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HUNGARIAN-IRISH PARALLELS: NATIONAL LANGUAGE IN 19TH-CENTURY HUNGARY AND IRELAND

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Abstract: *In Hungary a powerful language movement secured official status for Hungarian as a state language in 1844, and the contemporaneous development of its printed form gave rise to a number of Hungarian journals. Simultaneously, the Irish language experienced a dramatic decline and, as a consequence of the Irish-English language shift, English had become print language in Ireland. Yet, leading Anglo-Irish intellectual Thomas Davis considered Irish as Ireland's "national language", and emphasized the importance of its printed use in shaping national consciousness. In his Our National Language Davis makes references to the status of Hungarian and uses the achievements of the Hungarian language movement as an example for Irish language revivalists. Furthermore, in calling for the publication of at least bilingual, Irish-English newspapers, Davis refers to the that time multi-ethnic Hungary, where "Magyar, Slavonic and German" all appear in print despite the fact that Hungarian is the vernacular language of the majority population. My paper examines whether Davis's seeming disregard for the remarkably different positions of Hungarian and Irish in a striking parallel between them as "national languages" is just a product of romantic nationalism, or can be justified against a proper interpretation of "national parallels".*

Key words: *national parallels, Irish language, Hungarian language, language revival, language movement, print language, cultural nationalism, linguistic nationalism, 19th century.*

1. Introduction

The first extant references to a Hungarian in Ireland are about Lőrinc Tar, a Hungarian cleric living in the time of Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387-1473), King of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor. Tar paid a visit to St Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg and wrote a medieval account of his journey in Latin, mixing legend with travelogue, real with religious and imaginary experiences (Fügedi 156-157, Glatz 155, see also Kabdebo 19). Religion was also the background of an Irishman fleeing Oliver Cromwell's troops to Hungary. Walter Lynch, Bishop of Clonfert, stayed in the northwestern Hungarian city of Győr from 1655 to 1663, and donated an image of the Holy Virgin to the local cathedral, which

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was in subsequent centuries revered as the 'Virgin that shed tears' on St Patrick's Day in 1697 (Kabdebo 19-20). Religious orientation also permeates 17th-century Hungarian chronicles referring to contemporaneous Irish events and commenting upon them in harmony with their own protestant or catholic loyalties (see e.g. Cserei, Rosner). This, on the other hand, also reflected religious divisions in contemporary Hungary itself.

2. Hungarian-Irish parallels

The Hungarian idea of drawing a national parallel between the two countries originates from Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II, leader of a prolonged military campaign (1703-11) to gain independence from the Habsburgs. Although the fight for freedom eventually failed in 1711, at the hight of his success in 1707, Prince Rákóczi dethroned the Habsburg House in Hungary, and compared this act to Stuart James II's attempt in 1690 to regain the English crown via Ireland (*Universis orbis Christiani* 1707 in Kabdebó 21). Rákóczi argued that Hungary's connection with Austria was constitutionally similar to that of Scotland and England, yet Austria handled Hungary as England treated Ireland, that is as a "conquered country" without "ever having conquered it" (Hengelmuller 111-200).

Yet, it is through a series of nineteenth-century writings that mutual and genuine interest by leaders of Hungarian and Irish public life in the events of their countries is first revealed. Written reflections upon the major, sometimes cataclysmic experiences by the two populations inform us about the existence of a certain mental link between Hungary and Ireland, a connection which drew its inspiration from a sense of belonging to politically dependent European nations.

Irish Catholic emancipator and constitutional nationalist Daniel O'Connell's figure and mass movements attracted remarkable attention among Hungarian intellectuals with a political orientation. The development of Hungarian as a printed language in the first half of the 19th century gave rise to a number of periodicals, some of which, like *Rajzolatok* ("Sketches") in 1835 and *Atheneum* in 1837, informed the Hungarian reading public about O'Connell's achievements (in Kókay 458, 509). Lajos Kossuth, future leader of the 1848-49 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence also showed great admiration for Daniel O'Connell, and the 1843 issues of his *Pesti Hírlap* ("Pest News") include multiple references to the "Liberator's" Repeal Movement (in Kókay 675).

