice, May – September 1922), *A Reggel* [The Morning] (Komárno – Bratislava, 1922–1933).

⁴ Regional authors also founded newspapers and periodicals, such as: *Turul* [Turul] – mythological bird of prey, mostly depicted as a hawk or falcon – Bratislava, 1919), *Új Élet* [New Life] (Košice, 1919), *Tavaszi* [Spring] (Bratislava, 1919–1921), *Esti Újság* [Evening News] (Košice, 1919–1937), *Hajnal* [Dawn] (Bratislava, 1919–1921), *Híradó* [News] (Bratislava, 1919–1937).

The qualitative aspects of literature came to the front, as a very important attribute of the literary canon which was yet to shape. Ostracism and exclusivity was characteristic for the period between 1926–1932 – according to Pál Szvatkó, these debates were similar to the faith debates of the era of the reformation.⁵

Historical necessity did bring Hungarian literary institutions to life and started the career of several important writers: among them, Dezső Győry and a priest of the Premontre Order, László Mécs. Both, although starting out from different political presuppositions, were promoters of humanism and clearly turned against the expanding fascism during WWII. This approach was also characteristic for the works of Zoltán Fábry, who lived in seclusion in a small mining town near Kassa.⁶ Zoltán Fábry saw the possibility of rejuvenation in peripheries; his idea was based upon the expressionist Stefan George's approach, which washed out the borders between giving voice to the torments of the Self and the manifestation of vital questions related to the fate and future of a community. In his opinion, writers/authors should seek the answers to the most burning social issues, and in their focus of interest/attention should always be the man; he termed this kind of literature "emberirodalom" (human literature). In the 1930s, he stood up to fascism and became aware that cultural values of democracy were in danger, he was concerned with the deteriorative situation of the Hungarian ethnic minority; therefore his essays were written in the name of "vox humana," which he described as the writer's stance in reference to historic events of the time.

The first attempts on canon-building came from publicists; journalism and essays measured up to high standard – the main representatives were: Zoltán Fábry, Rezső Peéry, László Dobossy, László Wass, Rezső Szalatnai, Pál Szvatkó. The importance of the objective literary criticism came into the front. Critical reviews and essays were published about the development of the Hungarian minority literature in Czechoslovakia ("Szempontok a csehszlovákiai magyar irodalom fejlődéséhez," 1937, written by Rezső Peéry), about the contemporary poetry ("A szlovenszkói magyar líra," 1937, the foreword to the anthology of poems: *Az új magyar líra*, 1937 written by Rezső Szalatnai), also literary portraits about the most significant poets of the time – about Dezső Győry, Dezső Vozári, Imre Forbáth, written by Rezső Szalatnai.⁷

According to Balázs Béla Végh, the peripheral culture has a less significant value-generating and value-preserving force, albeit both of them are crucial for creating a canon. Since the peripheral cultures lack historical canon-creating conditions, makeshift solutions were needed; authors, literary historians, critics who were shaping the new literature were trying to create a specific status-consciousness.⁸ They were hoping that local idiosyncrasies of the minority culture will serve as virtual canon-creating values and will become literature-organizing factors. Shared system of values and suitable forum was needed, as well as a new approach which could combine and bring into accord two different aspects, the realistic portrayal of minority life and the modern formal approaches.

⁵ Pál Szvatkó, *A változás élménye* (Pozsony: Kalligram, 1994), 146–7.

⁶ Pomogáts, "Hungarian Minority Literature," 85.

⁷ Zoltán Fónod, ed., *A cseh/szlovákiai magyar irodalom lexikona 1918–2004* (Bratislava: Madách-Posonium, 2004), 377.

⁸ Balázs Béla Végh, "Kanonizáció a kisebbségi irodalmakban," *Erdélyi Tudományos Füzetek* 253 (2005), 93–4, accessed June 13, 2018, <http://mek.oszk.hu/03200/03202/03202.htm#8>.

This rejuvenation is associated with a new generation of writers who appeared in the middle of the 1920s. Their artistic approach was shaped by the conditions of their minority status, but they became acquainted with the new approaches of Hungarian and modern world literature. Their activities were guided by generational self-awareness creating literature from the vital questions of the fate and future of the Hungarian minority community.

