

Serbs in Hungary

by Peter Miklos

Some South Slav population already existed in the southern and south-eastern part of the Carpathian Basin when the Magyar Conquest occurred at the turn of the 9-10th century. These ethnic Serbian and Bulgarian groups -- professing the Orthodox religion -- formed part of the population of the southern territory governed by Ajtony who rebelled and lost (in 1028) against King Saint Stephen, organizer of the Christian state and its first king. Over time, there were several dynastic links between the ancient Magyar rulers of the House of Arpad and the Serb nobility. The most significant moment was the marriage of Bela II (the Blind) who ruled between 1131 and 1141, and Ilona, daughter of the Serb grand župan (ruling prince), Uros. The matrimonial ties between the ruling Magyar and Serb families and the political elite resulted in an influential Serb community in the country which, however, did not lead to a significant influx of immigrants. Significant arrival into Hungary of Serbs occurred in the 14th century as a result of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. The immediate reason for their northward migration was the termination of the independent Serbian state. This was preceded by battle loss to the Turks in 1389 at the Battle of Kosovo (Hung: Rigómező), where Lazar, the Serb ruler, also fell. This battle became the center of Serb national memory and the birth of national identity, its recollection featuring prominently in literature, ballads and folk songs, reminding the Christian Serbs of their struggle against Turkish Islam. In Hungary, the initial Serb colonies came into being along the southern border, in the Voivodina, Syrmia and Bacska.

In the early 1400s, the Serb despot Stefan Lazarević (1402-1427) accepted the Hungarian king -- later elected as Holy Roman Emperor -- Sigismund of the House of Luxembourg (1387-1437) as liege lord of Serbia. His successor, George Branković (1427-1456), also maintained cordial relations with Sigismund. In fact, in the 1420s, he ceded the fortress of Belgrade and the Banate of Macva (Hung: Macsó) to the king, both strategically crucial to the border defense of Hungary. In return, he was granted extensive estates in Hungary that brought an annual income of 50,000 gold coins. As a result of the actions of Lazarević and Branković, thousands of Serbs changed their domicile to Hungary.

From the 15th to the 17th century, Hungarians and Serbs -- aided by western Christian allies -- often fought in concert against Turkish rule. Alas, with scant success since the Serb state and a third of the Kingdom of Hungary became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1541. As a result of the southerly expansion of the Habsburg Empire, the former historical territorial boundaries of the Kingdom of Hungary became, more or less, reestablished at the end of the 1600s. However, when Belgrade again came under Ottoman control in 1690, the Serbs, who supported the Habsburgs' Balkan expansion with their forces, were forced to flee; the Habsburgs, by this time, also called the crown of Hungary as theirs.

The 'great Serb migration' took place in the fall of 1690. Under the leadership of Arsene Carnojevic, Patriarch of Peć (Ipek), several thousand Serb families (by some estimates 80,000 people) migrated into Hungary. The immigrants asked for certain rights and privileges from Emperor Leopold I, as king of Hungary: the right to freely practice their religion, use of the orthodox calendar and church law, autonomy for their church organization, freedom to elect their archbishop and bishops, and freedom from taxation. They did not lay claim to political rights at this time since they looked on their emigration as temporary and had hopes of returning to their country.

In his decree of August 21, 1690, Leopold I granted the Serbs of Hungary the privileges they sought, in exchange for assuming the protection of the southern border and requested that they be liable for drafting for military service. When the now-transplanted Serbs saw that the seemingly-stable Turkish administration presented them with an ever receding chance of returning to Serbia, they began to demand political rights, too. To oblige, Leopold I granted them, in the spring of 1691, the right to freely elect their own voivod, who could be their political leader and military commander, with the proviso that he can not exercise his authority until invested by the Hungarian ruler. At the end of the 1730s, another wave of Serb settlers arrived from the Ottoman Empire, led by Arsenije Jovanović, Patriarch of Peć. From 1741 onwards, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church was situated in the Hungarian town of Karlóca (today Novi Karlovci), although until 1848, they did not use the title of patriarch but rather that of archbishop (metropolitan).

Serious conflicts appeared between the Magyars and Serbs living in the skirmish zone between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. The first tension arose immediately after the battle of Mohacs (1526), which led to the three-way division of the Hungarian state. The Hungarian Diet elected two kings, the Hungarian Janos /John/ Szapolyai and the German Ferdinand Habsburg, leading to the bisection of what remained of the Kingdom of Hungary; the Turks occupied the south-central part. One of the officers of Serb descent of King Szapolyai was Jovan Cerni, also called the Black Man, who was ordered to the southern territories by the ruler to look after defense against Turkish incursions. Cerni, however, led his Serb followers on a looting and robbing expedition through the southern territories, even setting up a court in Subotica (Hung: Szabadka) -- calling himself the Czar of the Serbs -- and collecting tax and tribute from neighboring towns and villages. Szapolyai and his followers initiated several campaigns against him until, in the summer of 1527, they were able to defeat and kill him. Cerni's action gained great significance later as his pseudo-state was interpreted by 19th century Serb politicians in Hungary as the historical foundation and precursor of an independent Serbian Voivodina.

