

Hungarian Identity:  
Constancy and Change in the Father Land, Mother Tongue, and Family Lines  
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The unique history and language of the Hungarian people have created a distinct cultural identity. Although this unusual identity can be a source of great pride, it also can lead to a sense of isolation and otherness. Understanding the complexity of the Hungarian, or Magyar, identity requires an examination of the country's history, from its Eastern origins and expansion to its domination by neighboring countries. In light of this historical background, a careful reading of Hungarian author Miklós Vámos's *The Book of Fathers* reveals how a fictional Magyar family exemplifies the pride and despair of Hungarians over several centuries. The memoir of Hungarian-American journalist Marianne Szegedy-Maszák, in contrast, focuses on the true experiences of her family over three generations. Both works emphasize the importance of family in the shaping and transmission of Hungarian identity, acknowledging the influence of historical trauma while maintaining hope for the future of Hungary.



Hungarian Identity:  
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## Introduction

In Hungarian mythology, one of the most revered figures is the *csodaszarvas*, or “Wonder-Stag.” The all-white stag moved across the sky nightly with the moon in his antlers and the stars across his chest (Tomory). One day he appeared on Earth to the twin sons of Nimrod, and they were compelled to follow him. He led the princes, Hunor and Magor, through modern-day Russia and Ukraine, where they met and married the princesses of the Alan tribe. The “Wonder-Stag” took the newly created families into the fertile Carpathian Valley and left them there to form a mighty new nation of Hungarians, or Magyars (Faber). This intermingling of families from greatly different cultures and a sense of cultural destiny lay the foundation for what has become a unique national identity.

Historians believe that the legend is partially accurate; although no one can determine the true origin of the Hungarian ancestors, they did come from the East. Their unusual language holds clues to their origins. Hungarian, which is also called Magyar, is not Indo-European but Finno-Ugric. There are linguistic similarities to Finnish and Estonian, and there are strong links between the Hungarians and the hunter-gatherer tribes of Ostiaks and Voguls in Siberia (Lendvai 13). At some point in their early history, Hungarians incorporated elements of both Iranian and Turkish languages into their own, indicating close contact with those cultures as well (Teleky 7).

These linguistic roots separate Hungary from its neighbors, who all speak Slavic or Germanic languages, and hint at an isolation that appears repeatedly in the country’s literature and scholarship. Its most famous poet, Sándor Petőfi, once proclaimed Hungarians “the most forsaken of all the peoples of this circling earth!” (qtd. in Lendvai 220). The troubled history of the country seems to give credence to that attitude as for

centuries the Hungarian nation has been steadily growing smaller as a result of weak alliances and outright conquest. Hungarian historian Paul Lendvai asserts, “except for the Albanians, the Magyars are the most lonely people of Europe with their unique language and history... To be a Hungarian is a collective neurosis” (1).

Yet in spite of this decidedly pessimistic identification, Hungarians also share a fierce love for their country, often using a dark humor to express pride in the very things that could be viewed as negative. For example, in a debate with Enrico Fermi about the existence of aliens, Hungarian-born scientist Leo Szilárd famously joked, “They are already among us, but they call themselves Hungarians!” (qtd. in Teleky 83). Author Tibor Déry emphasized the contradictory tensions of his identity by describing being Hungarian as “a joke dancing over catastrophes” (qtd. in Lendvai 6). The quotes together capture the Otherness, the sorrow, and the pride of being Hungarian.

The novel *The Book of Fathers* by Hungarian author Miklos Vamos explores this complex cultural identity by tracing a Magyar family through twelve generations of turbulent change. The borders and language of Hungary shift dramatically over the centuries, and the men shift in accordance, changing their religion, political affiliation, and surname. They experience a series of devastating historical events, yet they maintain a fierce collective pride in the midst of their despair.

Marianne Szegedy-Maszak’s memoir *I Kiss Your Hands Many Times* takes a much narrower focus on Hungarian history; she writes of the real life experiences of three generations in her own family as they deal with two devastating wars. Her family members actually leave Hungary entirely, yet even in exile they exhibit that curious mixture of pride and sorrow over their homeland.

Although both constructions of Magyar identity in these works portray deep isolation, despair, and patriotism, the authors take remarkably different paths to achieve the same goals. In an article discussing Hungarians' response to historical trauma in place, Hedvig Turai argues that Magyars use both "hot" and "cold" memory to process the past. She uses Budapest's House of Terror, a museum detailing the horrors at the Gestapo and Arrow Cross prison and torture rooms, as an example of hot memory in that its design includes commentary and staging "to keep this outrage and hate hot" (105). In contrast, Statue Park is a collection of all the old Communist statues from across the city gathered into one place with no commentary at all; without context, the artifacts create a "cold" approach to the oppression of the past (104).

The work of Vámos may be seen as the literary equivalent of the "hot memory" location; by using the devices of fiction, the author can craft exactly the impression that he wants, triggering specific reactions in his readers. Just as Turai points out that the House of Terror incites visitors by portraying Hungary as an entirely innocent victim (106), Vámos deliberately leaves ambiguity about each man's involvement in revolutionary plots. Some are implied to have been involved, while others are the victims of chance or mistaken identity, but none of them are shown as actually deserving of their punishments, making their experiences even more poignant. This allows readers to internalize Vámos's belief that Hungary itself has been unduly punished.

On the other hand, Marianne Szegedy-Maszák has a background in journalism, giving her work the "cold" feel of Statue Park. Although she does include personal connections, she largely leaves herself out of the work, generally choosing to let the

primary documents speak for themselves. Her work is based in fact and reads as an investigation rather than a construction. For instance, three of her relatives all die on November 4, although in different years; that date also represents the anniversary of the Russian victory over Hungarian revolutionaries in 1956 (Lendvai 453). A “hot” approach would emphasize the link between all of the Magyar losses; Szegedy-Maszák uses a “cold” approach and lets the facts stand alone.

Turai sees limitations in only using one approach toward processing the past; in the same way, it is important to study both the fictional and non-fictional portrayals of Hungarian families. Despite their obvious differences in “hot” or “cold” approaches to the same topic, Vámos and Szegedy-Maszák both convincingly establish distinctly Hungarian traits. An analysis of their fictional and non-fictional Hungarian lineages in light of the csodaszarvas legend’s emphasis on family and destiny reveals the unique Magyar identity of dancing over catastrophe.

## Chapter One: Historical Overview

In order to understand how the literature of Hungary presents this complex cultural identity, it is necessary to understand its history. The various cultural, historical, and religious influences on the nation and its language have greatly affected its people; a close look at these elements through the lens of both fictional and real Hungarian families reveals the complexity of Magyar identity.

### Conquest and Expansion

Although the exact origins of the Magyars are uncertain, by the year 830 Hungarian ancestors lived in the regions between the Danube, the Black Sea, and the Don River in present day Ukraine. During the ninth century, they gradually moved further west, conquering the Carpathian Valley (Lendvai 12-13). According to Richard Teleky, the valley became “a place where East met West, where Asia met Europe” (95). The clash of cultures was often a violent one; historical references portray Hungarians as bloodthirsty and evil. Herodotus recorded that they were cannibals who drank the blood and ate the hearts of their enemies to become braver, and *The Song of Roland* refers to the Magyar people as “breeds of Satan” (Lendvai 7, 25).

The Hungarians, who destroyed a monastery in 926, were proudly pagan (8). Their first ruling dynasty was believed to have begun when a princess was impregnated by a *turul*, or mythical bird, to conceive Álmos, whose own son Árpád united the people by accepting blood sacrifices from the tribal chiefs in exchange for land (16).

Consequently, the Hungarians were perceived as enemies of the Cross, a perception that surely colored foreign attitudes even after their conversion under the revered king and patron saint, István.

István was the son of a pagan leader named Géza, who never converted but nonetheless saw value in alliance with their Western neighbors. He raised István as a Christian and married him to a Bavarian princess. Upon his ascent to the throne, István began the process of Christianizing his nation: missionaries were welcomed, Latin became prevalent, and the first educational institutions were formed (Lendvai 29-32). Historian Antal Szerb believes that István's greatest success as a leader was his ability to forge those links with the Western world without sacrificing Hungarian independence and sovereignty (qtd. in Deme "Perceptions" 310). István also made a point of welcoming other cultures into Hungary, warning his son in a letter that "a country which has only one language and one kind of custom is weak and fragile" (3).

However, after the deaths of István and his young heir, the country quickly fell into instability, and by the 1200s Mongolians had begun invading Hungary. None of Hungary's neighbors came to their aid, and Hungary was devastated (49). After the Mongolian attacks ceased, various rulers, often foreign-born, held the throne during a time of great expansion for the country, which reached from the Baltic to the Adriatic (65). This expansion and assimilation led to the country's Golden Age under King Mathias, who ushered the country into the Renaissance.

Like most of the Hungarian kings, Mathias Hunyadi was only partially Hungarian; his father was Romanian. The Hunyadis were not royal, but Mathias was immensely popular, and an heirless king's death paved the way for his ascension to the throne. Court historians invented a pedigree for him, linking his ancestry back to the knight Corvinus, whose name he adopted. With this legitimization, he revolutionized the country, beginning with the printing of books, the establishment of universities, and the

translation of religious texts into Hungarian. Most importantly, though, his reign was the last time the Hungarians were victorious in war. Because of this, even though he died in 1490, as recently as the 1990s surveys showed that Hungarians rank him as the most liked person in Hungarian history (75-85).

