

'America' in Rural Hungary around 1900: Migration Networks and Rural Press in Creating Transnational Knowledge

by Balint Varga

Abstract

This paper shows how knowledge about migration possibilities and the American way of life emerged and spread in antebellum Hungary through two channels, personal networks, and local newspapers. The paper argues that these two sources interrelated and mutually shaped each other. It also demonstrates the importance provincial papers played for migrants, to-be-migrants, and their communities.

On an autumn day in 1900, Dénes Nagy, a schoolmaster and cantor of the church in Vilonya, a little village in western Hungary, was approached by an elderly woman. The woman asked him an unusual favor: in change for a little money, Nagy was to pray for the failure of a certain man who ran for an important office at the forthcoming elections.¹

The unusual element of this request was not the fact that a woman intended to participate in politics, despite being not enfranchised.² After all, participation in politics is not restricted to voting deeds such as a strike, a public demonstration or a donation to a memorial are

¹The anecdote was recorded by migration expert Loránt Hegedűs during his fieldwork in the early 1900s: Loránt Hegedűs, 'A dunántúli kivándorlás és a szlavóniai magyarság (I. közlemény)', in: Budapesti Szemle 33 (1905) 122 (342), p. 338. Hegedűs specifies only the name of the schoolmaster but does not name the village; it is the almanac of the Reformed Church which identifies a schoolmaster with this name working for the school of the village of Vilonya in Veszprém County: Géza Antal (ed.), *A dunántúli evang. reform. egyházkerület névtára az 1900. évre*, 1900, p. 98.

²Around 1900, some 6% of the Hungarian population were franchised. Women had no voting rights at all; among males, the nobility, professionals, and well-off peasants and artisans were entitled to vote. This suffrage system was introduced during the 1848 revolution and by that it belonged to the most inclusive and progressive ones in Europe. In the following decades, however, it was not extended further (indeed, voting rights were slightly curtailed in 1874), making Hungarian voting rights one of the most exclusive in Europe by 1900. András Gerő, *The Hungarian Parliament (1867–1918). A Mirage of Power*, Boulder, Co. 1997.

inherently political and were open to anyone in fin-de-siècle Hungary. The civil society provided the large unenfranchised masses with several surrogates of participation in politics: males could elect the elders of Protestant church congregations, associations, labor unions, and village cooperatives in a democratic way; for females, options were more limited but they could also establish associations and take their leadership.³

What surprises at the encounter between Nagy and the elderly woman was thus not the idea she wanted to participate in elections and, being devoid of legal means, she did that by seeking divine support. The striking feature of her deed was the very elections she wanted to influence: she was neither concerned with officials in her village, members of her county assembly or the national Parliament but sought to intervene in the presidential elections of the United States of America.⁴ How come that an event in American politics could attract the attention of an old peasant woman in provincial Hungary and how did an American politician manage to secure the sympathy of a person who was a citizen of another country and presumably had never been to the United States, spoke no English and was likely even illiterate? This question is even more puzzling taking into account several contemporary observations that characterized Hungarian peasants as

³On the civil society of 19th-century Hungary, see Robert Nemes, 'The Politics of the Dance Floor. Culture and Civil Society in Nineteenth-Century Hungary', in: *Slavic Review* 60 (2001) 4, pp. 802–23; on the democratic mechanism of cooperatives, see Attila Hunyadi, 'Three Paradigms of Cooperative Movements with Nationalist Taxonomy in Transylvania', in: Torsten Lorenz (ed.), *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflict: Eastern Europe in the 19th and Early 20th Century*, Berlin 2006, p. 65.

⁴Yet it is unclear whether she supported Republican William McKinley, president since 1897, who ran for his second term or his rival, Democrat William J. Bryan, because migration was marginal both during McKinley's presidency and the 1900 election campaign and both candidates were moderate restrictionist. Naturalized Hungarian-Americans preferred in the rule the Republican ticket and Theodore Roosevelt particularly won their sympathy because he refused curtailing free immigration. On McKinley's position in migration issues, see Hans P. Vought, *The Bully Pulpit and the Melting Pot. American Presidents and the Immigrant, 1897–1933*, Macon, Ga 2004, here 20–26; on the 1900 elections, Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley*, Lawrence, KS 1980, pp. 207–30; Louis W. Koenig, Bryan. *A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan*, New York 1971, pp. 318–46.

ignorant in political and social questions, being unaware even of who the most important political leaders of their own country were.⁵

