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Government Propaganda in Interwar Hungarian Male Juvenile Travel Writing

Tibor Glant

Abstract: The Trianon Treaty of 1920 forced new realities upon Hungarians living in both what was left of Hungary and in the United States, while rising anti-immigrant sentiments in the New World culminating in the passing of the Johnson–Reed Act of 1924 further complicated the situation. With hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hungarians resettling into smaller Hungary from the territories forcefully ceded to the successor states, Budapest was not interested in large-scale remigration from the US. At the same time, American immigration restriction drastically cut off the flow of Hungarian migrants to the New World communities established at the time of the "new immigration." American popular culture (especially music, movies, and pulp fiction) took Hungary by storm and further strengthened the overtly positive image of the Transatlantic Promised Land. Travel writing continued to play a dominant role in shaping mutual images, and a new subgenre, juvenile male travel literature, emerged. Taking a closer look at the works of Lola Réz Kosáryné, Andor Kun, and Gedeon Mészöly I explain how tourism, romanticized images of the "Other," and government propaganda mingled in these texts in what seems to be a concerted attempt to help young Hungarians come to terms with interwar political realities.

***Keywords**: Trianon Treaty, Johnson-Reed Act, juvenile travel writing, Lola Réz Kosáryné, Andor Kun, Gedeon Mészöly*

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Introduction

US-Hungarian relations entered a new, formal, bilateral stage after the First World War, but at a steep price for the newly independent Central European country. Finalized in the punitive Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and population, with over a

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third of its prewar ethnic Hungarian population handed over to the other newly created successor states of Austria-Hungary. The US and Hungary signed a separate peace treaty in August 1921 because, first Republicans in Congress and then the incoming Republican administration under Warren G. Harding refused to accept the new global order dreamed up and partially brought about by the former Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, at the Paris Peace Conference (Pastor; Glant, "Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok"). Following years of intensive negotiations, the two countries signed a treaty of friendship, trade, and consular rights (in effect setting up functioning bilateral relations) in 1925, incidentally only after the US had finalized its new draconian immigration law in 1924. The Johnson–Reed Immigration Act restricted the number of Hungarians allowed to legally enter the US as potential citizens to 473 per year, thus cutting off prewar mass migration to the New World (Puskás; Frank). The timing was all the more important since Trianon Hungary had a population just under eight million, and somewhere between 350,000 and 425,000 ethnic Hungarian refugees poured in from the neighboring countries (Mócsy; Koloh).

As Éva Mathey explained, , Hungarians of all walks of life and political standing looked upon the United States as a potential prime mover, an arbiter mundi, in bringing about treaty revision— the one and only issue the White House persistently refused to discuss with Budapest. In what she called "chasing a mirage" ("Az Egyesült Államok") Hungarians tried to raise the issue with Americans repeatedly, officially, semi-officially, and privately. In a drastic yet logical shift of policy, after 1920, Budapest stopped encouraging ethnic Hungarian remigration and hoped to find new allies for treaty revision among the flourishing Hungarian-American communities and among the now limited number of Hungarians who were allowed to immigrate to the US after 1924. As we will see, these calls for fair play and treaty revision found their way into juvenile literature.

At the same time, the prewar idealized image of the US as a "promised land" not only prevailed but was boosted by the arrival of American popular culture in Hungary (Glant, "Amerikás könyvek".) In his comprehensive monograph, Balázs Sipos claims America became ever-present in everyday life in interwar Hungary: be it pulp fiction (westerns, gangsters, and hard-boiled detectives), literature (Palladis, Nova and Athenaeum all translated contemporary American novels), music (jazz), or movies. This cultural invasion, however, was by no means a one-way encounter since Hungarians in Hollywood (Korda, Fuchs, Lugosi, etc.; cf. Muszatics) also contributed to what Victoria de Grazia called the "irresistible empire" and David Ellwood described as "the shock of America" that Europe had to face as of the 1920s.

1927 marked a turning point in Hungarian revisionist policy. Budapest stepped out of diplomatic isolation by signing a treaty of eternal friendship with Mussolini's Italy, and Lord Rothermere published his iconic "Hungary's Place in the Sun" article in the *Daily Mail*. This revived the revisionist argument in print (see, for example, the *Justice for Hungary* volume edited by Count Albert Apponyi or the Hungarian Territorial Revision League pamphlets from 1928–1929; cf. Zeidler, ch. 4) and fostered a cultural-political environment in which young Hungarian adult males were also called upon to go abroad, acquire useful knowledge, and bring it home to serve their native country.