### The Ottoman and Hapsburg Empires

Hungarian Jenő Szűcs believes that the period up through Mathias's reign involved Hungary's becoming a part of the Western world, but "historical catastrophe" led to the country being led off course for the next four hundred years (qtd. in Lendvai 88). Two significant factors contributed to this catastrophe: the rise and clash of the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires.

King Louis II married Maria, a Hapsburg who was widely hated by the Magyars for her preferential treatment of German minorities in Hungary. When the Ottoman Empire began to expand its borders, the Hapsburgs relied upon Hungarian military strength for defense. In 1526 at Mohács, 25,000 mostly Hungarian soldiers and King Louis faced a Turkish army that was at least three times larger in a devastating battle. The Hungarians were defeated and the king was killed in less than two hours, causing Queen Maria to flee to Vienna. She took with her the Hungarian royal treasures, cementing a hatred among the Magyars for the Hapsburgs as well as the Ottomans. Lendvai credits the defeat at Mohács with the establishment of a Hungarian preoccupation with death, pessimism, and loneliness (91-93).

After Mohács, the Hapsburgs and Ottomans agreed that Hungary would be divided into three parts. The Hapsburgs retained control over what was deemed Royal Hungary, which consisted mostly of the northern and western portions of the country.

The Turks controlled the second part, the middle and south of Hungary, and they had a loose control over the third part, Transylvania, where Hungarian leaders were in control but were handpicked by the Sultan (Lendvai 106).

In addition to being split between two great empires, Hungarians were also being split by religious strife. Over the next century, in the semi-autonomous region of Transylvania, Calvinism spread quickly, whereas the Hapsburgs responded to the Reformation by strongly enforcing Catholicism in Royal Hungary. Meanwhile, the Turks erected mosques and minarets in their portion of Hungary; however, unlike the Hapsburgs they generally allowed religious freedom.

Desiring independence, a group of Hungarian and Croatian leaders had formed what is now called the Wesselényi Conspiracy to free themselves from the Hapsburgs. They attempted to enlist the aid of other anti-Hapsburg countries, most notably France, in battle, but the plan was discovered, the potential allies backed away, and the conspirators were exiled or killed (Lendvai 134). After this failure, a group of Hungarians believed that siding with the relatively lenient Turks against their common enemy would enable at least partial freedom. With the sultan they planned an ambitious siege of Vienna, but their utter defeat, culminating in the Treaty of Carlowitz in 1699, meant that the Ottomans were forced to cede much of their land to the Austrians. Hungary became a “conquered enemy province” of Austria (135), and many Hungarians were punished or exiled for their rebellion (Garcia). Protestant peasants, called *Kurucz*, continued to rebel in a series of small uprisings against those deemed Austrian loyalists, or *Labanc* (Vámos 471), but the Hapsburgs remained dominant. Their supporters were elevated into positions of nobility, creating an entirely new social structure in Hungary.

The doomed alliance with the Turks had another negative consequence for Hungarians as well. The perspectives of other governments toward Hungary were swayed because of its alliance with a non-Christian state. Those who had links to the Ottomans were “branded as godless, disloyal, and shameful,” furthering the Hungarian sense of isolation (Garcia). The issue of religion continued to be divisive, particularly under the reign of mid-1700s Hapsburg leader Maria Theresa. Known as a defender of Catholicism, she created additional tension by suppressing Protestantism and by persecuting and exiling Jews (Lendvai 172).

In spite of the many negative outcomes, however, this period saw a surge in Hungarian pride as well as calls for unity. Multilingual soldier György Bessenyei believed that a revived interest in the Magyar language was the best way to achieve that goal. In an attempt to reverse the perception that German and Latin were superior languages because of their associations with the upper class, he worked to modernize Magyar and encourage its use in newspapers and literature. Essayist Paul Ignotus wrote that this “invented the Hungarian nation” (qtd. in Lendvai 173). By the turn of the century, enthusiasm for the language led to demands for Hungarian in government and military functions; more importantly, it also led to the dissemination of works in Hungarian decrying Hapsburg policy.

The Hapsburgs responded with imprisonments and public executions; the punishments were so drastic that one poet who translated *La Marseillaise* into Hungarian received a sentence of ten years in a dungeon (Lendvai 184). In 1825, however, Count István Széchenyi dared to give a speech to the Upper Chamber in

Hungarian. It lit the spark for a national movement that adopted the motto “The nation lives in its mother tongue!” (Lendvai 199).

In 1848, the patriotic movement led to actual revolution. Poet Sándor Petőfi, in partnership with a group of other poets, writers, and historians, marched to the National Museum where he recited *Nemzeti Dal* (National Song), which includes the verse:

Magyars, once more our name and story  
Shall match our ancestors' in glory  
The centuries of shame and hurt  
Can now be washed away like dirt.  
By all the gods of Hungary  
We hereby swear,  
That we the yoke of slavery  
No more shall wear. (Szirtes)

In spite of this rebellious fervor, the attempt at revolution failed. While trying to establish a Hungarian-based hegemony, the revolutionaries alienated minorities within its borders, inciting resistance particularly from Slav and Romanian communities (Deme “Society” 76). The Austrian leaders wisely encouraged such tensions so that Hungarian forces were weakened and that potential allies were hesitant to come to Hungary’s aid. By 1849, the Hapsburgs forged an alliance with Russia, effectively ending all hope of victory for the Magyars. Though Hungarian leaders pleaded with other countries such as England and France for aid, no one would step forward against the combination of Hapsburgs and Russians, and the revolutionaries were defeated (Lendvai 238).

Less than twenty years later, however, a great shift occurred due to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, wife of Franz Joseph. Elizabeth, known as Sissi or Erzsebet, was hugely popular in Hungary in spite of being a Hapsburg. The surprising shift came about because Elizabeth declared herself a Hungarian by choice. Philosopher E.M. Cioran credits her affections for Hungary to a love of the melancholy, which was so

evident in Hungarians recovering from great national sorrow (279). She lived in Hungary, learned the language, and surrounded herself with the people, who in turn adored her. A newspaper wrote, “Everyone is convinced that the sentiments of patriotism dwell in her noble heart, that she has acquired the Hungarian mentality along with the Hungarian language, and that she has always been a warm advocate of the Hungarians’ needs” (qtd. in Lendvai 272). Jubilant Hungarian genealogists even announced a ‘newly-discovered’ connection between the Queen and the Hungarian Saint Elizabeth of the fourteenth century (278).

Although still under Hapsburg rule, the Hungarians were somewhat elevated as a result of Elizabeth’s advocacy. The emperor declared a “Dual Monarchy” in which Austrians were regarded as imperial (*kaiserlich*) and Hungarians as royal (*koniglich*) (283). This arrangement allowed Hungarians greater freedom and autonomy in some regards, although in some areas of government, such as military defense, they still faced restrictions. Many advancements were made in the country during this time, including establishing the first underground metro system in continental Europe, the completion of the Parliament building, the erection of now-famous bridges spanning the Danube, the extension of Buda Castle, the building of new museums, and the creation of a large city park (311).

During this period, Hungarian leaders pushed for assimilation of minority groups into Hungarian culture, believing that everyone willing to learn the language had the same opportunities regardless of cultural background. The Jewish community in particular was rapidly assimilating in Hungary. In a thirty-year period around the turn of the

millennium, 700,000 Jews declared themselves to be Magyar-speaking Hungarians (328). At the time, the synagogue in Budapest was the largest in the world (313).

### World Wars I and II

The relative contentment of Hungarians was to be short-lived, however. In 1914, the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand changed everything. Although the Archduke had been outspoken against Hungarian rights and was very unpopular among Hungarians, his death nonetheless catapulted Hungary into the Great War. Over the objections of many Magyars, including Prime Minister Tisza, Hungary was obligated by its political ties to join in Austria's retaliation for the assassination (356-7).

The war ultimately led to the weakening of Austria and the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy. A few days before the armistice, Hungarians, along with Romanians, Czechs, Croats, Slovaks, and Ukrainians, announced their independence in what was called the Chrysanthemum Revolution. The separation came too late to avoid political fallout, however; as part of the Treaty of Trianon, the Hungarians were forced to cut down their military and pay reparations. Worse, Allied forces drew new maps drastically changing the boundaries of the former Dual Monarchy (366-367). Hungary received the brunt of the punishment, its country dwindling from 325,411 square kilometers before the war to 92,916 (Vámbéry 15, 17). Three and a half million Hungarian subjects were dispersed to neighboring countries with no regard for familial, ethnic, or linguistic ties. The traditional coronation city, renamed Bratislava, belonged to an entirely different country, and so did the whole region of Transylvania (Lendvai 374). In total, two-thirds of the people and territory of Hungary were given away, an act one Hungarian described as the country being "dismembered" (Deme "Perceptions" 307,

314). One of the Hungarian leaders explained the effects of this treaty by saying, “We felt not only defeated, dejected, and debauched but - far worse - psychologically swindled, betrayed, and bamboozled” (qtd. in Lendvai 367). Lendvai himself says that the mere word Trianon “sums up for all Hungarians the most devastating tragedy in their history” (373).

