

HISTORY
OF THE
HUNGARIANS
IN BRANTFORD



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When writing about the history of the Hungarians in Brantford one is faced with the question: what is a Hungarian? The Kingdom of Hungary, prior to the First World War, was twice as big as the present day Peoples' Republic. People of many nationalities lived there, some of whom did not speak Hungarian but had a Hungarian passport and were perhaps classified accordingly.

A further complication was that wherever Hungary was mentioned it was always in connection with Austria with which Hungary was in close partnership. Canadian statistical reports prior to 1914 includes immigrants from Austria-Hungary, some Poles, Ukrainians, Southern Slavs, Italians and, of course, Germans speaking various dialects. All these arrivals from Austria-Hungary had a common sovereign, and this led the Canadian authorities to classify them in one group, immigrants from Austria-Hungary.

After the First World War, on the other hand, after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, many Hungarians became citizens of the emergent successor states and came to Canada with Czechoslovak, Romanian or Yugoslav passports. Language itself was not always a determining factor. Some of the immigrants were perfectly bi-lingual or tri-lingual, often not being able to define their own ethnic status, or even claiming a different ethnic origin from the ethnic group the language of which they spoke best. All this shows that the Old Country itself was a melting pot of various national groups and cultures.

When tracing the history of the Hungarians in Brantford and Brant County, care must be taken to refer to people who spoke the Hungarian (Magyar) tongue, a language not related to any other language group in Europe except remotely to the Estonian and Finnish, and who acknowledged themselves to be Hungarian. Many others consider themselves to be Hungarian yet have German or Slav names and in reality are Magyarized Germans and Slavs. On the other hand, there are others who do not realize that they are Hungarian but whose names point to distant Hungarian origin.

Hungarian immigration into Canada began only in the eighties of the last century, but we find a Hungarian name in the records of Ancaster Township as early as 1789. Christian Almas, 1752-1843,¹ whose descendants live today in Brantford and district.

Almas is definitely a Hungarian name. In an entry at Beverly Township, dated 1803, his name is spelt Almis. Since in all other references it is spelt Almas, this entry must be a clerical error. The interesting fact is the accent on the "i", which should have been an

¹ Based on research made by Mrs. Alma Luard and Mr. T. Roy Woodhouse.

"a". The Hungarian spelling of the name is Almas with the accent on the "a". It appears, then, that Christian Almas spelt his name in the Hungarian way as late as 1803.

How Christian Almas came to the New World and became most probably the first Hungarian settler in Ontario is a matter for conjecture. He came to Fort Niagara in 1787 with his wife and four children, claiming that he was a soldier in the German contingent. He was registered in the Beverly Township records as a Hessian. The term Hessian was applied to all German troops fighting for the British, for the majority of them were recruited in Hessian municipalities.

The landgraves of Hesse-Cassel in the eighteenth century derived their main income by hiring men to the British to serve in the American colonies. In 1776, 22,000 Hessian troops were thus transferred by the landgrave Frederick II of Hesse-Cassel to George III to fight the American rebels. These men, however, were not all Hessian. The landgrave preferred foreigners in his army to his own subjects, often obtaining them by means of pressgangs. Travellers and wandering apprentices were pressed into Hessian service to be hired to the King of England. The first Hungarian might have been such an unwilling emigrant. On the other hand, it is possible that Christian Almas was a soldier of fortune enlisted in either the Hessian army or in an army of one of the German princelings who sold troops for North American service. Hungarian soldiers, especially cavalymen, had a high reputation in the eighteenth century. Such men came of their own accord in search of adventure. After the war, the Hessians were disbanded. Some who did not return to Europe received land in recognition of their services. Most of this land was in Nova Scotia, but some of it was elsewhere. This might be the story of Christian Almas who received crown land in Ancaster in 1789.