Juvenile fiction covering the Americas was nothing new: besides translations of the various novels by the globally present Jules Verne (Verne Gyula in Hungarian), Gyula P. Zempléni's *A floridai kalandhősök* (Florida adventurers, 1905) and Bálint Bocs's *Tányértalpú koma csodálatos kalandjai Amerikában* (The miraculous adventures of Paw Bear in America,

1912) are two notable Hungarian examples. That notwithstanding, juvenile literature got a new boost between the world wars in Hungary (see Pogány, all works cited). A preliminary survey of interwar juvenile literature and Hungarian travel writing on the US yielded three texts that adopted the perspective of young Hungarian adults. The first two were published between 1926 and 1928, while the third came out in 1932. The three texts presented here combine traditional, pre-First World War Hungarian images (cf. Glant, *Amerika*) of America with Horatio Alger-style rags-to-riches stories and revisionist propaganda. They represent a short-lived, new type of fiction and narrative in Hungarian culture, one that would be drastically wiped out by the communists after 1945. All three tell the stories of young men travelling, yet the three authors could hardly be more different. Andor Kun was a much-travelled journalist, Lola Réz Kosáryné was an iconic female poet, writer, and translator of the time, and Gedeon Mészöly was a professor of linguistics at the University of Szeged. A fourth piece, titled *Egy 17 éves magyar fiú küzdelmei New Yorkban* (Trials of a 17-year-old Hungarian boy in New York), was published in 1926 by Imre Balnár, Jr., but it is not discussed here because it is based on the author's real-life personal experiences from the second half of the 1910s and only briefly mentions the issues discussed here.

Andor Kun's Janika (1926)

The noted journalist Andor Kun (1882–1960) published *Janika Amerikában* (Janika in America) in 1926. The book was so popular that it saw three editions by 1928. Kun worked for many prominent papers of the age, ranging from *Pesti Hírlap* and *Magyar Hírlap* through *Friss Újság* to *Magyarság*, and was the Budapest correspondent of *Amerikai-Magyar Népszava* from 1920 onwards. Kun's other popular works include *Politikusok pongyolában* (Politicians in night gowns, 1913), a Mikszáth-like take on Hungarian politics before the Great War, *Amerikai bolyongások* (Out and about in America, 1932), an entertaining travel account of the US, and *Berlinből jelentik* (Berlin reports, 1945), a vitriolic unmasking of Nazi propaganda from the Third Reich. He was not allowed to publish anything by the communists after the war, and he passed away in 1960.

Janika's father was a successful Hungarian-American engineer who decided to return to Hungary after his American wife had passed away in the early 1910s. The father then enlisted and died in the Great War. Bullied by lower-class elements after the war, the orphaned boy decides to take up his father's former American boss on his promise to help if needed. He sets out alone, gets into bad company in France, and is framed for jewel theft on the ship as he arrives in the New World. He escapes from the ship with the aid of a Japanese passenger and is helped by an unnamed white hobo and a black kid from Harlem, George Washington, who works for Macy's, New York's iconic department store. Throughout his wanderings, Janika encounters the KKK and Native Americans and saves a hotel from a joint white gangster and Chinese Tong attack. His story is a typical rags-to-riches one, where he uses "luck and pluck" to succeed. Yet he is unhappy, and his American mentor, Mr. Brown, with whom he, of course, does connect in the end, gets it: "John, I know what bugs you. You wish to be back home. You would die of homesickness here. What you crave is your homeland, the air in Hungary, words in Hungarian. You would perish here like a fish out of water, would you not?" (184). So Janika returns home to be greeted on arrival by his fellow scouts, who appear here with some emphasis although they got but one passing mention in the entire book beforehand.

Janika is a typical Horatio Alger story with a Hungarian twist, as he cannot accept life in America and returns home a hero. It must be noted that Alger was not translated into Hungarian. Kun clearly consumed and understood pre- and interwar American cultural products and crammed his personal, movie, and literary experiences into a 186-page story, which, in today's booming juvenile fiction world, would probably be 600 pages plus.