Still reeling from the loss and suddenly free from Austrian rule, Hungary needed new leadership. Within months a new Communist party, composed mainly of atheist Jews influenced by the Bolsheviks, had taken command, but its control lasted only a disastrous 133 days (Lendvai 369). Hungary was in financial ruin and political chaos, and the previously liberal country began to demonstrate troubling signs of anti-Semitism. Jews who had been leaders at the time of the Treaty of Trianon, plus those in the failed Soviet-style government, became convenient scapegoats for many Hungarians. In addition, most of the minority groups in Hungary had been living on the outskirts of the country and had been annexed into other regions - but Jews, who lived mostly in central Hungary, were suddenly the only large minority (377). The concept of a Hungarian identity created by language and individual choice was disappearing. The political right, promising a purification of Hungary, had begun to exert influence, primarily under the leadership of commander-in-chief Admiral Miklós Horthy. Horthy and Prime Minister Pal Teleki instituted the first anti-Jewish laws, placing quotas on the number of Jews allowed in universities and professions and paving the way for acceptance of the Nazi Final Solution against Jews (384).

When Hitler became a major political player, many Hungarians saw him as a means of regaining some of the territory lost in the Treaty of Trianon; the goal of reclaiming

land at any cost had become the sole focus of Hungarian foreign policy (Vámbéry 125). The support had serious ramifications for Hungarians with any Jewish ancestry, however. Because the Hungarians had traditionally identified themselves as Magyar by choice and language rather than blood, their family lines were often intermingled with a variety of other cultures, and those with any Jewish ancestry scrambled to conceal that as the Arrow Cross organization, devoted to Hitler and to a purification of Hungary, grew in power (415-417).

For a time, Hungary managed to stay on the sidelines during the war. However, in 1943 the Second Hungarian Army was ordered to Voronezh, Russia. Over 135,000 soldiers were imprisoned, wounded, or killed in the battle, affecting most Hungarian families (419). Still, many Hungarians believed that Hitler would be ultimately victorious and supported him, not knowing that he had been plotting to occupy Hungary completely. In the process of that occupation, 3000 politicians and intellectuals were arrested and sent to labor camps.

Jews faced an even worse fate. A ghetto was established in Pest, home to roughly 200,000 Jews (Karsai). Soon Hungarian officials trying to win favor with Germans bragged of sending 147 trains with 437,402 Jews to Auschwitz in less than a month and a half (422). Jewish books were publicly destroyed, and soon Jewish people were publicly executed. In the winter of 1944, members of the Arrow Cross party lined up hundreds of Hungarian Jews along the Danube River just outside the Parliament building, where they were tied together in groups so that when one would be shot, he would pull the others into the river to freeze and drown (424). By the end of the war, the

number of Hungarian Jews had plummeted from nearly 800,000 to less than 7000 (Karsai).

### Communism and post-Communism

In spite of the disastrous Soviet-style rule just after WWI, Hungarians again turned to Russia in the upheaval following the defeat of the Axis powers. Russia had helped defeat the Nazi presence in Hungary, and many Magyars were grateful. However, before long they found themselves chafing under an equally restrictive regime.

Stalin's protégé in Hungary was Mátyás Rákosi. Rákosi had been exiled to Russia as a result of his involvement with the short-lived Communist government in 1919, allowing him to avoid the tragic fate of many of his fellow Jews during the Holocaust. He returned to rule Hungary as a Communist for twelve years, ushering in an era of fear and cruelty. Under the direct leadership of Stalin and with the help of the newly created AVH organization, he sought out and tortured or executed traitors to the Communist ideals, including members of his own cabinet. A network of 40,000 informants provided them with information about possible suspicious behaviors of more than a million Hungarians (Lendvai 434-439).

After the death of Stalin, Imre Nagy, who was also a Communist, became the Prime Minister. In 1953, he dared to speak publicly about the "intolerable conditions characteristic of a police state," earning him the adulation of many Hungarians. Party leaders stripped him of power, but the seeds of rebellion had been planted. In 1956, the bodies of several high-profile victims of the AVH were reburied in a symbolic funeral that attracted 200,000 people. Meanwhile, anti-Russian student protests in Poland inspired many young Hungarians, who gathered in solidarity in October. This protest

attracted thousands and culminated in Russian soldiers opening fire on the crowd that had gathered outside the Parliament building. Over the next few days, around 10,000 freedom fighters, armed with mostly homemade weapons, battled Soviet forces. Most expected the Western world to rush to join them as an opportunity to topple Soviet dominance, but the event coincided with a crisis surrounding the closing of the Suez Canal, and international attention was focused primarily on that. Though Soviet forces actually left the city of Budapest in retreat, Moscow soon ordered additional troops to the area and squelched all hope of further rebellion (Lendvai 448-453). As a result, an estimated 210,000 Hungarian freedom fighters fled the country to avoid retaliation, many walking to Austria and then dispersing across the globe (455). Hungarians remained under Russian control until the fall of the Iron Curtain.

In the early 1990s, scholar Richard Teleky visited the newly free Hungary to connect with his Magyar heritage. He interviewed a sociologist in Budapest who shared, “The young are very disturbed about the future of Hungary. Those who are older are simply exhausted from years of change, especially all of the ideological shifts” (Teleky 147). Teleky writes that though Hungarians finally have freedom, he personally fears a new occupation of a different sort caused by the great number of international investors swooping into the country (152). Hungary was given some political and economic stability when it was admitted into the European Union in 2004, but various factions within the country still vie for power (“Hungary”).

Many Magyars, however, fear the decline of Hungarians more than further economic or political upheaval. The deaths, expulsions, and immigrations of Hungarians during the country’s last century caused the number of Magyars to drastically fall. As the

population ages and the birth rate falls, the numbers continue to decline (Deme “Perceptions” 312). As for the language, it is still spoken in traditionally Hungarian communities in Romania and other neighboring countries, but the total number of native Magyar speakers is probably less than fifteen million today (Lendvai 506). While some still call for the reabsorption of these speakers into Hungary, most politicians and scholars agree that the goal is extremely problematic, encouraging Hungary to focus instead on becoming “a model in the region by guaranteeing national, ethnic, and religious rights” (Deme “Perceptions” 318) - a call back to King István’s exhortation regarding diversity a thousand years ago.

The same sentiment is present in the origin myth as well. The *csodaszarvas* deliberately united men of the East with women of the West in a land foreign to both, creating an entirely new blended society. According to the myth, Hungarians have always been Other by design. No wonder, then, that the families believed to have descended from them identify as aliens, odd beings who nonetheless maintain the ability to dance in spite of catastrophe.

## Chapter Two: *The Book of Fathers*

### Introduction

Hungarian author Miklós Vámos wrote his ninth novel, *The Book of Fathers* [*Apák könyve*], as an attempt to explore his personal heritage. He began researching the life of his deceased father, learning about occupations, military service, and religious background he had never known before. Frustrated by the limited knowledge available in government records, he realized he would be unable to write of his family history, leading him to question, “If I couldn’t write a novel about my father, why didn’t I write one about every Hungarian father?” (Vámos 469). The novel became the story of the fictional Csillag family through twelve generations of Hungarian history, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire to post-Communism. The twelve men are linked not only by bloodlines, but also by the ability to see visions of one another’s lives, both past and future. They record these visions in an heirloom journal, the Book of Fathers. Vámos uses the family to symbolize the ways Hungarians in general have dealt with massive changes to their father land and their mother tongue.

Vámos relies upon an astrological motif to structure his work. The family name Csillag directly translates to “star,” as does the Jewish name Stern that is also used at various points through the family’s history. The twelve main characters all represent signs of the zodiac, and their first names correspond to the Hungarian name for their signs. The book also begins and ends with a solar eclipse (469).

However, this use of astrology is not merely to provide structure to the work; Vámos effectively uses these astrological ties to provide greater symbolic meaning as well. He does not explicitly refer to the csodaszarvas myth, but there are a number of implied links to the story. The family coat of arms is a “precious horn-shaped stone splitting a

rock in twain” (Vámos 49), language which calls to mind the literal translation of csodaszarvas, “wondrous horn” (“Csodas,” “Szarvas”). Vámos also repeatedly references the role of dogs in guiding his characters, which is likely also a reference to the csodaszarvas legend. The twin princes of the myth are the sons of Nimrod, who is associated with the constellation Orion in Hungary. The great hunter is led by the constellations Canis Major and Canis Minor, representing two dogs, and the brightest star in them is Sirius, the “dog star” (“Orion”). Sirius, or Sziriusz in Hungarian, is a fixed star that maintains its position while other constellations move about the sky (“Astrology: Fixed Stars”), emphasizing the steadfast guidance and loyalty provided to the Csillag men by dogs throughout the novel.

In 2007, Krisztina Fehérváry studied a surging interest in astrology among post-Socialist Hungarians, and she argues that many Magyars are drawn to astrology as a reaction to the country’s history of oppression. In the absence of state control and with the new “exponential increase” in personal choice, horoscopes give believers a new framework for decision-making. Based on the predictable but ever-changing movement of stars and other natural objects, astrology provides a worldview that allows for the co-mingling of both destiny and individual choice (568). Such a perspective aligns well with the astrological symbolism in *The Book of Fathers*; the Hungarian identity as personified by the Csillag family is in constant reaction to external forces. The men are strong individuals with unique and often conflicting perspectives, but their general family history is influenced by a strong sense of destiny. This attitude harkens back to the origin myth of the csodaszarvas, in which the astrological being comes down from his assigned path in the heavens to divinely lead Hungarians to their fate. With the help of an

assortment of guide dogs, the “stars” of each generation are following a set course. The cycle of twelve generations culminating in an eclipse, or a rebirth, ultimately provides a sense of hope for the Csillag family and for the nation of Hungary itself.

