

## **Szántó, András. 2021. *Pesti alakok a nagyvilágban* [‘Guys from Pest in the Wide World’]. Budapest: Gabbiano Print Kft.**

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András Szántó (1964-) is a Hungarian-born author, researcher, and art advisor living in New York City. His professional background is diverse. Following his studies at Corvinus University in Budapest and then at CUNY and Columbia University in New York, he settled down in the Big Apple to build a career in art business and marketing communications. He has acted as art advisor for several reputable institutions including the Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, the Dallas Museum of Art, Stanford University, Kunstmuseum Basel, Asia Society, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, to name but a few.

Szántó moved to the United States in the 1980s, but his connection to his homeland remained intact through his professional pursuits and so did his obvious passion for introducing Hungary and Hungarians to the world. *Pesti alakok a nagyvilágban* [‘Guys from Pest in the Wide World’] is the ninth of a ten-volume series that he wrote about people based in or originating from Budapest. Each book focuses not only on famous individuals in the traditional sense, but also on humans that the author himself may have had a personal connection with – people that *he* considers important. This personal approach lends an immensely compassionate, gentle tone to the books, instantly drawing the reader in. In addition to providing significant data, Szántó also manages to present a collection of interesting stories. It is a commonly known fact that successful writers develop engaging characters and compelling plots while using a riveting language. Szántó may not be a fiction writer, but his text certainly makes the readers feel as though they were on an exciting adventure, finding out more and more about the protagonists, and looking forward to the climax of the story, when the conflict of the plot is resolved, the questions are answered, and the essence of the protagonists becomes fully understood.

*Pesti alakok a nagyvilágban* is indeed an exceptional book about the life stories of adventurers. It is not long (only 136 pages), but it is so engrossing that the reader finds it difficult to put it down. The subtitle of the book is *Expatriates, Immigrants, Dissidents, Hobos*, which promises that the book will include the diverse accounts of several people of Hungarian origin. Szántó begins the text by providing the reader with a general overview of immigration from Hungary at the turn of the twentieth century. He explains that one of the main sources of income of large international passenger lines was the transportation of immigrants, and that they built their marketing strategies around this concept. They had offices in European capitals including

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Budapest (the largest ones at Baross tér and Fiumei út), where passengers could register, book their places, and buy their tickets to their preferred destinations. The vast majority of the passengers intended to relocate to the U.S., where – according to news of that era – due to labor shortage, employers attracted potential candidates by offering high salaries. Although the agents with profit-making in mind tried tirelessly to convince people to move abroad, many of the future emigrants were fully aware that starting afresh in a new country was not going to be easy. Nonetheless, due to financial hardship and/or increasing political and economic unrest, many decided to leave anyway. Prior to their departure, their eligibility was checked by the *Kivándorlókat és Visszavándorlókat Védő Iroda* [‘Protection Office of Expatriates and Repatriates’], who were responsible for ensuring that the candidates met the increasingly strict requirements of the host countries. Should the candidates be sent back from abroad, the Protection Office would be in charge of paying for their transportation in full. Although the U.S. traditionally preferred Anglo-Saxon immigrants, the number of arrivals from other countries (including Austria-Hungary, Poland, Russia, Italy, Greece, and Turkey) was still two and a half times larger than that of the Anglo-Saxon people. Szántó quotes from Andor Löherer, a financial expert of that era, who voiced his concern about “our simpleton peasant who thinks that money grows on trees in America” (19). Löherer contended that Hungarians (and indeed Central and Eastern Europeans) sensed upon arrival that the thorny path had been created exclusively for them, but by the time they fully realized it amidst pain and hardship, it was often too late. The Americans wanted to get rid of such people as the state was not prepared to provide for the poor. As Szántó emphasizes, American culture was and to this day is characterized by the pursuit of success and wealth, which knows no mercy. Advancing the greatness of their nation is the key goal of Americans, and charity has little place in this process.

Defending the “simpleton peasant,” Szántó counter-balances Löherer’s views by indicating further, more positive definitions of Hungarians who left their homeland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to try their luck elsewhere. According to contemporary poet János Lackfi, Hungarians may have their flaws (“they complain constantly and they are hot-headed”), but they are patriotic, therefore whenever they “wanted to die, they always dragged a Turk down with them” (4). Theodore Schoenman, the biographer of Ágoston Haraszthy (1812-1869) – the father of California wine, who will be further explored – has a similar opinion. Defining Haraszthy and, by extension, Hungarians in general, he lists an array of virtues, including: “[He was] restless. Impatient. Imaginative. Hard-working. Fit as a fiddle. Theatrical. And stubborn, of course. That is – Hungarian!” (75). Accordingly, Szántó draws attention to the fact that Hungarians who decided to emigrate were not all unskilled, useless, naïve people who thought that “money grew on trees in America.” On the contrary: the majority of them made remarkable achievement by being “Imaginative. Hard-working. Fit as a fiddle. Theatrical. And stubborn.” They proved that success was not always about greatness but rather about resilience and consistency.

The chapters are not arranged in a chronological order, and the different emigration laws that existed in different times and places are not emphasized in the book, either. Nonetheless, *Pesti alakok a nagyvilágban* gives insight into the lives and accomplishments of ten Hungarian immigrants who came from a modest past and created an extraordinary future. The first one of them is Jolán Földes (1902-1963), who was a world-renowned Hungarian-Jewish author virtually unknown in Hungary. She emigrated to London in 1941 and is best known for her novel entitled *A halászó macska uccája* [‘Street of the Fishing Cat’], which recounts the hardship that a working-class Hungarian family had to endure when they emigrated to Paris after World War I.