Kun's insightful commentary on America is based on first-hand experience acquired before and after the Great War. He is at his best when addressing race. On board the ship, Janika befriends an unnamed Japanese passenger who, as has been mentioned, helps him escape from the ocean liner just before they reach Ellis Island. Although he travels legally, he enters the US illegally, to avoid arrest on arrival on fake charges. Janika shares his fears with his Asian friend, who replies: "Us, yellow folks, are looked down upon and even hated in your white-skinned world, because we have learned everything from them and soon they will be learning from us." He then goes on to say that Japanese people are more than ready to make sacrifices and tolerate hardships to learn from others and, they willingly take their new knowledge home. The two outcasts naturally bond as the (still unnamed) Japanese man describes himself as the "elderly son of a strange and mysterious land" (48–49). This is a clear take on the blatantly racist "yellow peril" and "Oriental mystique/wisdom" narratives of the time (Frayling).

Like Asians, African-Americans have a strictly defined place in American society. A scruffy hobo introduces Janika to a black family that lives in poverty but endures their fate with honor and dignity. The father is absent, the mother runs the house, and the boy, George Washington, has a strict work ethic and moral code: he is willing to help but expects Janika to work as well(and by doing so, adopt the American work ethic). The Washington family helps him to survive, which initially places the Hungarian boy at the bottom of American society. When his fortune turns, he, of course, pays them back in kind.

White characters, however, represent all walks of life. The hobo is homeless and poor, and Janika begins her journey from a similar place. His "nemesis," William, is a streetwise confidence man and hardened criminal. They first meet in Switzerland, then in Paris, and William tries to involve Janika in various felonious activities. William later frames Janika on the ship for stealing jewelry, and then turns out to be the head of the white gang that works with a Chinese Tong to rob New York jewelers. Janika and the hobo unveil their plot and save a hotel that the criminals had set on fire as a diversion for the robbery. Janika becomes famous, the newspapers cover his true story, and he eventually meets Mr. Brown, his late father's American mentor. At the end of the book, the hobo also goes legal and begins to work freelance for the police. Thus, Janika moves from the subhuman status of East-European immigrant to New York high society, a feat that he can achieve on account of his skin color but only with the help of other "inferior" actors (the Japanese man and the black family).

Janika is an enjoyable read and clearly has a message that resonates with Hungarian government policy of the time: talented Hungarians should go out into the world, prove themselves honest and heroic (and so improve Hungary's international reputation), learn new skills, and then return home (like true scouts do) to contribute to the rise of Hungary. A similar message is on display in the following text.

Lola Réz Kosáryné's Tibi trilogy (1926–1928)

Lola Réz Kosáryné (1892–1984) was a pioneer female poet and writer of her time (*Filomena,* 1920, *Asszonybeszéd* [Women's talk], 1942) and the recognized translator of, among

others, Edgar Wallace, Pearl S. Buck, and Margaret Mitchell into Hungarian. She was, of course, the mother of iconic Hungarian historian Domokos Kosáry (1913–2007). She penned some 38 pieces of juvenile fiction, including the Tibi trilogy between 1926 and 1928. This trilogy had five editions by 1942.The work and the author were banned by the communists after 1945. She passed away in 1984.

In *Tibi csapata/Tibi Magyarországon* ([*Tibi's team/Tibi in Hungary*] we meet Tibi Hupák, a Hungarian-Slovak ("magyar-tót") boy from Upper Hungary (Felvidék), whose father died in the war and the Czechoslovak occupation took him by surprise at the age of seven. By the time he gets to secondary school, the family is forced to move to Hungary (just like the author's family did in 1919). He is a proud Hungarian and a natural-born leader, hoping to recover his homeland from the Czechs. The uncle of a rich friend challenges him to retain his Hungarian identity and pride even if he stays away from home for fifteen years. Tibi agrees to take on the challenge if his mother accompanies them to the New World. The second volume, *Tibi a tengeren/Tibi Amerikában* (Tibi's sea voyage/Tibi in America) is another Horatio Alger-inspired rags-to-riches story. On the voyage, he saves an elderly Slovak couple from a fire, becomes an overnight sensation, and lands a movie shoot in Hollywood: he is asked to reenact his brave rescue mission for the big screen. He invests the money he has earned to provide his future financial independence. Volume two ends with a grown-up Tibi finding a job with an American senator delegated to the League of Nations. The third volume, *Tibi hazajön* (Tibi returns home, 1928), narrates his arduous work for treaty revision, which happens by the end of the story. He secretly revisits his homeland, now part of Czechoslovakia, and sees the destruction wrought by foreign rule: "Destruction all around. The town became a village, industry disappeared, the people became even more poor. No money, no initiative. Some newcomers have become rich. The people are hit by heavy taxes" (204). His companion, a successful Hungarian-Slovak-American entrepreneur, Jani Ulichár, finds his old home in ruins: "The walls collapsed in. Nobody lived in it. The garden was taken over by weeds. Ulichár asked around for the new owner. A clockmaker in a nearby town bought it, but taxes were so high he had no money left for renovations" (205).