The year 1927 is considered to be a milestone of the Hungarian literature in Czechoslovakia. In this year, the manifesto “Kisebbségi géniusz” [The genius of the minority] of the Hungarian poet Dezső Győry was published in the periodical *Mi Lapunk* [Our Journal], along with his collection of poems called *Újarcú magyarok* [Hungarians with new face].

In his work, “Kisebbségi géniusz” – which became a guideline for the progressive youth – Győry declares the battle against any kind of physical or intellectual exploitation; moreover he claims that the Hungarian ethnic minority has a mission to create universally endorsed culture of the mankind under minority circumstances.

In 1928, intellectuals around the mentioned Szent György Kör [Circle of St. George] compiled a list of artworks which could be considered as the first list of the shaping literary canon. It consists already of canonized works of Hungarian culture (which helped to shape the identity of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia) – *Poems of Endre Ady*, Béla Bartók – Zoltán Kodály: *Hungarian folksongs*, Lajos Kassák: *Egy ember élete*, Dezső Kosztolányi: *Édes Anna*, Zsigmond Móricz: *Hét krajcár*, *Sárarany*, *Uri muri*, *A fáklya*; Dezső Szabó: *Az elsodort falu*, *Ólj*, *Egyenes úton*, *Segítség*; Gyula Szekfű: *Három nemzedék* – alongside with three works of Hungarian authors from Czechoslovakia: Dezső Győry: *Újarcú magyarok* [Hungarians with new face] (1927, published in Berlin, Ludwig Voggenreiter Verlag, Hungarian Section), László Mécs: *Hajnali harangszó* [Tolling at dawn] (1923, published in Užhorod), István Darkó: *Szakadék* [Abyss] (1928, published in Košice). The list was created with the strong belief that the Hungarian literature in Czechoslovakia could integrate into universal Hungarian cultural standards. Zoltán Fábry ranks these authors among the representatives of the so-called literature of value, who remained faithful to the collective and qualitative ideals of the minority literature.

Not all of the authors were creating their literary works in terms of the above-mentioned canon. They were following the ideal of the modernist, quality literature in Hungary, represented by the authors gathered around the literary journal *Nyugat* [West]. These authors were among others: the authoress Piroska Szenes, the poetess Erzsébet Szenes, and the bilingual (German, Hungarian) writer Pál Neubauer.

Female authors in particular did not publish their works in the Hungarian journals in Czechoslovakia. Despite their remarkable literary works, they were ignored by the Hungarian literary history in Czechoslovakia.

In the 1930s, interpretive communities partly legitimized the status quo of the previous decade; on the other hand, they recognized that ethnic- and community-centered canon could set some aesthetic and ideological limitations on authors and recipients, therefore emphasizing the importance of the authors' identity and

the autonomy of freedom, in spite of the practice of minority literatures to create a traditionalist canon, which puts the community on top of its hierarchy of values.⁹

Typically, these literatures go through the process of institutionalization in a more intense way and in a shorter time. As for the Hungarian literature in Czechoslovakia, we are speaking about a period of only 20 years.

The First Vienna Award on November 2, 1938 transferred the territories of southern Slovakia and southern Ruthenia to Hungary. On March 14, 1939 the Slovak State was founded with the help of Nazi Germany – in this territory the literary life of the ethnic Hungarians ceased to exist. After WWII, the whole literary life of Hungarians in the Third Czechoslovak Republic (in February 1948 after the coup d'état of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia the name of the state was changed to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) needed a complete restart.

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Summary

The early 20th century was a very turbulent period of time especially for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – the Central Powers were defeated in World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy disappeared from the maps and new states were created. After signing the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, more than one million Hungarian people found themselves living behind the borders of Czechoslovakia. For Hungarians living in minority, the establishment of specific culture was crucial. The paper deals with the process of formation and re-creation of Hungarian literature within the newly formed First Czechoslovak Republic, and also attends to introduce the struggle of this newly established ethnic literature in the first decade of its existence, as well as the attempt to define itself.

Adj. Izabela Ślusarek

⁹ Ibidem, 105–6.