This paper argues that the request of this peasant woman was far less unusual as it seems at first look. Indeed, evidence from different parts of rural Hungary shows American presidential elections and the political and economic affairs of the United States, in general, drew considerable attention from people otherwise seemingly rather indifferent to the wider world.⁶ The interest of provincial Hungarians in American politics was, of course, not an isolated phenomenon. Rather it was part of a larger pattern: around the turn of the 19th century, „America was an organic part of the Pápa district [a region in the west of the country],“ claimed the economist Loránt Hegedűs, probably the best contemporary expert studying the Hungarian provinces to determine the causes of the sudden emergence of transatlantic migration.⁷ A similar claim was made both by other contemporary experts and later ethnographic research in the context of other migration-strong regions of fin-de-siècle Hungary.⁸

The Hungarian countryside, of course, does not stand alone in becoming familiar with ‘America’, or better said, with a very peculiar understanding of the United States. As the survey of Max Paul Friedmann summarizing ethnographic research on fin-de-siècle European migration regions shows, the notion ‘America’ entered rural communities throughout Europe and it retained a plethora of associations, among them very critical ones, too. ‘America’ was associated with a large distance, to be covered only through vast difficulties; with making money easily but also with hard and dangerous work and

⁵Róbert Braun, *A falu lélektana. A Huszadik Század könyvtára* 47, Budapest 1913, p. 21.

⁶„Amerikai visszavándorlás,” *Köztelek*, May 6, 1908; József I. Gerényi, *Az amerikai kivándorlás oka és hatása*, Bártfa n. d., here 108; Loránt Hegedűs, *A dunántúli kivándorlás és a szlavóniai magyarság* (II. közlemény), in: *Budapesti Szemle* 343 (1905) 33 (123), p. 15.

⁷Hegedűs, ‘A dunántúli kivándorlás és a szlavóniai magyarság (I. közlemény)’, pp. 337–38.

⁸Gerényi, *Az amerikai kivándorlás oka*; Béla Gunda, *America in Hungarian Folk Tradition*, in: *The Journal of American Folklore* 83 (1970) 330, pp. 406–16.

exploitation; with homesickness; with sexual infidelity and forms of urban criminality; and with anything extravagant or odd in general. Friedmann, relying mostly on ethnographic research, locates these diverging associations in migration-strong communities and thus claims that ‘America’ entered the mental map of rural Europeans largely through the networks forged by migration.⁹ During the era of Old Immigration (i.e. until ca. 1880 when the mostly west and north European migrants sailed to America to settle permanently) knowledge of and associations with America flowed through correspondence connecting the two sides of the Atlantic. Around 1880, a new era started: now south and east Europeans predominated among European migrants; their aim was to spend a few years in the United States and to return with their savings to their genuine homeland. Steamships provided travelers with cheap, safe and quick transport, therefore the number of people travelling east rose sharply either to pay a short visit to the native land or to re-settle permanently.¹⁰ This meant that knowledge of America could now be transmitted orally, too.

The fact that ‘America’ became an everyday notion in rural Hungary around 1900 can be explained by two overlapping and interdependent phenomena: the transatlantic migration networks and the provincial press, the former being a bottom-up, the latter a top-down source of knowledge.

The transatlantic migration networks came into being in the period of Hungarian mass migration to the United States between 1880 and 1914.¹¹ Migrants—some 1 to 1.5 million people—conveyed their expe-

⁹Max Paul Friedmann, *Beyond ‘Voting with Their Feet’. Toward a Conceptual History of „America” in European Migrant Sending Communities, 1860s to 1914*, in: *Journal of Social History* 40 (2007) 3, pp. 557–75.

¹⁰Drew Keeling, *The Business of Transatlantic Migration between Europe and the United States, 1900–1914*, Zurich 2012).

¹¹On the Hungarian migration, see Julianna Puskás, *Ties That Bind, Ties That Divide. 100 Years of Hungarian Experience in the United States*, New York 2000; on the transatlantic migration patterns in a wider, regional context, see Ulf Brunnbauer, *Globalizing Southeastern Europe. Emigrants, America, and the State since the Late Nineteenth Century*, Lanham 2016; Annemarie Steidl / Wladimir Fischer-Nebmaier / James W. Oberly, *From a Multiethnic Empire to a Nation of Nations. Austro-Hungarian Migrants*

rience in the United States back to rural Hungary by correspondence or, if returning, by personal encounters. (According to vague contemporary estimations, some third of the transatlantic migrants returned to their native community permanently.) The knowledge on 'America' and the associations with it could enter the vocabulary and alter the mental map of rural Europeans at an astonishingly quick pace. The anecdote cited in the introduction demonstrates how quick the mental map of villagers could adapt: transatlantic migration started in west Hungary in the late 1890s and already the 1900 elections stirred up interest among villagers as an event with potential consequences on their lives.¹²