There was, however, another possibility. Some Hungarians were fighting on the side of the American insurgents under the command of Count Casimir Pulaski, a Polish cavalry officer who was permitted to organize his own legion in American service. Almas married in 1779 a Madeline Baker of New Jersey, that is to say, when the War of Independence was still in full swing. Could then an enemy soldier have married an American girl in New Jersey where some of the biggest battles of the war were fought? After the war, all the Hessian troops (who admittedly were popular among the girls) had to leave the United States, but Almas did not leave until five years later, with his family. No doubt he heard that land was being given in Canada to former British mercenaries. He claimed that he was one of them. Later, in Beverly Township, he was registered as a Hessian. This need

not indicate the country of his birth, since most of these troops recruited in Hessian territory were categorized collectively as Hessians. Probably Almas was one of these, but it may be that he deserted them, perhaps the very year of his marriage in 1779 when Count Pulaski formed his legion, which as is known, some Hungarians joined.

All these are but conjectures. Christian Almas settled near Ancaster where he registered the crown patents on several lots. In 1787-91, he was a surveyor, or assistant, and had at least eleven children. He died in 1843 on the 27th of November aged 91, and was buried in Barton Union cemetery on the Mohawk Trail in Hamilton.

In 1867, the year that Canada became a nation, according to the *Gazeteer of Brant County*, two of his descendants, David Almas, builder, and Jacob Almas, farmer, lived in Brant County in the village of Kelvin.

The history of the Hungarian community in Brantford dates back to 1904. Individual Hungarians might have reached Brantford before, but it is definitely known that by 1904 four Hungarian families were established in the City: the Bor, Ramport, Szajko and Vadi families. They were of farmer stock but worked in factories. It was mainly through their letters sent home to the Old Country that Brantford became known to many Hungarians who wished to emigrate to the New World.

There were four distinct waves of Hungarian immigration into Canada: 1907-14; 1925-38; 1947-49 and 1956-57. In the first wave, in 1907, many Hungarians came directly to Brantford. They arrived in groups of twelve and were mostly of peasant stock, seeking employment in factories. The first of these Hungarian immigrants, a Mr. Charles Gaal who still lives in the city, reaches his 85th. birthday in this Centennial year. He arrived in Brantford on January 18th, 1907, a few months before the general wave of Hungarian immigration which began only in the spring of that year. He was then single, a young country boy from South Western Hungary, and was gladly welcomed by his compatriots already resident in the city. Mr. Gaal found employment in a foundry at 15 cents an hour. He remembers that immigrants used to live in boarding houses, thirty to thirty-five boarders in one house. Most of them, like himself, did not intend to settle in Canada, but hoped to save money to return home and become prosperous farmers in the Old Country. Mr. Gaal did not stay long here. He worked for some time in the U.S.A. and then returned to Hungary. He settled and married there, but could never forget Brantford. So, in 1928 he returned here with his family and has lived here ever since. His eldest son, Joseph, who joined the Royal Canadian Navy, lost his life in the Second World War.

The majority of the Hungarians arrived in Canada between 1926 and 1938. They also, like their 'predecessors, were mostly of peasant stock. The majority of them were recruited by the C.P.R. who had agents abroad, and were destined for Western Canada (Saskatchewan and Alberta). But many stayed in the East, or after a few years in the West found their way to Ontario or Quebec. The big cities, Montreal, Toronto and Hamilton absorbed many of them. But Brantford and Brant County had its fair share. Most of these immigrants, some single, some with their families and some married but having left their families behind them in the Old Country, were young with a tremendous physical capacity for hard and sustained work. They had great courage. Many came here with borrowed money and without knowing a single word of English, and having had the minimum of education, obtained work on farms or as unskilled labourers in factories or on construction projects. They had little opportunity to learn English. In this respect they were at a disadvantage as compared with other ethnic groups, for Hungarian is not an Indo-European language. It differs from English to a greater extent than the other European tongues.

