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**SLOVAKS ON THE CROSSROAD OF SELF-PRESERVATION OR ASSIMILATION**

**(The History of the Slovak community living in the Great Hungarian Plain in the interwar period)**

**Summary**

The main focus of the dissertation is the history of indigenous Slovaks with an emphasis on the Slovak community living in the southern region of the Great Hungarian Plain in the Horthy-era from the aspect of assimilation.

Their numbers dwindled in the 20th century. Voluntary assimilation was not the cause of this however, which means that the attenuation of their numbers was at least in part caused by artificial assimilation. The cause behind this is not some kind of direct measure, but a series of crucial emergency situations. It is also a fact that the Slovaks didn't always respond to these events as expected. In the dualistic era Slovaks were only endangered as an ethnic group, their existence was not threatened. The Horthy-era completely changed the world around the Slovak community: most of them came under the rule of new national governments, a smaller part of them had to remain in Hungary as an ethnic community, but with an independent Slovak country supporting them. Therefore, both national and ethnic aspirations affected them. The Hungarian Slovaks paid a price for the founding of Czechoslovakia; they were forced to choose between staying loyal to the new Hungarian state and between the internal compulsions of joining the new-found Slovak nation-state. Due to the fact that the Slovak community was scattered among small villages, it could not resist assimilation effectively. The small number of intellectual elite also amplified this process. They did not possess a strong, and -in terms of the national movement- self-conscious economical potential. This is true despite the fact that the wealthy peasantry wasn't completely immune towards the cause of its ethnic group. Their existential needs however demanded the continuous suppression of the needs of the ethnic group. The statistics show this clearly, despite the fact not every death can exclusively be attributed to this process. Certain difficulties of peace also contributed to this sudden decrease. As we could see, the Slovak language could not become wide spread in government offices. Slovak speakers had difficulties even where according to applicable law, speaking Slovak should have been legitimate. In order to keep their office jobs, they had to design a half-solution. They chose Hungarianized names. This of course doesn't immediately make them part

of another ethnic group. One thing is certain: these steps caused their „souls” to fracture in their micro environment – their relation to family. Education in Slovak language gradually got discontinued in schools.

Hungarianization efforts became so wide spread that they started damaging the autonomy of the Church. The leaders of the Church were pressured and there were some who didn't even need to be persuaded – they assisted in taking away their native language voluntarily. They had certain representatives inside the Church though who drew attention to the fact that neglecting the native language and forcing a foreign language upon the followers goes against the goals of the Church and its mission. The complete lack of verticality in schools amplified the fact in our era that a Slovak intellectual elite was not able to form. Therefore an active intellectual environment could only form at places where the leader, organizer elite could be complemented from the populace.

Enforcing their rights and opportunities was therefore quite difficult in practice. Their geographical location also contributed to their assimilation. Only the populous villages and agricultural towns of the Great Hungarian Plain could enjoy the benefits of the higher population density. This is where a more regular cultural life of higher quality could take root. Budapest is a very special case in this respect. Its disadvantage is that almost every district had Slovak residents. Its advantage is that even though they were scattered, they lived in the cultural area of a metropolis. They could not be concentrated to a sufficient degree. They were not able to resist certain administrative restrictions. All Slovak establishments founded in Budapest before 1919 (press, associations, bank etc.) were suddenly liquidated. After 1920 only the working class remained in most cases, the intellectual elite disappeared. Only one or two establishments managed to survive. The Horthy-era forced even these organizations into an administrative vise. They imposed various crafty administrative responsibilities upon amateur theater groups. In order to get and keep a job or getting a career that matched their particular skillset they had to meet a demand: they had to change names and the new name had to be hungarianized or Hungarian. This is what I consider the first, still mild phase of assimilation. In order to reveal the depth and volume of the assimilation, sociological methodology and social psychological studies would have to be used, therefore it is not a part of this dissertation. It is certain, that on the surface they pretended to be trying to blend in as soon as possible. They could only embrace their Slovak heritage among family. The rural populace had relative success in conserving its archaic language. Under the outlined conditions they had a very little or no chance at

modernization and convergence. The only area where language could be transmitted to the newer generations was the family. In religious schools the first years provided them the opportunity to learn writing in Slovak language. Following this they had to educate themselves in order to become a useful individual who wrote verses and articles for local newspapers. Oh and what accomplishments are these! Sometime around the 1920's the opinion of Margitai József -who was the south Slav chief administrative officer at that time- was only partially true despite the fact that he tried very hard –especially on a governmental level- to calm the Slovak community. This is true as far as the Slovak community's insistence on using its own language and its desire to acquire its own land is concerned. They fought twice for Hungary because they considered the country their home, maybe because their family and their lands were here. What is „home”, if not the land where they lived and worked with their family, where they tried filling the boundaries set by fate with their everyday joy, success and sorrow –in other words: with life itself. Most of the Hungarian Slovaks used the method of silent survival by avoiding conflicts. They didn't give up their lands and suppressed one of their languages, converting it into an inner voice – they made it the language of celebration and the intimate environment of home – because they couldn't do anything else without consequences.