In 1936, this novel won the All-Nations Prize Novel Competition of the London-based Pinter Publishing Ltd. While Földes was and still is considered by literary critics a light-weight author, thanks to Szántó's research the reader is able to see how, despite her dismissal by critics, many ordinary people were touched by her novel. Szántó provides a wealth of images highlighting the lasting legacy of Földes, including an illustration by the famous painter and graphic artist Franz Masereel, which appeared in a special edition of *A halászó macska uccája* in Belgium, or photographs of restaurants named *Halászó Macska* in Budapest and Paris.

The interesting relationship of literature and restaurants plays a significant role in Szántó's account of the next "guy from Pest." Following his service in the Hungarian army during World War II, Lajos Szathmáry spent time in German and Soviet prison camps and thereafter was a displaced person in an Austrian refugee camp. He lived in various Western European countries before coming to the U.S. in 1951. He had \$1.10 in his pocket and no knowledge of English. In 1959 Szathmáry settled down in Chicago and started working for a frozen food company. Due to his diligence and creative ideas, he contributed to the success of his employers, and his advice was even taken up by NASA. He then published a cookbook entitled *Frozen Food Recipes and Cooking Tips*, and soon afterward, in 1962, he established his own legendary restaurant named Bakery. Szathmáry also set up his own culinary-cultural projects, including a research laboratory, a library, and a literary research workshop. He cooked for celebrities and presidents, and he hosted Hungarian scholars doing research in literature and/or gastronomy. After long years of hard work his name became known for multiple reasons, and he always remained most dedicated to representing Hungarian culture. Yet, he did so not by loud praises of the values of his homeland but rather by dispersing his great and deep knowledge of Hungarian history, culture, literature, and gastronomy.

Similarly important restaurateurs in Szántó's account are Pál Kövi and Tamás Margittai, revitalizers of the famous The Four Seasons restaurant in New York, where iconic figures from the worlds of culture, sports, art, and music would dine on a regular basis. The two "quality maniacs" paid much attention to the selection and training of their staff and offered the highest quality of cuisine, until they finally sold the restaurant in 1995. Kövi, who published the only famous cookbook about Transylvanian cuisine, was also admired for his communication skills in a dozen of languages, while his typical Hungarian accent never softened. Another significant gourmet specialist introduced by Szántó is György Láng, who moved to New York after his parents were murdered in the Holocaust. During his career, he opened two-hundred restaurants in eighteen countries and published numerous cookbooks, but in 1992, following the Hungarian regime-change, he finally returned to Budapest and took over the prominent Gundel restaurant.

Good food must be paired with good wine, says Szántó; therefore, his discussion of renowned Hungarian Americans continues with the lengthy description of the life of Ágoston Haraszthy, who was cited earlier as an exemplary man with a true Hungarian spirit. Nobleman, adventurer, and writer Haraszthy was born in Pest in 1812 and is said to be the first Hungarian who settled down permanently in the U.S. and the second Hungarian who wrote and published a book about America in his native language. Leaving from London in 1840, he travelled to New York on board of a mail ship, but he only spent a short time there because he was much more interested in yet undiscovered territories. He bought lands with one of his friends and established a town he called Széptáj ('Beautiful Scenery'), presently Sauk City, Wisconsin. Haraszthy travelled on horseback extensively, and wherever he appeared, he was remembered for his creative ideas and Hungarian garments, which were more beautiful and brighter than anything else one has ever seen. Haraszthy was a successful businessman and, among many other things,

he was once even elected for county sheriff, but he is most remembered for establishing the town of Buena Vista in California, where he became the founder of the Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma. It was not he who brought the first vine shoots to California, but he was certainly the pioneer of laying down the foundations of modern, professional, and mass-producing wineries in the area.

Serving a different kind of community, Sándor Lénárd is mentioned next in Szántó's book as a man who was trained to be a physician, but his love for literature and languages often prevailed since he was also a polyglot writer and translator. In Hungary, he is most famous for having translated *Micimackó* to Latin. Even after years spent in Austria and Italy, and then decades in Brazil, his writing and thinking conveyed his Hungarianness deeply and purely. Another doctor to be praised by Szántó is Albert Szent-Györgyi, who worked as a researcher in the Netherlands, Germany, and the U.S., but who was the first – and actually the only – Hungarian Nobel Prize winner who received the award for work carried out in Hungary. Yet, instead of focusing on this achievement, Szántó stresses Szent-Györgyi's excellent pedagogical techniques and kind, approachable personality. Judging by his findings, Szent-Györgyi was a very inspirational teacher who constantly motivated his students and colleagues to utilize their skills as best as possible.

Szántó's account on the last three persons of his investigation – István Örkény, Géza Dámosy, and Dr. Szlava Füzesi – is shorter than the previous portraits. Nonetheless, the passion of these three men for creative tasks – that is, gastronomy and literature, travel journals and drawings, medicine and poetry, respectively – does come through in the book. All three of them are well-travelled individuals whose adventures and temporary or permanent relocations significantly impacted their work and figures.

To conclude, András Szántó manages to accomplish his mission as set out in the introduction of *Pesti alakok a nagyvilágban*; his collection of "The Table of Interesting Hungarians" succeeds in illustrating a diverse group of Magyars who made a difference in this world, each in their own specific ways, either by moving abroad and keeping Hungarian traditions alive there, or by returning home and enriching Hungarian culture with their experiences gained on foreign soil.