Kornél Csillag Sternovsky, Kos/Aries, 1702-1743

Vámos begins his novel with the story of Kornél Csillag, who is not a “pure” Hungarian. Both of his grandfathers had been forced to leave Hungary after suspected involvement in the failed Wesselényi Conspiracy, and his maternal grandfather had married into a local Bavarian family. Therefore, Kornél’s mother was half German, and his first language was actually German instead of Hungarian. His father and paternal grandfather had both passed away, so his only Magyar influence came from Grandfather Czuczor. When the family is allowed to return to Hungary, Kornél is mocked and ostracized by the village children for being different. Thus, Vámos establishes the theme of Otherness from the beginning of the novel; a possible link to a failed quest for Hungarian independence has led to the Othering of a predominantly Hungarian child. And yet in spite of all the teasing Kornél does seem to belong in the village of Kos. Vámos indicates a strong connection through his use of the Hungarian language: Kos is not only the name of the town, but it is also the Hungarian word for Kornél’s astrological sign, Aries. Interestingly, although Vámos never explicitly links to the csodaszarvas myth, a link is implied by an alternate definition of the word *kos* as an uncastrated horned animal, the buck or stag (“Kos”). As in that myth, Kornél’s Hungarian identity is not negated by a mixed heritage; he becomes a patriarch for a long line of Magyar men.

In Kos, Kornél discovers that he is gifted with uncanny language skills that reveal and strengthen his Magyar roots. While sitting in his Grandpa Czuczor's office, the three year old Kornél stuns the older man by reading in Hungarian a manifesto from Prince Ferenc Rákóczi calling upon his countrymen "to liberate themselves from the oppression of the House of Austria" (Vámos 7). Vámos portrays Kornél's first experience with the written word, then, as rooted in the desire for an independent Hungary. Similarly, Kornél learns to write by literally copying his grandfather's journal, which the multilingual grandfather wrote in Hungarian because "he wanted to keep the story of their days in his mother tongue" (2). This immersion in both family history and the Hungarian language shapes Kornél and in turn all the generations that follow him.

Despite this rooting in the language of his ancestors, however, Kornél is soon caught up in the turmoil surrounding the country itself. By the early 1700s, Hungary had been divided into three parts, with Turks, Austrians, and Hungarians all vying for control. Vámos indicates this power struggle symbolically when the region becomes a battlefield. In haste, the villagers flee into caves nearby, but they cannot escape the strife. Kornél's mother is raped and murdered by a gang of looters hoping to become rich off the spoils of war. Then his beloved grandfather comes upon the same men while wearing Turkish-style clothing and carrying a saber, and the men take him for an Ottoman spy. They torture him until he dies, and then to eliminate the threat of retaliation they aim cannons at the caves. Kornél, the only survivor, is crippled by the blasts. The family, the village, and in a sense Hungary itself have all been nearly destroyed in the crossfire of opposing forces.

Following this tragedy, Vámos introduces an important motif: a watch that had been found by Telegdi, one of the very looters who killed Kornél's mother and grandfather. The watch had stopped at 12:15 on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1683, which was when Telegdi's own father had died in the Battle of Párkány where the Ottoman Empire had been defeated by Western forces (18). When looters come to the cavern to search for valuables, the watch is inadvertently left behind and picked up by Kornél. It becomes one of the family's most treasured heirlooms. This watch, like the astrological structure of the novel itself, indicates the cyclical nature of history, but with the added associations of paternity and tragedy.

Another important motif beginning in Kornél's chapter is the appearance of dogs, symbolic of the astrological role of Sirius to the father of all Hungarians, Nimrod. After being crippled and abandoned in the caves, the young boy is heartened by the arrival of a large Hungarian dog he names Málé. The dog, who is likened to Grandfather Czuczor (27), appears to give his strength to Kornél, enabling him to live long enough to witness a spectacular solar eclipse. Málé dies as Kornél is, in a sense, reborn during the eclipse. Again, Vámos uses the Hungarian language in a clever way; the word *málé* literally means spoon ("Málé"), indicative of the nourishment given to Kornél during a time of near starvation. It also is used in a compound word to refer to sheep: *málészájú* (literally "spoon-mouthed") ("Málészájú"), which may emphasize Kornél's astrological connection to Aries, the Ram in astrology. Málé is crucial to the survival of Kornél, and in turn his family line.

Vámos uses the eclipse to begin a new cycle for the heavenly bodies and for the Csillag men, triggering the visions that become part of their heritage. Staring at the sun

leaves Kornél's eyes permanently weakened, but he attains the ability to see into the past and future. Later, his first sexual experience triggers the ability to see an even earlier cycle when he witnesses his previous twelve ancestors on their own wedding nights. He records all of these events in what becomes *The Book of Fathers*.

In his adult life, Kornél uses his ability to speak German fluently in order to gain a position as a stable hand for an Austrian general. He quickly becomes acclaimed for his horsemanship, and he even takes a new name for himself in honor of a Hungarian horse master - Sternovsky. He assimilates into the Western world, marrying an impoverished Austrian noblewoman and traveling as far as England with the general. However, he does not completely abandon his Hungarian roots: he follows in the footsteps of his great-great grandfather and opens a glassworks factory, learning the trade from a long-dead relative. Kornél's story begins the new cycle of twelve generations. It is the beginning of a return to Hungary and its language - a return that is troubled and tragic.

#### Bálint Sternovsky, Bika/Taurus, 1726-1758

The second male in the family line is Bálint Sternovksy. He continues Kornél's pattern of being distinct from his forebears but drawing directly from his visions of them. Bálint was known for his singing ability, which was due to his forebears. His earliest exposure to music came from his father, Kornél, who, in spite of his wife's connections to Austrian high society, hummed tunes loved by Kurucz (anti-Hapsburg) rebels to soothe his little boy. By including this detail, Vámos indicates a link between Bálint's personal talent and the family's emphasis on the goal of Hungarian independence. The

link is furthered when Bálint begins having visions for himself. From visions of his grandfather Peter, a pianoforte player, he learns to hone his musical skills and expand his repertoire. He also learns to speak fluently in both German and Turkish due to Peter's childhood under Turkish influence and his exile in German-speaking Bavaria; however, Bálint's father Kornél refuses to speak German in the home, preferring Hungarian.

Bálint experiences visions strongly at three distinct times: during a serious childhood illness, while touching the arm of a young girl, and during a coma before his death. The first two incidents lead to tangible benefits; in addition to learning music and language skills, he treasures the family watch, and he cherishes the mortar shell that had nearly killed Kornél. He also goes on a quest to Kos to learn more about his heritage and to seek out a treasure hidden under the rosebushes. Although his ancestral homesite had been destroyed and looked different from his visions, he is able to find the correct spot due to the guidance of a stray dog (68). He recovers the family treasure and secures his family's fortune. Consequently, he considers the visions that enabled these events as a blessing from God (67).

In spite of this good fortune, however, Bálint is an outsider. Described as "curious, not run of the mill (48)" and a "daydreamer, (56)" he is isolated from others. He said of himself, "I don't trust people. They are capable of the utmost evil. It is better to withdraw" (51). His great mistrust of people appears to stem from his obsession with Kata, the young daughter of the new glassmaster. Again, the author seems to use dogs to guide him toward destiny, as they bark to get his attention just before he sees her for the first time while she is bathing, playing "like a puppy" in the water (59). However,

Bálint's mother Janka, born of noble Austrian lineage, refuses to allow him to pursue Kata due to her perception of their different social classes. Denied the chance to seek her out, he spies on her instead, leading to a heated argument between Kornél and the glassmaster, and Kornél is fatally wounded in the encounter.

Realizing that the tragedy means he could never wed Kata, he marries Borbála instead. Borbála is described as a cruel, cold woman; she mocks her husband and disbelieves his abilities. Their union begins a decline in the family: during their honeymoon, the glassworks business begins to fail, which ultimately forces him to declare bankruptcy. Vámos appears to indicate that Bálint fails to follow the guidance of the dog; his line should have come through Kata, who was not averse to his attention, but he bows to social pressure instead. Consequently, he is stuck in a loveless marriage, isolated and alone.

As an adult, the still-obsessed Bálint injures himself while falling from Kata's window. Vámos accentuates Bálint's feelings of separation by sharing his thoughts during the coma following his fall: "He was restless. He explored his family's history, a tireless traveler of the mind, and tried without cease to think how he might pass on the substance of his visions... He agonized in vain; there was no way" (83). Bálint is distraught that he has not recorded his visions in the Book of Fathers, choosing to doodle about music instead. More importantly, he is deeply burdened by the knowledge that he had been responsible for his father's death. As he faces death, he realizes his intense isolation even more fully. Bálint's story is full of unfulfilled desire, tragedy, and loneliness.

István Stern, Ikrek/Gemini, 1749-1791

Bálint's son István was born under the sign of the Twins. Significantly, in Hungarian astrology, the Twins are often associated with the two original Hungarian brothers, Hunor and Magor (Hmori), and Vámos deliberately references twins repeatedly throughout István's chapter. István's wife Éva is called his twin on several occasions; he believes that they are one and that their similar surnames indicate a shared destiny (95). Just as a traumatized Kornél chose to adopt the more acceptable surname Sternovsky to survive, Éva's father, Aaron Smorakh, chose the surname Stern after facing persecution for his Jewish faith. Both men use the construction of a new identity to navigate a new life, in much the same way that the famous Hungarian King Matthias constructed a new identity to rule.