Continued efforts to open associations and theater groups implies that they indeed wanted to live. They needed spiritual sustenance as well, even if they were peasants lacking proper literacy and schooling. Their literacy statistics were things to be proud of, since Slovaks have always did their best to educate themselves. Managing their own farms –which was common on the Great Hungarian Plain- was also an advantage, which stemmed from them being peasants. This situation made their life a bit isolated. Their linguistic values could therefore be preserved better. They didn't wish to become a political party but if someone started off in that direction, they were inclined to join them. Their scattered state and the „defense of governmental and social order” made this impossible. When opportunity arose they joined and became a forming power. (See: SzNEP-SSNJ) This organized power was used by Slovaks for self-mutilation after 1945.

Emigration didn't noticeably decrease their numbers. Mixed marriages only decreased the headcount of the ethnic group in Budapest, since it became significant in rural villages and towns more compactly populated by Slovaks only after 1948. Demographical reasons – the decrease in the number of people who could be married off lowered the chances of marrying

outside the community. Economic measures that made life more difficult for them stimulated migration, but even before this great transformation the surviving isolated ethnic units started voluntarily blending into the Hungarian majority who were building their new system of government.

The processing of various chapters shows that it's not about equals going against each other, which means that the crossroad mentioned in the title was not a crossroad at all, the way was predetermined. Due to the way being predetermined they had to resort to „trickery’, to seemingly blend in, never appearing on demonstrations or risking conflicts. If someone did resort to open conflict, they had to act and take responsibility alone. The increased number of individually started conflicts in nationality politics and law –not taking cases from common law into consideration-however indicated the presence of a problem affecting large groups of people. The fact that solving these issues „required” the use of police and armed forces shows just how democratic Hungary was at the time.

Hungarian Slovaks had to experience the feeling of being abandoned twice, first after 1920. From this frozen isolation they could gradually get back on their feet. To this very day they still couldn't recuperate from the „loss of blood” they had suffered from 1946 to 1948. Their position in the structure of settlements in tandem with external environmental effects indicated, predicted a certain degree of assimilation. In case of coexisting nationalities this is a living, active factor.

Language statistics are the clearest indicators of this continuous integration. The first indicator is the rate of people who forgot their previous native language after ten years. Examining the language proficiency of age groups highlights that people of old age have a higher rate of knowledge concerning their native language but they do not excel at learning Hungarian. Younger age groups show exactly opposite tendencies. During the fifty year period that this dissertation focuses on there wasn't even one situation where the Slovaks didn't have to face some kind of outside compulsion. Strict laws that influenced even their daily lives forced their activities between strict boundaries. After the First World War the authorities simply started ordering them around: Join this and that! Their opinion and wishes were not relevant and when they finally got the chance to make their own decisions about themselves, many people-manipulated by international politics and unbridled propaganda-made bad decisions. This could not be undone. We have seen that the ethnic awareness and self-esteem is like a string of a

sensitive musical instrument. Under rough, restrictive hands it can't produce beautiful sound. In proper hands it is capable of making nuanced, calm tunes that radiates harmony. I believe I am not mistaken by stating that the strings of Slovak self-awareness and esteem were subject to the heavy hands of administrative bureaucrats who had no intention of producing delicate notes. What follows this could be considered a requiem despite the fact that the Slovak community – even to this day-managed to keep its status as Hungary's third biggest minority. I started my research with the unsaid hypothesis that the Hungarian Slovaks could make a choice between assimilation and survival between 1920 and 1945. As a final conclusion I can state that this was a faulty assumption. The legal, governmental, social environment restricted their opportunities to such an extent that they could only choose the depth and speed of assimilation with ruling majority. All those cultural activity factors that proved, strengthened their existence and life were only good for explicitly or implicitly delaying and resisting the assimilating effects. What can I then consider to be the undisputable, unique accomplishment of this dissertation? The results are as follows: First, it tried to give an overview of the Slovak community living inside the Trianon borders from the aspect of assimilation. Existing findings, publications-if they discussed the topic of assimilation mentioning the Slovaks as well)-examined a different time periods and dealt with Slovaks living in other areas.

My work has of course been augmented with previous detailed findings or better summarizing syntheses.

My dissertation is the first paper that summarizes the experiences that explain and highlight upon the starting points of certain issues that are present even today. My work can also serve as a warning that even if we have brilliantly worded minority laws that project positive thinking, their existence in itself will not define our society's maturity and tolerance, only their practical implementation. Society's ability to tolerate can be illustrated best if it's proven that they don't only accept something –minority issues for instance- and feel the emotional need to act, but they reciprocate as well, which means that individuals can accept the expression of being different without generating negative emotional feedback for them, that could-due to the influence of certain outspoken members of the community-form a collective opinion.