The depression years were especially hard on them. Not finding work in the cities they tried to make use of their original skill on farms. Brant County, with its tobacco fields, was a tempting place. Quite a few Hungarians hired themselves out on such farms for the winter months for only their bed and board in order to obtain paid employment during the tobacco harvest. In spite of many difficulties and privations, many Hungarians managed to send money home to their families and pay off their debts. Gradually, they became independent farmers, buying a tobacco or a mixed farm on credit. Their ability and willingness to work was their only security.

One of the Hungarians in Brant County bought his first farm with a token down payment of \$1.00, so great was the seller's confidence in him. It would be difficult to picture Brant County nowadays without the Hungarian tobacco growers. They have done exceptionally well.

During the Second World War, Hungarians of both the first and second generation joined the Canadian forces all over the country. The Album of Honour for Brant County contains quite a few Hungarian names. The names of four young men of Hungarian descent are engraved on the Brantford Cenotaph. A/B Joseph Stephen Gaal, son of Mr. Charles Gaal, the oldest of the earliest immigrants to Brantford (mentioned above) and Mrs. Charles Gaal, was born on April 12th, 1924, in Hungary. His father, returning to Brantford with his family brought him here in 1928. He attended St. Basil's School

and later the Brantford Collegiate Institute. Although only 17 years of age, three years below the required age limit, he enlisted in the R.C.N.V.R. on March 21, 1942 in London, Ontario, stating that he was 20. He was trained in London and Halifax. In June, he went to sea as a torpedoman, and served on corvettes, frigates and fairmiles. His last ship was the Frigate Chebogue which was torpedoed in Mid-Atlantic on October 4th, 1944. When the Chebogue was struck A/B Gaal was killed instantly and his body was caught in the wreckage. The frigate was then towed by an Allied ship for 1000 miles only to be caught in a terrific storm that blew for 12 hours in the vicinity of South Wales and caused the Chebogue to flounder and drift through dense rain onto the sandy bottom of Swansea Bay. The storm was so severe that it loosened the wreckage, and A/B Gaal's body was washed into the sea seven days after his death, to be recovered a few days later. He was buried with full naval honours on October 16th at St. Morrision, Swansea, Wales.

His brother Charles was also an A/B in the R.C.N.V.R. and the two brothers saw a great deal of one another, although they served on different ships. They once sailed together on the Queen Elizabeth in September 1943, and were at H.M.C.S. Greenock, Scotland.

Pte. Joseph Molnar, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Molnar, 176 Sydenham Street, was born in Brantford on October 23, 1921. He attended St. Basil's School. He joined the Medical Corps of the Canadian Army on September 8th, 1942, and after training at Peterborough and Camp Borden, left for overseas in February, 1943. He was transferred to the 48th Highlanders of Canada, and with his regiment saw action in Italy, Belgium and Germany. He was killed in action during the last week of the war on April 10th, 1945 at Wertle, Germany, and was laid to rest there.

Pfc Joseph Sebok Jr., U.S. Army, was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Sebok Sr. of 17 Pearl Street, some of the earliest Hungarian immigrants in Brantford. Born on January 11, 1917, in Brantford, he attended St. Basil's School. In 1941 he went to South Bend, Indiana and there married Miss Betty Bodish. He joined the U.S. Army in October, 1943, at South Bend, and after training proceeded overseas, reaching England on D Day. Engaged in the North European campaign, he was wounded, and was awarded the Purple Heart decoration which was subsequently received by his wife. He was killed in action in Germany on November 19th, 1944 as one of those invading the German Reich. He now rests, in a cemetery in Holland. In this Centennial year, his mother still lives in Brantford at the same address.