For the Jewish Stern family, the name represented a new start after being persecuted and evicted from a series of homes across Eastern Europe under the anti-Semitic policies of the Austrian leader Maria Theresa. At the time when István meets Éva, they had settled in the Tokay region of Hungary famous for its wines. He quickly falls in love, but his mother vehemently disagrees with his choice. Unlike his father, István insists that he must be with the woman he loves, and Borbála actually disinherits him for his choice because she refuses to accept a Jewish daughter-in-law. Consequently, István becomes the first to use the Stern surname when he marries into Éva's Jewish family and renounces his Calvinist upbringing. He fully embraces being a Stern, and he even gains the ability to see into her family's tragic past.

István joins them in a winemaking business, immersing himself in their trade and their religion. Under the leadership of a rabbi in the family, he grows in his new faith until he is actually considered more of a Jew than his father-in-law due to his strong

adherence to the law. Perhaps Vámos indicates that, as the son of an outsider and then an outcast himself, István feels a deep connection to the Otherness of the Jewish people.

Although Maria Theresa's successor, Joseph II, officially proclaims Jews to be a protected minority, the anti-Semitism she had instituted continues after her death and personally affects István and his family. During a trip to visit family in Lemberg (modern day Lviv, Ukraine), the Sterns are caught in a tragic demonstration; vandals burn the scrolls and books in the extensive Jewish library, and they slaughter the people. Significantly, István describes the fur-wearing criminals as reminiscent of the Magyars who first rode into the Carpathian Basin. This detail indicates dissatisfaction and disassociation with his Magyar heritage, perhaps linked to the Magyar mother who abandoned him due to her racist intolerance.

During the tragic demonstration, István's wife and two of his sons are killed, while he and his eldest son are seriously wounded. In their grief, Éva's family members blame him for taking Éva and the children there, and István is disinherited a second time. He and his son Richard have no choice but to return to their Sternovsky relatives, who begrudgingly allow them to stay in their star-shaped house. Separated from his "twin," István spends his time playing himself at cards and contemplating suicide.

István treasures the Book of Fathers, even treating it with the reverence one might afford a holy text, but his final entry reveals the devastating effects of the tragedy he had faced: "Here, see, be silent, if you wish to live in peace" (117). He writes this final exhortation to his descendants not in Hebrew or Hungarian, but in Latin. Perhaps Vámos includes this detail to indicate István's disconnection from both Magyar and

Jewish families. Even the family watch, symbol of István's ties to family, seems to indicate this disconnect: Vámos writes that the brokenhearted man repairs the watch on many occasions, but "it remains a temperamental little creature, as if it were not a timepiece but a traveler adrift in time. It loses a month or two now and then; on occasion it can be a decade in error" (128).

Richard Stern, Rák/Cancer, 1775-1841

István's surviving son Richard pointedly refuses to use the Sternovsky name, clinging to his Jewish roots even while living with his anti-Semitic grandmother. He is clearly affected by the tragedy at Lemberg; in addition to the recurring memories of the brutal deaths of his brothers and mother, he is missing part of his thumb, cut off to prevent gangrene after the attack. The loss is symbolic of how "his childhood had been neatly bisected by the Lemberg tragedy" (140). He had once been happy with the Sterns, but while living with the violent Borbála, who is compared to a fairy-tale witch, he is severely beaten and becomes depressed.

Vámos builds upon the idea of a disconnection with Hungarian culture that was established with István's character by having his son leave Hungary entirely for several years to become a language professor in France, where he adopts the French name of Risharre. Richard takes with him the family watch but he abandons both Calvinism and Judaism, saying, "It makes not a bean's worth of difference" (119). Disconnected from his Christian and Jewish families, his only true religion is based on his visions. He sees visions of his future wife and children, and he spends his time looking for exactly the right woman so that he can create his own family, ending his period of isolation and Otherness.

He sees an impoverished Catholic marquise that he believes fits his vision and becomes determined to meet her. However, he does not know until much later that she had been wearing a wig and could not have been the correct woman. This sense of a deviation from destiny is confirmed by the story of their first meeting: she averts her eyes to avoid the sight of “immodest” dogs and runs her carriage over him. She turns away from dogs, typically used by Vámos as the guardians and guides of the Csillag men, out of repulsion; she cannot truly be part of his family. Although he swears to raise any children in the Catholic faith, he and the overly pious marquise are never able to conceive. Her extreme prudery causes Richard to become impotent.

As his marriage fails, he is invited to return to Hungary, described as “a fallow field visited by drought... [that] no one considers of any importance” (133) to use his linguistic abilities to revitalize interest in the Magyar language. However, this interest leads to relationships with ardent Hungarian nationalists. When the Hapsburg government begins to try eradicating revolutionaries, Richard is deemed guilty by association and is sentenced to a long imprisonment in a Munkács dungeon.

It is while he is imprisoned that he is finally cured of his impotence. Importantly, Vámos places this event on the dawning of the new century while Richard kneels as if in prayer, the same posture used when he writes in the Book of Fathers. His physical release is marked by a release of visions as well; he is able to clearly see and process all that he has endured, allowing him to move to a new phase of life. He becomes even more obsessed with his visions. He fills the pages of *The Book of Fathers*, writing more than any ancestor before him, even in the dark.

He is finally released from captivity after agreeing to sign a German document assuring that he will “respect” the Austrian Empire - though in the privacy of his book, he writes that “the law is an ass” (142). Upon his release, he finds that the Sternovsky home had been confiscated, so he turns to the Stern family, where he is welcomed, but finds that “everything was so familiar, yet somehow alien” (150). There he studies both Hebrew and Hungarian, even coining new words that were added to dictionaries. He then marries the true woman of his vision, a poor Czech girl, and has several sons, more than compensating for his earlier impotency. Secure in the creation of a new family that will extend the line of Csillag men, he lives “to a ripe old age in the bosom of his family” (152). His final words in the Book of Fathers speak of hope: “my ancestors and I have had our share of suffering; from this day forward let years of happiness beckon. If we had a star, it would last for eternity, or even longer” (152). With the character of Richard, Vámos restores a traumatized and disenchanting Magyar to his heritage by immersing him in language and family, erasing his Otherness.

#### Otto Stern, Oroszlán/Leo, 1803-1824

The optimism of Richard’s later years initially sets a positive tone for his son, Otto. Otto exhibits the qualities of his astrological sign, the lion. He leads his brothers, known as the Vandal Band, in drunken, sometimes violent, carousing, racking up debt for his overly lenient father. Although at first he seems to be driven solely by hedonistic desire, his passions later expand to include revolutionary fervor. As a young hooligan he incurs his father’s anger for jokingly setting the words of their family’s wine charter to an old “subversive Kurucz song” (157), but Otto later comes to believe in the spirit of the anti-Hapsburg Kurucz. This transition begins when he stumbles upon a meeting at the

synagogue to establish a Magyar Society. A distant cousin speaks, saying, "... our Magyar mother tongue has for centuries on end languished in the slough of imperfection" and calling for the "cultivation of our language" (164); Otto is so moved that he pledges a thousand florins to the organization.

Later, this donation proves to be his undoing, as it leads to a wrongful accusation of treasonous activity. Vámos extends his pattern of having innocent Hungarian characters suffer unjustly, but during Otto's interrogation, he realizes he does identify with the beliefs of the true perpetrators, asking himself, "Why don't we have a Hungarian king of our own? One who speaks our language, knows our customs, has our interests at heart?" (181). Though at first his patriotism had been motivated solely out of a love for his mother tongue, that burgeons into a desire for Hungarian independence.

Vámos demonstrates the link between language and nationalism in the issue of religion as well. Although Otto's father identifies as a nominal Catholic, Otto and his brothers are raised in a Jewish community. Otto seems to have no particular attachment to either religion. In fact, when one of his brothers questions whether Jews have a place in the Magyar Society that declares allegiance to the "great God of the Magyars," Otto replies, "Magyar tongue goes with Magyar God" (165). Here Vámos indicates the shift in the importance of the Magyar language to its people, because it, more than religious affiliation, indicates true patriotism.

For Otto, religion is revealed to be distinctly familial. He refers to their Book of Fathers as "the personal Bible of his family" (171). Just as his father before, he reveres the book, treating it as a holy document and believing that "the most important

knowledge lay within its covers” (170). He notes that it is completely full and plans to order another folio; however, he is executed for his supposed revolutionary involvement before he can.

He does, however, manage to extend the family line before his untimely death. Unbeknownst to him, his encounter with a prostitute at the tavern leads to the birth of Szilárd. The woman’s real name is Matushka, indicative of her Russian Orthodox upbringing, but her clothing and pseudonym of Fatimeh bear evidence of Turkish influence as well (178). Otto is intrigued by her ethnic ambiguity, and their sexual encounter is different than any he had had before. Vámos returns to the astrological motif in describing their affair, writing that the woman tames the Leo from a “feral beast” to a “sweet household pet” (180). This transition from lion to dog indicates a return to the motif of guidance or destiny at work, although the author has kept that realization from his character.

Importantly, during their encounter Fatimeh has taken Otto’s heirloom watch, his “most treasured possession,” from him, a loss that grieves him even more than the torture of interrogation (183). While he ponders this in prison, he hears the sound of snoring and guesses there must be a dog nearby, “on the basis of his family history” (183). He dies as an innocent man wrongly accused, but the presence of a snoring dog nearby, just as Málé had been with Kornél, indicates destiny still at work in tragedy.