In the latter half of the 1830s two of Hungary's leading nationalist politicians, Bertalan Szemere and Ferenc Pulszky visited Ireland, and in their separately published travelogues they both write about the economic backwardness of the rural Irish and the growing strength of political agitation in Ireland. As his book *Utazás külföldön*, or "A journey abroad" (1840) proves, Szemere, also Prime Minister of Hungary's short-lived sovereign responsible government in 1849, became especially appalled by the poverty and hunger of the Irish countryside, and identified the causes as follows: Ireland's political and economic 'slavery' in relation to Britain, the resultant lack of native industry and commerce, the feudal system of land tenure, payment of tithes to the Church of Ireland, potato being the nearly exclusive food crop for the poor, and rapid population growth among them (352-365). In his social essay *Szegénység Irlandban* or "Poverty in Ireland" (1840) Baron József Eötvös relied upon the experiences of Szemere and Pulszky, both being friends to him, for his own study of the causes and effects of poverty (38-108).

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The year 1848 was witness to a revolutionary upsurge in Europe, and the Hungarian social upheaval was transformed into a prolonged fight for the country's liberation from the Habsburg Empire. Hungary's War of Independence was crushed by the overwhelming military might of the combined Russian Tzarist and Habsburg forces, and the defeat was followed by cruel revenge and years of severe oppression on the part of the Austrian government. Hungary's failure to liberate their country and the ensuing execution, exile and sufferings of those involved in the heroic struggle evoked sympathy in some of those who had played a leading role in the abortive Young Ireland Insurrection of 1848. Michael Doheny in his *The Felon's Track* (1914), John Mitchel in his *Jail Journal* (1913) and William Smith O'Brien in his unpublished travel journals, often referred to as his "Diaries", made references to the Hungarian War of Independence (in Kabdebó 23-25). Mithchel's reflection upon the suppression of the Hungarian freedom fight during his stay in the Cape of Good Hope in 1850, expresses feelings of shock as well as a clear awareness of events going on in this Central-European "fellow/comrade-nation":

"The Austrians are hanging and shooting general officers. Kossuth, the immortal governor, and Bem, the fine old general, are refugees in Turkey, other Hungarians and Poles flying to the US. Justice and right everywhere buried in blood" (Mitchel 205).

Each of these former Young Irelanders appear to have discovered parallels between the Hungarian and the Irish cause of independence. This, however, was not without precedent. Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-45), the leading intellectual of the fledgeling Young Ireland Movement, who, because of his early death in 1845, could not be witness to the European revolutionary wave of 1848, had already compared the position of O'Connell's Ireland to that of other subordinate nations, including Hungary, in the early 1840s: "And Austria on Italy, the Roman eagle chained, Bohemia, Servia, Hungary, within her clutches gasp; And Ireland struggles gallantly in England's loosening gasp" (in Griffith 73). The very fact that this quotation comes from the volume *Thomas Davis,* edited by Arthur Griffith in 1914 gives credit to Thomas Kabdebó's (24) supposition that the Young Irelanders were among those inspiring and instructing Arthur Griffith's *The resurrection of Hungary* (1904), a national parallel of historic importance between Ireland and Hungary.

3. The cause of "national language"

Throughout the 19th century non-sovereign nations and nationalities increasingly began to underscore their demand and right for political autonomy or separate statehood by emphasizing their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. While loosening political dependence on the Habsburgs meant the main constitutional objective, campaigning for cultural and linguistic sovereignty was also of outstanding importance in the so called *Hungarian Reform Age*, a determining phase in the pocess of our national awakening preceding the 1848 Revolution. The success of the language movement was proved by the official recognition of Hungarian as a state language in 1844.

Whereas the revival of the Irish language became a central theme of Irish nationalist ideology at the turn of the 20th century, the recovery of the grossly endangered native tongue was not an issue of real weight to either Daniel O'Connell or to most of the Young Irelanders in mid-19th century Ireland (Pintér 189-192). As an exception to his contemporaries, Thomas Davis

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expressed deep concern over the language loss and proposed a programme for the revival of what he called "Ireland's national language." In some of his essays, Davis makes references to the status of Hungarian and uses the achievements of the Hungarian language movement as an example which could be used by Irish language revivalists. In his *Our National Language* (1846) Davis contrasts a country which through experiencing language change becomes a real colony with countries which despite the loss of political freedom have preserved their native vernacular. "To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest – it is the chain on the soul" (175), says Davis with reference to Ireland's advanced Irish-English language-shift. Then he continues with regard to Hungary, where there is "sure hope" because the "speech of the alien is nearly expelled" (176). In the case of Hungary this observation held true of Latin, which, for long centuries, had functioned as Hungary's official *lingua franca*, as well as to German, the language of our Austrian oppressor's.