The rural press emerged as the other important source of popular knowledge on 'America'. Katalin Stráner recently demonstrated how metropolitan newspapers became an agent in spreading knowledge relevant to transatlantic migration, or, more precisely, how they penetrated knowledge to discourage people from migrating overseas.¹³ The argument here goes one step beyond: not only the press of the national capital Budapest but also provincial newspapers, printed even in towns with a few thousand inhabitants only, were instrumental in this process. While these papers generally highlighted the dangers of emigration, they also regularly reported about presidential elections, the ups and downs of American economy and news concerning the legal conditions of migration and the means of legal transportation.¹⁴

in the US, 1870-1940, Innsbruck 2017; Tara Zahra, *The Great Departure. Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, New York 2016.

¹²Similarly, in some villages in the neighboring province Galicia (today west Ukraine), Canada entered the mental map of villagers within a few months and kept a central role in the conversations of villagers. Matthias Kaltenbrunner, *Das global vernetzte Dorf. Eine Migrationsgeschichte*, Frankfurt 2017, pp. 99–109.

¹³Katalin Stráner, *Emigration Agents and the Agency of the Urban Press. Approaches to Transatlantic Migration in Hungary, 1880s–1914*, in: *Journal of Migration History* 2 (2016) 2, pp. 352–74.

¹⁴From the abundant examples a few: „Az amerikai elnökválasztásról,” Szamos, October 23, 1904 (printed in Satu Mare, population 35,000), „Prezident választás,” Zalaegerszeg–Zalavármegyei Hírlap, November 8, 1908 (printed in Zalaegerszeg, population 10,800); „Az amerikai elnökválasztás,” Magyar Földművelő, June 28, 1908 (printed in Satu Mare but intended for the peasant readership of the vicinity); „Taft ellenjelöltsége,”

The reason why political news became significant for rural Hungarians can be explained by the assertion that presidential elections had an immediate effect on economic prosperity and on the migration regulation of the United States. Therefore, overseas political news effected the timing of the potential migrants' journeys. It was widely assumed that migrants should have embarked on their journey a few months after presidential elections when the economy resumed its „normal cause” after political upheaval. In fact, evidence from economic history does not support the correlation between election season and economic performance and the source of this assumption is unclear; yet, it seems that it became a common knowledge among potential migrants.

Local newspapers usually kept their reports short and focused on the most relevant information. However, some editors felt necessary to inform their readers about American political life in more detail. For instance, *Szinérváralja*, a paper printed in the little northeast town Sinei (population 5000) in a region with high emigration numbers, covered the 1904 elections in details¹⁵, while *Balatonvidék*, the paper of the western town Keszthely (population 7500) delivered a lengthy article on the etiquette of the White House.¹⁶

The two sources of knowledge naturally shaped each other. Transatlantic migration started without the agency of the press, thus the bottom-up knowledge production preceded that of the press. Once migration reached a significant level, the local press needed to react and cover news relevant to (potential) migrants and their families; this, in change, may have catalyzed further migration as the knowledge necessary for migrants spread now not only through personal networks but reached beyond.

Occasionally, the two source types met literally. *Délmagyarország*, a paper printed in the southern regional center Szeged, was renowned for its highly professional staff and delivered regional, national and

Szamos, December 30, 1910 (printed in Satu Mare).

¹⁵„Az amerikai elnökválasztásról,” *Szinérváralja*, November 15, 1904.

¹⁶„Az amerikai köztársasági elnök beiktatásáról és a washingtoni „Fehér Ház” etikettjéről,” *Balatonvidék*, March 9, 1913.

international news, the latter's sources being metropolitan papers. Once its journalist visited a nearby village to report on some well-off villagers who secured their prosperity through capital accumulated during their sojourn in the United States. Once the journalist revealed the purpose of his visit, the coachmen carrying him declared he had also lived in America for some years and could not hide his surprise and disdain to learn that the journalist never left Europe.¹⁷ Both people in this encounter, the well-trained professional and the most likely barely educated carter, showed a sense of worldliness: the former was shaped by reading, the latter by firsthand experience; during this encounter, these two sources of knowledge interacted and shaped each other further.

The two ideal types of sources of the production of knowledge of and associations with 'America' exist, of course, in theory only. In practice, knowledge about 'America' was conveyed both by the provincial press and by correspondence and occasional personal encounters between migrants and their family members; yet, the precise route of the knowledge cannot be tracked. What is sure that these two sources of knowledge facilitated the widening geographical knowledge of rural Hungarians to an earlier unimaginable degree.

¹⁷ „Amerika Magyarországon,” Délmagyarország, September 20, 1911.