#### Szilárd Berda-Stern, Szűz/Virgo, 1825-1849

Otto’s son is christened Szűlard, a “favorite name for puppy dogs” (187), although he later becomes known as Szilárd. He is raised primarily by his grandmother in a village by the sea; the exact location is not specified, but it is in a place that uses Cyrillic

lettering and has Russian Orthodox customs. He has no knowledge of his father and has no significant male influence at all, until his mother marries a Hungarian man and takes him with her to the man's hometown. This plotline allows Vámos to explore the path of minorities who struggle to assimilate into Hungarian culture.

In Hungary, Szilárd takes his stepfather's last name, Berda. Berda is proud to be Hungarian, and he and Szilárd's mother are active in the local theater, where their goal is to "promote theatrical activity in the Hungarian language, to raise its status" (196). They even put on a controversial restaging of a play called *The Unhappy Hungarians* in which all of the villains are fitted with contemporary Austrian uniforms (199). Szilárd, however, does not believe he can fit in. Mocked by the other children for his accent, he feels "forever banished from the cacophonous noise that united the Hungarians" (192).

However, in his very first vision, he discovers that his ancestor Kornél had also been mocked for having an accent, giving him hope and solace. From his images, he discovers a rich family history. He learns about the special watch hidden in his mother's belongings, and he envisions the hiding place where Otto had placed the Book of Fathers. Desperate for connection to his paternal roots, he takes the watch and travels to the Sterns, where his grandfather Richard eagerly welcomes him into the family. When Richard again sees the watch he assumed had disappeared forever, he muses, "This is how it is with us.... We keep losing members of the family, only to get them back again in the course of time" (206).

Although Vámos indicates the great difficulty Szilárd had in becoming Magyar, he portrays the character as fully embracing his heritage once he is reunited with his family. After he takes the family name Stern and gets a Hungarian education, he

actually becomes a member of the Hungarian Theater of Pozsony (now Bratislava, Slovakia), participating in the very activity that once made him feel isolated and alone. Bolstered by the support of the Stern family and the expansion of his own, he lives quite happily for a time.

Again, however, the author emphasizes the trauma faced by Hungarians by shaking the stable, happy life of his characters with yet another unjust punishment. Szilárd, who greatly enjoys the works of famous Hungarian writers Jokai and Petőfi, makes the mistake of reading aloud from a magazine featuring their work. He reads a resolution supporting the beginning of the 1848 Magyar revolution against Hapsburg rule. Austrian troops quickly learn of the event and brand him a conspirator, sentencing him to death by firing squad. By showing how the simple act of reading Hungarian words aloud can lead to death, Vámos portrays both the fragility and innocence of Magyars. This is further emphasized by Szilárd's last request, in which he wants to emphasize his identification with his family and with Hungary with the word Csillag on his tombstone - but the heartless Austrians merely throw his body into a ditch. Vámos uses Szilárd to portray Hungarians as innocent victims stripped of both life and dignity.

#### Mendel Berda-Stern, Mérleg/Libra, 1844-1870

Szilárd's first-born son is Mendel. The scales are an appropriate symbol for this character whom the author uses to examine the balance between destiny and free will. At an early age, Mendel indicates a fascination with destiny by making his own version of a Hungarian Tarot deck, in which each hand-drawn card represents a member of his family; notably, he includes the family dog, who was ranked just below his father (220). After Szilárd's death, Mendel sits on the rooftop with his father's telescope and

welcomes the visions of his family as he watches the stars. Here, Vámos uses astrology as a means to literally unite the family that had been cruelly separated by unjust death.

As an adult, however, Mendel uses his childhood interests for personal gain. Vámos cleverly asserts this by again referencing a tarot deck. Mendel associates himself with the Chariot card. The seventh highest card in the deck, it corresponds with his position as the seventh in the family line since Kornél; however, the initials MS on the card stand for Mercury and Sulfur, elements used for alchemy (231). A professional card player, he wishes to know the future in order to amass great wealth; he studies Nostradamus, fortunetelling, and oracles in the pursuit of material gain.

He earns more than merely money, however; he also discovers the astrological pattern that Vámos uses to structure the entire novel. It is while translating into Hungarian a famous French astrological work that Mendel first makes the discovery that each man in his family line is linked to the astrological signs. He further notes that the ascendant for each man is always represented by the next sign in the cycle, enabling him to predict the times and locations for the birth of each man in the cycle. He is able to correctly calculate the time and location of his first son's birth.

However, his abilities encourage him to try to change the course of destiny. When he surmises that his wife will die in childbirth, he sends her and their older children away while he lives in the Queen of England Hotel in Budapest. He reasons that if he refuses to touch his wife, she cannot become pregnant and fulfill his prophecy, but the spurned wife looks elsewhere for attention. When Mendel learns that his wife has died in childbirth after all, and that he is in a way responsible for her infidelity, he hangs himself

from the window of his hotel overlooking the Danube. He dies while cursing the stars (254).

During his life, Mendel tries desperately to control every aspect of the future, with disastrous results. Although he personally earns great quantities of gold, like the alchemists of old he ultimately fails at his goals. He takes his own life in his despair, leaving his son an orphan. Although Mendel is not a victim of unjustified foreign oppression like many of the men in his family line, his tragic death indicates the consequences of trying to manipulate destiny. Instead of drawing strength from and expanding his family, Mendel chooses to separate, isolate, and limit it, and in the end he curses the stars that once represented his link to family. Vámos uses Mendel to demonstrate that there must be a balance between choice and fate, as represented by the scales of Libra; Mendel does not respect the balance, and his life and family suffer for it.

Sándor Csillag, Skorpio/Scorpio, 1868-?

Mendel's first son, born Sigmund Berda-Stern, is used to represent Hungary itself in some ways, as he comes of age during Hungary's pre-WWI rise and grows increasingly wealthy and more cosmopolitan. Although he wanders the country in poverty as a young man, when he inherits his father's money held in trust for him, he buys a Jewish shoe store in Pecs and expands his wealth. He keeps his family the envy of the city with their French fashion, Russian caviar, Japanese vases, Belgian lace, and Armenian jewelry. He even keeps a permanent suite at the Queen of England hotel in Budapest. His rags-to-riches tale parallels the unprecedented rise of Hungary's status at the time.

However, for all his success, he displays a markedly different attitude toward his family's history than many of his predecessors. At a very early age, he sets his dog's kennel on fire, nearly killing him (256). Given the link between dogs and guidance in this work, it seems that Vámos is associating Sigmund with a dangerous level of personal independence. This is supported when the "wild and untrammeled" (256) orphan leaves his guardian aunt and wanders all over Hungary. He abandons his father's name in favor of a return to his ancestor's more "ancient name" and goes by Sándor Csillag instead. Even more telling, on the night of his wedding, he drunkenly gives away his family's once-treasured watch to his new father-in-law (267). Vámos clearly shows that the consequences of a man's choice extend into other generations; Sándor treats his father's home, name, and most important possession with disdain.

However, he keeps and uses the Book of Fathers. He is hesitant at first to write anything in it, fearing to mar the "sublime" blank pages, but when he does, his contributions deal largely with prayers to keep himself pure instead of yielding to his raging hormones with his wife's sister. Tellingly, he orders a lock and key for it, keeping the key in his watch fob. With this detail, Vámos emphasizes a shift in the Csillag men: Sándor does not write openly and freely as his ancestors did, but he writes secret dark admissions that could actually destroy his family.

On New Year's Day, 1900, Sándor is in his hotel suite's bed with his sister-in-law, while his wife stays at home giving birth. Whereas a new century ushered his ancestor Richard into a new understanding of himself and his visions, Sándor's illicit affair signals something entirely different. Sándor is racked with guilt. Worse, his visions signal "a world conflagration" and a death from hunger (284), foreshadowing WWI and his own

death in the Holocaust. Though at his (and his country's) peak in 1900, roughly a thousand years after the reign of King István, everything soon begins to fall apart. With the story of Sándor, Vámos foreshadows a darker period for the Csillag family and for Hungary in spite of their apparent success.

#### Nándor Csillag, Nyilas/Sagittarius, 1898-?

Sándor's son, Nándor, continues his father's love of fine living, and like his ancestor Bálint he is gifted with musical talent. He desires to become the Hungarian version of the famous singer, Caruso, and he travels widely in pursuit of that goal, even becoming the first in his line to venture to South America. He uses his travel experience to establish a cosmopolitan restaurant, and at his height he has enough money to live comfortably, invest in real estate, and open a Swiss banking account.

In spite of all his success, he has "little interest in the past and even less in the future" and believes he has "only a fraction" of his forefather's abilities (301). The decline in family importance that began with Mendel continues, and Vámos symbolizes it with an actual lessening of the ability to see visions as generations become less attuned to their ancestors. However, Nándor does have an interest in clocks, repairing them while he listens to opera. This hobby indicates a latent desire for the heirloom watch his father had drunkenly given away; it is while working on clocks that he is able to experience visions.