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the theoretician of *Sturm un Drang* had a great impact on both his contemporaries and on the coming romantic generations. As John Kelly (5-7) observes Thomas Davis fits into a pattern of cultural nationalism first articulated by the German philosophers Kant and Herder. Some of Herder's famous statements, like "Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its forefathers?" or "Even the smallest of nations […] cherishes in and through its language the history, the poetry and songs about the great deeds of its forefathers" (in Edwards 1985: 24) find an echo in Davis's conviction that the language reinforces the distinct existance of a nation: "A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories – 'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river" (Davis 174-75).

Herder's plebeian democracy also influenced some of the most outstanding Hungarian poets of the 19th century, János Arany and Sándor Petőfi, both contemporaries of Thomas Davis. A paradox provoking thought is that whereas Herder in his late-18th century work *Thoughts on the Philosophy of Human History* (1784-91) envisages the short-term extinction of some European nations such as Hungary, a few decades later Davis, who relied on the German philosopher as one of his major theoretical sources, sets Hungary's success in their linguistic revival as an example for the Irish.

Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* makes the observation that print language is what invents nationalism and not a particular language *per se*. Following this line of thought Declan Kiberd claims that "Irish, being largely part of an oral culture, was supplanted by English, the logical medium of newspapers, and of those tracts and literary texts in which Ireland would be invented and imagined" (137). Thus, in Ireland English became the language of printed books, newspapers and modern journalism, which, on the other hand, were essential channels to disseminate political ideas and influence public opinion (Pintér 205). In fact, the importance of the printed version of a national language in shaping national consciousness was already realized by Thomas Davis, who in his *Our National Language* emphasises that the absence of at least bilingual, Irish-English newspapers excludes Ireland from an international and European context and makes the country a "backwater of England." Among countries set as examples for Ireland in this respect Davis refers to the that time multi-ethnic Hungary, where "Magyar, Slavonic and German" all appear in print despite the

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very fact that Hungarian is the vernacular language of the majority population (182).

4. Veracity of parallels between nations and national languages

Considering the remarkably different positions of Hungarian, which was the language of everyday communication for people born Hungarian – with the exception of those aristocrats who primarily lived in Vienna – and that of Irish, which by 1842 had approximately 2.700.000 monoglot speakers (Pintér 169), that is less than half of the native population, with the upper and urban middle classes almost thoroughly anglicized, Thomas Davis's parallel between the two "national languages" appears striking. The question arises whether this national parallel regarding Hungarian and Irish is valid or just influenced by ideas of romantic nationalism. Thomas Kabdebo holds the following view on this topic (29):

„Historical veracity of parallels […] does not depend on the minutiae of chronological, social or istituitonal or even economic details but on the similarity of situations. Parallels are drawn by active agents of the historical process who discover similar agents acting in a similar historical process. In that sense parallels are always discovered against not dissimilar backgrounds, in situations fairly akin, such as: 'method of rule', dependency, 'empire building, 'colonizing' or 'being colonized.' But, perhaps, the most relevant is the correlation of contexts: emerging nationalism, nationalism in its assertive phase, […] could bring two geographically distant countries into a valid parallel."

For Davis, whose mother tongue was English, Irish was the national language, because of its unique way to express Irish thought and imagination:

„The language, which grows up with a people is […] mingled inseparably with their history and their soil, fitted beyond any other language to express their prevalent thoughts in the most natural and efficient way" (173).

Davis's ideas on the importance of linguistic awakening in the formation of a nation's character appear to be reinforced in the words of Laszlo Hadrovics, a Hungarian linguist living and working more than a century later:

„Nations which have started from different stations of linguistic consciousness; the levels they have reached in political fragmentation or unity; the extent to which they have been influenced by alien impact; and the effort they have taken to shake off foreign influences show great diversity. However, each national movement shares the ambition of creating a literary language which meets all the requirements of European civiliztation, a standardised norm, which stands above national dialects. These national movements have at the same time a great importance in shaping national identity" (in Nádor 58).[2]

Thomas Davis was the first Irish linguistic ideologist, who beyond antiquarian interest, and preceding the nation-wide Irish-language movement of the late-19th-century, the Gaelic League, gave a programme for the revival of Irish as a languge of everyday communication. In this respect he was not just contemporaneous with the Hungarian language movement but shared with Hungarians what Anthony Smith says about the ethnic as opposed to the civic conception of a nation: geneology and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, customs and traditions play an important

[2] Translated from Hungarian into English by the author

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role in the formation of a nation even if the ancient language and language revival has failed, like in the case of the Irish (11-13).

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