On his next visit to Europe, Tibi is framed in France by Czechoslovak spies and is jailed for five years. He jumps from the train when he is extradited to Czechoslovakia and finds refuge with a family that he had once helped in America (in volume two). Soon afterwards, thanks to British and American pressure, Upper Hungary returns to Trianon Hungary, and Tibi comes home a hero in uniform. On the final page of the novel, the third-person narrative shifts into a conversation with the reader and concludes with a prayer to the Lord for the reunification of Hungary. When Upper Hungary returned to Hungary in 1939 (the First Vienna Award), the trilogy was reprinted every year in a single volume titled *Tibi: Vissza a Felvidékre* (Tibi: Return to Upper Hungary).

The Tibi trilogy echoes the author's family history and is thus clearly autobiographical, but, of course, with a gender twist: the hero who lost his father and hometown in the war had to turn into a man. Any story of a woman protagonist traveling all by herself and proving successful in both America and in Hungary would have carried no credibility in the patriarchal world of interwar Hungary. There is little character development in the story. Tibi is an idealized figure. He is brilliant and industrious, and he manages to navigate both the Old and the New World by sheer instinct: he naturally adopts "the American way" without ever being taught what it means. He is purposeful, and the only element of character development we see in him is that he

becomes more cautious after his arrest and incarceration. In Lola Réz's universe, he is the idealized young man of talent and determination, who would reverse the injustices of the Trianon treaty. The three volumes are about 80 pages each, which makes *Tibi* just about as long as *Janika*. The language is equally simple, but the message is more direct: we have no detours with criminals, Native Americans, the KKK, or burning hotels, although we do have a Hollywood episode. The Tibi trilogy is also a rags-to-riches story with even more emphasis on the Hungarian twist first seen in *Janika*, since Lola Réz specifically tells us what Tibi is doing for the restoration of the territorial integrity of the prewar Kingdom of Hungary and celebrates his eventual success in 1928 (eleven years ahead of time). It goes without saying that in the distorted Communist "historical" narrative of the "traditional Hungarian-Czechoslovak friendship," this book was banned, and discussion about it was suppressed.

Mészöly's American-Hungarian Boy, Feri

The third piece of young adult male travel writing was penned by University of Szeged linguist Gedeon Mészöly (1880–1960). He was one of the pioneers of the Finno-Ugric theory on the origins of the Hungarian language and a renowned translator of Pushkin, Racine, and Homer. As its title suggests, the hard-bound book is a reverse travel account: *Amerikai magyar fiú Magyarországon* (An American- Hungarian boy in Hungary, 1932). Its subtitle reads, *Olvasókönyv külföldi magyar tanulók számára* (A textbook for Hungarian students from abroad). The author invites his fictitious nephew Feri, living in America, to Hungary for a summer visit. The 276-page book is a thinly veiled tour guide to Trianon Hungary. It focuses on the successes of the Horthy-era reconstruction efforts (while ignoring the global economic crisis that hit Hungary especially hard). It recites and amplifies the government abuses targeting Hungarians in the neighboring successor states. The fact that the characters fly commercial between Debrecen, Budapest, and Szeged is an example of the successes emphasized by the author, while the before and after photographs (54–55) of the Maria Theresa statue in Pozsony (Bratislava) and its ruins on display in the National Museum represent the atrocity propaganda side.

The host and Feri also visit various Hungarian communities in the successor states. In Czechoslovakia, a literary event is cancelled by the authorities because on a previous occasion they had sung the Hungarian national anthem, which is forbidden by Czechoslovak law (217). In Serbia, they are harassed by the police (70–76), and in Transylvania, their French companions are robbed of their car and clothes (268–271). In the book's final scene, weeks later, they reconnect with the same French tourists at Lake Balaton (Siófok). They ask the foreign visitors if they had recovered their belongings, and the Frenchmen reply that such villains would only be captured if Transylvania were returned to Hungary (272). The American dimension of revisionist propaganda described by Mathey is also on display here: they visit the Washington statue in the City Park of Budapest and read news of Idaho Senator William Borah's call for treaty revision (Mathey, "Elszigetelődés" and *Az Egyesült Államok*). This volume, richly illustrated with more than fifty photographs, also ends with a prayer for the resurrection of Greater Hungary.