The visions cannot prepare him, though, for the tragedies that await him. When anti-Jewish laws are established in the very city he helped to modernize, he is outraged. A non-practicing Jew, he cannot accept that others would question his Hungarian identity: "Me, not a Hungarian! Me, whose Hungarian name brought glory to my homeland in the

greatest opera houses of Europe? Who speaks Hungarian perfectly, and not a syllable of Hebrew? Who has ancestors who were executed in 1849 because they fought for Hungary's freedom? Has everyone here gone completely mad??" (310). His family history and Magyar language cannot save him; even signing over his business to a nominal Christian partner cannot. His German wife, whom Vámos characterizes as speaking perfect Hungarian in spite of her background, cannot comprehend that her homeland would be involved in his persecution and literally goes mad (308). Before he can emigrate, he and his family are sent to Auschwitz.

It is at Auschwitz that he is again reunited with the family watch. While working to sort through the remains of the gassed for anything of value, he comes across the watch, which had been found "in one of the jackets matted into filth" (315). He holds it, a tangible link to the maternal grandfather who had last carried it and to eight generations of his paternal relatives. He tries to pray, mumbling in both Hungarian and Hebrew, and then drops the watch into the outhouse (316). He chooses to sacrifice the watch voluntarily rather than have it taken from him. With this act, Vámos again returns to the pattern of unjust trauma; the only time Nándor has ever held this precious family heirloom, he must surrender it into excrement to protect it and himself from oppressors.

He quickly declines after losing this link to his fathers, but his final act is surprisingly revolutionary. He makes his own clown costume and sings in Auschwitz as the operatic sad clown — in Hungarian (317). It saps his strength, and he collapses in real tears when his fellow prisoners applaud. The next day, he is taken to the showers and gassed.

Interestingly, Vámos describes the dying Nándor's final vision of deer running up a hill, "their antlers scraping and scratching the sky that covered the ground" (317). It is possible that Vámos is indirectly referring to the csodaszarvas myth. The deer appear to be a contrast to the divine guide in the form of a stag that once leapt from the sky to help Hungarians; these deer are helplessly reaching back toward the heavens in agitation over this new tragedy affecting Magyars.

#### Balázs Csillag, Bak/Capricorn, 1921-1966

While Sándor and Nándor both perish at the hands of the Germans, Nándor's son Balázs suffers because of the Russians, allowing Vámos the opportunity to explore tragedies caused by both Allied and Axis forces; just as in the old conflict between the Ottomans and Austrians, Hungary was again caught in the middle of opposing forces at the expense of its people. Although Balázs is an aspiring lawyer, he is drafted into becoming a laborer in the Hungarian Army, where he is captured by the Russians and forced to work as a prisoner of war. Although the Russians and Germans were on opposing sides, Balázs faces the same anti-Semitism with them that his family experiences at Auschwitz; he is beaten and called a subhuman "filthy Jew" (322).

His visions enable Balázs to survive. He and a fellow prisoner are able to escape because of his foreknowledge and begin walking from Russia back to Hungary. He calls upon the survival techniques of Kornél to help them until they come to a hospital in Ukraine. There he and all the other patients are deliberately shot and burned. He alone survives but is again imprisoned. When he finally walks back to Hungary after his release, he is badly scarred, physically and emotionally.

Throughout this whole journey, dogs are significant. Some Russian dogs bark at him, drawing the attention of old women who leave out hot food. Later, he wanders in the woods where, like his ancestor, Kornél, he is accompanied by a stray dog. However, in this case, he feels he needs to “get rid” of the dog. He also spends some time in an old granary, where two chained dogs had starved to death. The shocking contrast between these unwanted and dead dogs with the nourishing presence of Málé, who sacrificed his life for Kornél, emphasizes the severity of Balázs’s tragedy. He cannot accept or receive help. Later, when he tries to get help at a relative’s house in Budapest, a dog there licks his face and barks enthusiastically, but the dog’s owner is disgusted by his appearance and pulls the dog away. Balázs immediately gives up on getting help and wanders alone back to Pecs, where he finds that his entire family has died. With these stories, Vámos indicates Balázs’s total despair; he actively turns against what guidance and support may exist in his life and chooses to be utterly alone.

Even more telling, when he retrieves the Book of Fathers, his only link to any family, he tears it apart and burns it, saying, “I’m letting go of the past! I’m letting the past go to hell” (348). This refusal to remember his past - and even to try destroying it - indicates the depth of his trauma; he refuses to remember anything at all because the pain is just too great.

He renounces his Judaism to become a Catholic, marries a distant relative, and begins working for the new Communist party as a way to earn steady pay and finally realize his dream of becoming a lawyer with the help of his employer. However, when his highly ranked Communist boss is accused of treason by his own party, Balázs is forced to go into hiding and renounce his dream yet again, instead working night shifts

at a local factory. He reflects, “We’ve all been conned... the whole thing’s a fraud, lies, drivel: the crap about the peace front, the just fight, equality, brotherhood. It’s nothing but a ruthless struggle for power, with the stronger always crushing the weak. There is nothing new under the sun” (362). He fully, deliberately disconnects from everything, even refusing to see visions, so that he can avoid his pain.

He begins to question the wisdom of this choice in his later years when he realizes he doesn’t even know if his son has the ability to see visions at all. He says to himself, “You squeezed the past out of you but somehow it took the present with it... You didn’t notice how you wasted the days and the years” (366). He comes to this realization too late, though, as he dies that night. With Balázs, Vámos accentuates the severity of the trauma that ravaged Hungary and its families. The traumatized Balázs can shut down emotionally from the painful past, but the cost is even greater isolation and despair.

#### Vilmos Csillag, Vizöntő/Aquarius, 1950-198?

As a young child, Balázs’s son Vilmos witnesses the failed revolution against the Soviets in 1956 while innocently lining up for bread. He becomes separated from his father in the rush of the crowd after bullets ring out, but it is his father’s deliberate separation from him that has the more lasting effect on him.

Vilmos is ignorant of his family’s history, to the point where he does not even know that he has Jewish ancestors until he hears school gossip; when he asks Balázs about the rumor, his father gives him the only beating of his life (372-3). He has no knowledge of the Book of Fathers at all, but he does write his deceased father a series of letters with all the things he wishes he could truly say to him. Tellingly, Vámos portrays the letters as full of questions and uncertainty about his identity and heritage, a sharp

contrast to the sure visions and prophecies of earlier generations. Also, the only connection to dogs is when Vilmos is described as a frightened puppy cowering before his bullying mother (389). Vámos deliberately severs Vilmos from help, even transforming references to dogs from steadfast guides to terrified victims.

Influenced by his love of the Beatles and other Western bands, he becomes a musician and escapes Hungary while touring Scandinavia, reflecting that “for a long time, he didn’t even want to hear the word Hungary, never mind return” (395). He has no connection to his past, and therefore none to his country.

He marries a woman who is part Hungarian, American, and Indian, and they settle in Brooklyn (395), but shortly after the birth of their son, the marriage fails. Vilmos decides to return to Hungary and wants to take his son, but his wife refuses. Vilmos goes alone, where he discovers that even his father’s grave has disappeared; the marker had been taken down and replaced when his family quit paying maintenance fees. Here Vámos displays that even when disconnected Hungarians want to return to their homeland and seek ties to their families, it can seem futile; the gap may have become too great.

When Vilmos returns to the US to see his son once more, he gets lost coming out of the airport. He is beaten by attackers who cannot understand his strange accent and steal his belongings. He dies there and his body is not discovered for two weeks. With no identification, there is no official record of his death. He never experiences visions, and he never really knows either his son or his father. Vámos uses Vilmos to represent the extreme isolation of the traumatized Hungarian.

Henryk Csillag-Stern, Halak/Pisces 1976-?; Konrád Csillag, Kos/Aries, 1996-?

As the last of the astrological/familial cycle, Henryk is even more disconnected than his father before him, continuing the pattern of decline Vámos established midway through the cycle with Mendel. Raised in the United States by his mother's family, Henryk has almost no connection to Hungary. As almost the exact opposite of his forefather Kornél, he has serious memory problems, finding it difficult to read and retain information. Described as absent-minded and "weak in the head," he has a terrible memory and flounders through school (417), although like many of his ancestors he has exceptional musical talent. His inability to read music, though, eliminates the possibility of a career.

While backpacking through Europe, he finally visits Hungary. He wants to search out his roots, trying to find information about his long-absent father. He moves in with a woman named Ann, who lives in Csillaghegy ("star hill"), but the real attraction, he comes to realize, is for her dog rather than her. He comes to identify with the dog, realizing "I am a stray dog, too" (426). The quote emphasizes both his loneliness as Other and a sensed connection to his family's ancestral guides.

After his break-up with Ann, Henryk begins to work with an Irish friend in a business focused on acquiring and converting real estate across Hungary, Transylvania, and Slovakia — areas that had once been considered Hungary prior to the Treaty of Trianon. Known as HEJED, the name of the company loosely translates to "your place" (433). Henryk quickly develops a gift at finding old furnishings for the estates, causing him to reflect that perhaps the company should be HEJEM, "my place," instead (450). This name shift is indicative of a shift within Henryk himself. He is literally immersing himself in his country's past and the language for the first time.

Although he does not have visions or any knowledge of the Book of Fathers, he does keep a file on his computer related to his searches for his own family history. Like his ancestors before him, he desires to keep a record of what he learns so that his own children won't "start from scratch" (438). His searches are largely unsuccessful; he manages to locate Csillags in the cemetery where his grandfather had actually been buried, but readers recognize that it is another family entirely. However, he does meet an old woman who manages to give him some information.