F. S. Stephen Tatai, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. John Tatai of R.R. 4, Brantford. Born in Brantford on December 16th, 1916, he received his education at Mount Vernon Public School and Burford High School, and was a member of Mount Vernon United Church. While still in school, he showed a great interest in machinery. Enlisting in the R.C.A.F. in August, 1942, the young airman trained at Lachine, received his wings at Mount Joli, Quebec, in April, 1943, and after a furlough at home was posted overseas. In England, he was attached to the R.A.F. and before going to Bomber Command was doing reconnaissance flying. He was reported missing following air operations on February 21st, 1944, and it was learned that he had been buried at Plattsdorf, three miles southeast of Bonn, Germany. That he did his job well and efficiently, and that he was happy serving his country was emphasized by his officers in letters to his family.¹

The third wave of Hungarian immigration into Canada took place between 1947 and 1950. The immigrants who came in that period were a different type from their predecessors. These were the displaced persons who escaped from their native country when Central Europe was occupied by the Bolshevik army. A good proportion of these immigrants were of middle class origin and included quite a few professionals, among them civil servants and officers of the armed forces. They were used to a comfortable way of life, but the years of war and exile conditioned them to hardship. During the first years of their arrival they did physical work on farms or in the town. Many were employed by the now well established, prosperous farmers who could give them directions concerning the unfamiliar work, in their native language. In Brant County, the tobacco harvest in August offered excellent opportunities to save some money and make a down payment on a house and look for employment more suitable to their background. Due to their education they learned English better and faster than the earlier immigrants. After five years' residence, when obtaining their Canadian Citizenship they were fluent in the language of their country of adoption.

A second type of Hungarian immigrant came to Canada, Brant County included, from 1949 onward. These were relatives of the earlier immigrants. Since the regulations were relaxed by the Hungarian authorities this type of immigrant is still arriving.

The Hungarian uprising against Bolshevik tyranny in October, 1956, brought the third wave of Hungarian immigrants into Canada and Brantford. We shall devote a special section in commemoration of the events of those days at the end of our study. The new immi-

¹ From the Album of Honour for Brant County, World War II, 1939-45.

grants were mostly very young people, skilled or semi-skilled, and easily employable in factories. Because of their youth and more formal education they learned English comparatively quickly. In fact, it was this group of immigrants which became most easily integrated into the Canadian way of life.

Brantford, like the rest of Canada, has four types of Hungarian immigrant. The pre-war immigrants were mostly small farmers, the post-war ones were displaced persons, mostly of educated middle class origin; the refugees of the 1956 period, who on an educational level stand between the two, trained mostly for industry. The fourth type is the second and third generation Hungarian, children who were born or educated in Canada. They are all English speaking, but because of their regard for their parents and grandparents many of them still speak Hungarian and think with affection on the country of their ancestors.

Among prominent citizens of Hungarian origin in Brantford in 1967, Mr. Joseph A. Varga is Vice-Chairman of the Centennial Commission and Chairman of the Brantford Citizenship Council. The Crown Attorney, Mr. Charles Borda is second generation Hungarian.

HUNGARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

On July 14, 1907, a Benefit Society was formed among Hungarians in Hamilton under the name of First Hungarian Sick Benefit Society of Hamilton. Some Hungarians in Brantford joined this society which was founded (as its name indicates) to pay sick benefits in case of illness. The membership fee was 50c per month. An independent branch of this society was formed in Brantford on June 1, 1913. According to the minutes, signed by the secretary, Mr. Joseph Nemeth, ten members took part in that inaugural meeting and paid \$16.80 that day. They also had expenses: 17 copies of the bylaws of the society and ten badges to be worn by the members. It was also recorded that the cost of the return journey between Hamilton and Brantford for the chairman and secretary was \$2.00.

The Society was reorganized on November 4th, 1926 as the Brantford Hungarian Mutual Benefit Society. It was a non-political social club, open to everyone between the ages of 16 and 45. Its membership increased gradually. For eleven years members met mostly at the premises of the Y.M.C.A. Their present property on Albion Street, known as the Hungarian Hall, was bought in 1937. In 1947 the property was enlarged to include a dance hall open for social events to the general public. In 1960 the building was further extended and modernized. The Brantford Hungarian Mutual Benefit

Society has more branches in Ontario with headquarters in Brantford. The main branch in Brantford has about 150 members.