The Mészöly text is easy to read, and, in terms of propaganda, it is the most blatant of the three texts. The car theft story in Transylvania is a clear update on the interwar legend that Hoover once called Rumanian Prime Minister Ioan I. C. Bratianu a horse thief at Paris (Bonsal 171), and, like in the Tibi trilogy, we are told that Czech, Rumanian, and Serbian rule brought nothing but destruction while Hungary is a beacon of progress and civilization. This book also reflects a newly emerging narrative that began with the 1929 World Congress of Hungarians in

Buffalo, NY (Szántó 73–76) and culminated in the Second World Congress of Hungarians held in Budapest in 1938 (during the St. Stephen commemorative year). At the core of this narrative is the belief that the Hungarian government has a moral responsibility to educate Hungarians in America about what is really happening at home and help maintain their strong Hungarian identity without urging them to resettle in the old country (*Magyarok*; Halácsy). Here, Feri is simply the excuse to present the Hungarian case, and the text is juvenile literature only in name (cf. the subtitle of the book). He is not presented as a Hungarian who happened to have been born in the US, but as an American of Hungarian stock. This suggests that he is expected to help in the US and not to settle in Hungary.

Conclusion

Janika and *Tibi* revive the pre-First World War images of the US as a place miles ahead of Europe where you can succeed with hard work, honesty, and luck. Tibi has a "cold shiver" (136) when he understands that, unlike in Budapest, girls and boys attend the same school in his New World home, but he adapts easily. He invests his earnings from a movie shoot into a forest development project that would grant him the financial independence to travel around Europe in pursuit of treaty revision. In *Janika,* we have a detailed description of Macy's (94–98), and Tibi is taken to the New World by the stereotypical American Uncle, an émigré Hungarian who returns for a family visit. However, stereotypes work both ways. Both books point out Hungary's poor international reputation and bad press as well as all the lies that were spread about Hungarians at the Paris Peace Conference. Tibi encounters an English lord who believes Hungarians are barbarians. He mocks the Englishman: "And that we still tenderize meat by putting it underneath our saddles. We have goulash, *csikós*, and Tokaj wine" (221). Jani and Tibi both fight stereotypes by inviting critics to come and visit Hungary, which, of course, is the main theme of the Mészöly volume: invite an American-born Hungarian boy raised in the US to visit home and show him what Hungary is really about. These works tie in with the conscious Hungarian government policy, explained by Zsolt Nagy, of encouraging tourism and using such visits to convince critics that Trianon Hungary is a better place than what its international perception would suggest .

One of the most fascinating aspects of interwar US-Hungarian relations is the apparent absence of government censorship in Hungary on the discussion of American subjects, including participatory democracy and freedom of the press, neither of which was actually practiced in the Old World country (Glant, "Amerikás könyvek"). At the same time, the overdose of American popular culture created an existential challenge for some (e.g., jazz for gypsy musicians in the restaurant business). It generated honest resentment in others (Sipos ch. 7). However, none of this appears in the three books covered in this paper. All three show respect, if not awe toward American achievements and progress. They also echo the government's message that if you educate Americans about the true nature of Hungary's problems, they will help us. This is in line with the government policy of encouraging foreign critics to come to Hungary and see for themselves.

All three authors shared some of the key revisionist goals and narratives of the Horthy regime despite the fact that they had clear reservations about its patriarchal and undemocratic nature. Two of the three even ended their book with a prayer for the restoration of Greater Hungary. Kun was Jewish and was given a hard time for his aforementioned 1913 and 1945 books, Lola Réz was a most talented woman writer and translator struggling to make ends meet

in the uncomfortably patriarchal Hungary of her time, and Mészöly nearly lost his university job for writing a political satire for the stage by the title *Tótágas* (Topsy-Turvy, 1927). According to the official history of Szeged University published in 1999, the Smallholders Party, in retaliation for getting ridiculed, pushed for his removal from academia in the Hungarian Parliament (Mikola 187). All three authors, together with the books analyzed here, were promptly wiped from public memory by the communists, which suggests that juvenile adventure in the New World combined with revisionist propaganda was a short-lived but unique feature of Hungarian culture between the wars.

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