After the great influx of 1690, the Serbs living on the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary amid numerous privileges still instigated anti-Magyar unrest during the 18th and 19th centuries. During the reign of Empress Maria Theresa, the Serbs living in Hungary raised an army of 14,000 who supported the Empress in the war of the Austrian succession, opposing the German

claimants to the throne. After Maria Theresa solidified her position, she began to urge the union of the Orthodox Serbs with the Catholic Church (meaning the creation of the Serb Greek Catholic Church), as well as the reduction of their privileges granted them for their frontier defense services. In response, one of the frontier-guard captains, Pera Jovanovic Segedinac, organized an uprising in 1735. The revolt of the Serbs in favor of retaining their privileges also attracted Magyar peasants from Bekes County, protesting their serf obligations. After a while, the two revolting groups turned against each other and the movement was soon put down. Pera Segedinac and other leaders of the uprising were executed in Buda in the summer of 1736.

The really serious confrontation between the Magyars and the Serbs of Hungary came during the Hungarian Revolt and Fight for Freedom of 1848-49. The Hungarian uprising that erupted on March 15, 1848 was, among other things, about civil rights, equality under the law, obliteration of serfdom, and the equitable distribution of common burdens. The Hungarian Fight for Freedom, commonly associated with the person of Louis Kossuth, that sprang from these causes was opposed by the Serbs of Hungary and they began to make demands of political and territorial autonomy, to round out their existing religious and cultural autonomy. Their goal was the creation of an autonomous -- independent of Hungary, sovereign but to the Habsburg ruler -- Serbian Voivodina, which, in due time, could unite with Serbia. That Serbia had, in the meantime, been recognized in 1826 by Turkey as a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire. (It became an independent country in 1878.)

As a sign of independence, the Serbs living in southern Hungary met between March 13 and 15, 1848 in the Syrmian town of Sremski Karlovci (Hung: Karlóca) where they elected as Patriarch, Josif Rajacic, the metropolitan of Sremski Karlovci (as head of a *de facto* independent church of an independent country) and colonel Stefan Supljikac as their civil and military leader (Voivod). They then initiated armed conflict with the Hungarian military. The Serb rebels burned and destroyed Magyar villages, towns and churches. After the Hungarian Freedom Revolt was put down, Emperor Francis Joseph ruled in an absolutist manner between 1849 and 1860, creating the Serb Voivodina and the Banate of Temes, two provinces now independent of Hungary and accountable directly to the Emperor, who held the local title of Grand Voivod. The territories were integrated into the Kingdom of Hungary in 1860.

The first world war ended with the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, leading to the Treaty of Trianon (1920). In its terms, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes received an area of 62,000 square kilometers of the Kingdom of Hungary, as well as all of Croatia itself (42,500 sq. km.), in an attempt to create a unified nation state. Some of the Magyars, who now found themselves in a foreign country -- mainly intellectuals, teachers, civil servants but also ordinary farmers and craftsmen (some 40,000) -- had no choice but to move to the now-truncated Hungary. The majority of Hungarian Serbs opted to

move south between 1920 and 1930, where comparable sized lands were guaranteed them as they left behind.

The portion of the southern territory, between the Danube and Thies Rivers, again became part of Hungary in April of 1941. It was not until January of 1942 that the Novi Sad (Hung: Újvidék) round-up took place, during which Hungarian authorities executed 4,000 Serbs -- partisans, communists and civilians. In 1944, Tito's partisan units, aided by the Red Army, retook the disputed southern territory. At the turn of 1945-46, the Communist Party leadership of Yugoslavia directed the local Serb military units to carry out ethnic cleansing among the Magyar and German population. The exact number of Magyar casualties is not known, although expert estimates put it between 20,000 and 40,000. A further 80,000 were forced to flee their homeland and seek refuge in Hungary. The Voivodina again became, under the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1947), officially part of Yugoslavia.

During the socialist era, the advocacy and cultural organization for the Serbs of Hungary was the Democratic Association of Southern Slavs of Hungary. According to the data of the 2001 census, there are 3,800 citizens of Serbian ethnicity living in Hungary. Since 1995, a Serb autonomous organization has existed both at local and national levels; they have a weekly newspaper and a short weekly program on national television. In 1990-91 -- on the 300th anniversary of the great Serb migration -- a large number of the Serb Orthodox Churches in Hungary were restored with government assistance.

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