In the winter of 1956-57 after the Hungarian revolution, when the refugees began to arrive in the City, the Society, under the Chairmanship of Imre Vegh (who later became the Hungarian announcer of the C.B.C. Overseas Branch in Montreal) gave all possible help to the newcomers in adjusting to their circumstances. In the following years, the Society sponsored Hungarian cultural activities, among them various dance groups which have performed at the Glenhyrst Festivals with great success. The chairman in the Centennial year of 1967 is Mr. Fabian Pusztai. He has held this office since 1962. Under his chairmanship the Hungarian Mutual Benefit Society became interested in city projects, generously contributing to the Civic Centre Fund.

CHURCHES

Approximately two-thirds of Brantford and Brant County's Hungarians belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Most of the rest are Calvinist or Lutheran. Some Hungarians who came from the North Eastern part of Hungary belong to the Greek Catholic or Uniate Church. But the first Hungarian-speaking congregation in Brantford was formed by immigrants in the late twenties who were of Pentecostal persuasion. They bought the old synagogue on the corner of Richmond and Albion Streets and renamed it the Hungarian Evangelical Church.

The majority of the Hungarian Roman Catholics belonged to St. Basil's Parish, for most Hungarians settled in the neighbourhood of St. Basil's Church. Within that parish the Hungarian Ladies' Holy Rosary Society was formed and its members recite the Rosary at Hungarian Roman Catholic funerals.

The Greek Catholics held property for some time on West Street. They worship at St. John's Ukrainian Catholic Church but have their own congregation. Once a month, Mass is celebrated in Hungarian by Father George Papp who lives in Hamilton.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada commenced work among Hungarians of the Reformed (Calvinist) faith in the early thirties. Two brothers, the Reverends Charles and Frank Kovacs came alternately occasionally from Hamilton to Brantford. Charles Kovacs was an ordained minister of the Reformed Church of Hungary. His young brother Frank was a sculptor, who, however, to help his brother whose health was not good, studied for the ministry in the United States. They worked among Hungarians in Saskatchewan before coming to Hamilton and Brantford.



Old and new Presidents of the Hungarian Mutual Benefit Society, Branch 1, 104 Albion Street, Brantford
Eight to left: Frank Malyik, Head Office President; Joseph Kocsis, first (Branch) President in 1926 and
F. S. Pusztai. Centennial Year President.



During the forties, some Hungarian families of the Reformed Faith moved from Montreal and others from the West to Brantford and Brant County. After Charles Kovacs retired and his brother Frank Kovacs moved to London, England, a congregation was formed as a Mission Charge of the Presbyterian Church in Canada on May 27, 1945, under the name of the Brantford and District Hungarian Presbyterian Church. Services in the Hungarian language were held by the Rev. Eugene Ruzsa of Hamilton. The first regular minister of the congregation was the Rev. Calvin Doka, a second generation Hungarian born in Kipling, Saskatchewan, who at the same time also became the minister of Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church.

Some Lutherans from Hungary also joined the congregation. Hungarian Presbyterians retained some of the characteristic features of the Old Country Church within their organization, such as the office of the warden, the elected lay head of the Church. In the Brantford Hungarian congregation this office was held through many years by Mr. Joseph Chato who moved to Brantford from Raymond, Alberta and did outstanding service for his Church.

Originally, the congregation met for services at the old Y.M.C.A. building, or Knox Presbyterian Church, but in January 1952 property at 111 William Street was bought for use both as a community hall and a manse. In 1956 the congregation gave every possible help to the Hungarian refugees in Brantford.

In 1962 land near Pleasant Ridge Road was donated by Mr. Bruce Patterson for the purpose of erecting a proper place of worship which also could service as a community church for the district. The new church was dedicated on November 14th, 1965 when the name of the congregation was officially changed to Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church. Services are held in both the Hungarian and English languages.

In the spirit of brotherly love and ecumenity, the Hungarian Greek Catholics were represented at the church dedication and a generous gift was made by Mr. George Malik and Mr. Steve Vancsik on behalf of the local Hungarian Greek Catholic congregation.

1956

The Hungarian uprising against the Communist regime in Hungary and the Russian army of occupation broke out on October 23, 1956. This was the first full-scale revolt against Bolshevism behind the Iron Curtain which had a considerable initial success. After eleven years of Russian occupation, for a whole week Hungary was free again.

The Hungarian uprising was followed with great interest, sympathy and admiration all over the world, for it was not thought that a successful revolt against twentieth century methods of highly organized oppression was possible. Yet Hungary's fight for freedom, unorganized and spontaneous as it was, beat the forces of the hated State police, disarmed some Russian forces in the country, and for the time being overthrew the Communist regime.

For some time the frontiers of Hungary became wide open, ready to receive much-needed help from the West. But the Hungarians waited in vain. Fresh Russian forces were sent to the country and the revolt was crushed. In the first week of November, 1956, many a young Magyar gave his life not only for his Fatherland but also for universal freedom and human dignity.

Through the pen borders thousands of refugees began to pour towards the free West, leaving behind everything in haste before the dreadful Iron Curtain closed again. The refugees, of course, were not All freedom fighters, indeed, the majority of them were not. But the Western world which could not save them from Bolshevik tyranny received them with open arms. Shortly, about 30,000 of them reached Canada.

When the first news of October 23 reached Brantford the local Hungarians became one in pride and sorrow for their countrymen. Public opinion gave them whole-hearted support. Blood donors clinics were organized all over Canada as well as in Brantford to help the wounded fighters-for-freedom. A special Hungarian Aid Fund was established to send much-needed medicine, first aid equipment and food to Hungary and later to refugee camps in neighbouring Austria. A special meeting was held in the Hungarian Hall, attended by the dignitaries of the city and also by the officials of the Polish Alliance.

The following Sunday, the Brantford Hungarians made a protest march through the city, from the Hungarian Hall to the Market Square where they were joined by some Ukrainian friends. In front of the City Hall a meeting was held under the chairmanship of Mr. Joseph A. Varga. Soon a huge crowd gathered. Mr. James Brown, Liberal Member of Parliament for Brantford, addressed the by-standers. He was seriously ill at that time, and it was a very special effort for him to appear at the Market Square and deliver his speech which was believed to be his last public function. Fortunately, shortly after this event his condition improved and his health was restored. His moving speech on that great day of demonstration on behalf of distant Hungary appears to have been a turning point in his health.

When Russian forces crushed the Hungarian revolt, a Hungarian Refugee Co-ordinating Committee was formed among prominent citizens of Brantford. Its first meeting, called by James Brown, M.P. and Miss Laura Van Every, Immigration and Canadianization Committee, I.O.D.E. (Municipal Chapter) was held at the Y.M.-Y.W.C.A. on Wednesday, December 13th, 1956, for the purpose of forming a representative Citizens' Committee for the reception of Hungarian refugees in the Brantford area, and co-ordinating plans already initiated by different community groups.¹ At that meeting, Mr. James E. Brown, M.P. and Mr. George T. Gordon, M.P.P. were elected honorary chairmen, Miss Laura Van Every, chairman, Mr. Bert Beaumont, vice chairman and Mrs. M. Lusby, secretary.

The committee, in close co-operation with the Hungarian Aid Committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Imre Vegh, did valuable work for the refugees arriving in Brantford in arranging accomodation, language classes and helping to find employment in preparation for a new life in their new country. The comparatively quick integration of these refugees into Canadian life was to a great extent due to the efforts of this committee.

In conclusion, it may be remarked that the Hungarians who came to Canada came from all strata of society and all parts of the Old Country would never have mingled with one another, or even met, in their native land. The New Country brought them together as it brings them into contact with other citizens to build up the Canada of the next 100 years.

May they prosper here in Brantford and all over the land.

¹ From the original minutes.