More importantly, his job takes him to an old estate owned by the Austrian Windisch family — the exact family his ancestor Kornél had married into centuries ago. The woman hires HEJED to help turn the location of their family home into a guesthouse for horse lovers. The connection to Kornél is obvious to careful readers, but Henryk is of course ignorant that he is dealing with his own family history while he speaks with her. He is repulsed by her ostentatious jewelry and her "petty bourgeois" tastes when she turns down the old Hungarian relics his team had been carefully restoring. He makes a point to stop and pee on the sign marking her property before he leaves (444). This scene is powerful in its rejection of anti-Hungarian values; it shows how the primarily American Henryk is beginning to take pride in his Magyar roots, even when he is unaware of them. It almost seems as if he is channeling the anger of his ancestor Bálint, forbidden by an earlier Frau Windisch to marry his true love because of social class.

Henryk meets his own true love while he is actually searching for a dog, with his main requirement being that the dog should be as big as possible, indicating his desperate need for guidance. He meets a Hungarian woman named Maria solely

because he is fascinated by her four large dogs. Maria's ex had become infuriated when his purebred Labrador had been impregnated by a mysterious dog, and he abandoned them Maria and the dogs. Here, it appears that the clueless Henryk needs the help of the four dogs in order to see his destiny. The puppies' mixed heritage is reminiscent of Henryk's own tangled heritage, a mix of several different religions, races, and nationalities.

It is Maria who introduces him to astrology, which makes "his spine tingle" when he reads about it (455). He struggles against the limitations of his poor memory to learn the signs, although he is never able to learn the twelve signs in order correctly. This failure clearly links to his disconnection with the rest of his family line.

He desperately wants to marry Maria, but she refuses him on the exact same grounds that made him dislike Frau Windisch; she says she cannot be united to anyone with "petty bourgeois" ideals (457). *Vámos* uses the same phrase to describe that for all his strides toward discovering his Magyar roots, Konrád cannot fully overcome the effects of the historical trauma inherited from his ancestors. However vehemently she argues against marriage, though, she does carry his child, Konrád.

Konrád begins the cycle all over again. A Kos/Aries like his forefather, Kornél, he can start this cycle anew because of his father's return to Hungary and immersion in its culture. In fact, while Henryk works to rebuild old Hungarian castles, making sure "the past is re-created in stone and wood so that it continues to endure" (461), Konrád makes his first sentence, "we goin ford and back!" (461). Although ostensibly this relates to his movement in the stroller at the time, careful readers recognize that it also

accurately describes how a Magyar-based future is made possible by this immersion in, not disconnection from, the past.

Unlike his father, he has a remarkable memory and learns to read and write very easily. When he turns four, he gets his own notebook, which he labels BOOK OFFATEIRS (463). Konrad indicates quite clearly that he is seeing visions; he points to his head when he is asked where he has learned how to draw a fortress, but Henryk cannot comprehend this, having no such visions himself. He assumes his child has an active imagination instead.

The novel closes when Konrad’s mother becomes obsessed with the arrival of a solar eclipse. She determines that the best place to view the eclipse is at Lake Balaton in the city of Siofok — which lies just north of where Kornel viewed his own eclipse over two hundred years prior to Konrad’s birth. The family drives to Siofok where they settle down to watch it, Konrad with his notebook and colored pencils. Notably, while this happens, “the dogs chased each other around the garden” (464). Their playful inclusion in this scene speaks to the joy inherent in having helped destiny unfold; as the event draws closer, they become agitated because “they can sense that something extraordinary is happening” (465).

While the eclipse begins, Konrad begins to draw hillsides, a battlefield, and cannon fire, writing the words GAVE WATCH BEGINNING underneath. It is obvious that the Hungarian-born Konrad, who like his ancestor Kornel signaled a return to Hungary and its culture, begins a new cycle of Magyar men with a strong knowledge of the past. In spite of the darkness of his father and grandfather’s ignorance, much like the darkness of the eclipse itself, Konrad represents hope. This symbolism is bolstered by the last

words of the novel, which shift directly from Henryk's writing to Kornél's centuries earlier. The entry tells of his experience watching the eclipse, concluding with how "the affrighted beasts and folk rejoiced and bid welcome to the light reborn" (466). By literally overlapping the writings of the first and last men in the cycle, Vámos brings his characters in the full circle of the astrological charts and the heirloom watch. He leaves readers with the impression that the Csillag men, and Hungary itself, will continue to experience both great happiness and significant trauma, but that ultimately they will always have the hope of rebirth.

## Chapter Three: *I Kiss Your Hands Many Times*

### Introduction

Although Vámos is able to use literary techniques to create a fictional family spanning centuries of Hungarian history, Hungarian-American journalist Marianne Szegedy-Maszák takes an entirely different tack for her book: she investigates the mysterious, secretive past of her own Hungarian family, tightly focusing on three generations. As a result, her memoir *I Kiss Your Hands Many Times* is starkly different from *A Book of Fathers*; however, the portrayals of Hungarian identity and family ties in both works show strong similarities. Szegedy-Maszák emphasizes the powerful effects of historical trauma on identity as well as the importance of family.

Szegedy-Maszák initially knew very little of her family history, but after the deaths of her parents, she was intrigued by the discovery of several letters her father had written to her mother. She hired a family friend as a translator and began to discover a wealth of family secrets in the contents of the letters. Much like in the journals in Vámos's novel, the written word became a conduit for long-buried truth to be revealed; in this case, the secrets were entirely true. She discovered that her family in many ways had been instrumental in the shaping of Hungary. They had also been shaped, in turn, by the events that befell Hungary in the first half of the twentieth century. In several respects, the arc of her family mirrors that of their country, and her investigation highlights traits associated with the Magyar identity: a mixture of pride, isolation, despair, and desire for Hungarian autonomy.

## Historical and Religious Background

Although the book focuses largely on the World War II love story between her father, a Christian diplomat, and mother, a Jewish heiress, the historical background Szegedy-Maszák provides about older generations is crucial to understanding how the fate of Hungary is reflected in the fate of her family. Regarding her father's side, the author notes that her great-great-grandfather Hugo had established the Hungarian News Service in 1882 "in the interests of freeing the Hungarian press from the pressures of the Viennese news agency" (Szegedy-Maszák 6); early in the family's history, the desire for Hungarian autonomy is well established.

However, in keeping with the shift in Hungarian sentiment toward the Austrians in light of Queen Elizabeth's self-professed Magyar identity, later generations tended to support the monarchy as Hungary's international status grew. The author's paternal great-grandfather, Aladár I, even wore the coveted traditional costume, the *diszmagyar*, at a Hapsburg coronation ceremony. Szegedy-Maszák links the moment of personal triumph to his country: "It seems he peaked at that moment, as did the nation he represented, since both his career and the empire collapsed within two years" (6). When associations with the Hapsburgs led the country into the disastrous World War I involvement, Hungary, and the Szegedy-Maszák family with it, began to decline.

As her paternal family's influence on the country waned, her maternal side's grew exponentially. Her Jewish great-grandfather, Manfred Weiss, originally canned plum preserves in his factory, but in the late 1880s, he was commissioned to manufacture goods for the Austro-Hungarian army. He eventually located his factories on the nearby island of Csepel and became hugely successful; in fact, due to the nature of his

products, he was actually able to profit during World War I and increase his family's wealth and land. After the war, he used his expertise to shift his factories from ammunition to goods such as cars, trucks, motorcycles, and textiles, thereby expanding the family's wealth even further (14).

Following Manfred's death in 1922, his sons-in-law took over the family businesses. Morić Kornfeld, the author's grandfather, was the son of a Czech who had become manager of the most prominent Hungarian bank. After becoming fluent in Hungarian, Zsigmond Kornfeld embraced his adopted country, even "Magyarizing" the Budapest Stock Exchange. Morić in turn carried on in his father's patriotic spirit as a "Renaissance man" who served in Parliament (12) and expanded the Csepel factories to cover 570 acres and employ 40,000 Hungarian workers (13). The author's great-uncle, Ferenc Chorin, inherited the leadership of GYOSZ, the association for Hungarian manufacturers, from his father, who had founded the organization. Chorin, too, served, in Parliament, and he also ran a mining company that produced 40% of the country's coal (11). By 1925, the combination of Weiss, Kornfeld, and Chorin businesses was responsible for ten percent of the Hungarian GDP (48) and roughly half of all Hungarian industry (Lendvai 342).

The love affair between the children of two such different families seems largely improbable; what connection could there be between the son of a middle class, intellectual, Catholic family and the daughter of a wealthy, cosmopolitan, Jewish family? In fact, the author's father, Aladár, once ranted in an early journal about "the war millionaires" like the Weiss family, and how that "capitalist race happily luxuriates" while others were "tattered, hungry, and shivering" (26). Notably, he recanted and wrote an

addendum 64 years later admitting his urge “to burn it and eradicate it from his past” (26); unlike Balázs Stern in *The Book of Fathers*, however, he chose to leave the painful memory there for others to read after his death.

His shift away from anti-Semitism began during his foreign service in pre-World War II Berlin. There, during his five years as Secretary of the Hungarian embassy, he is approached by Hungarian expat Jews needing help as anti-Jewish sentiment under Hitler’s ascent to power grew. He met Hitler himself, and over time he became increasingly worried over the “quasi-religious mass movement” he saw rising with the charismatic politician (25). It was around this time that he met and fell in love with Hanna, the author’s mother.

Importantly, the Weiss family at this time was Jewish in heritage but not in practice. Beginning with the business-minded Manfred Weiss, the family began to assimilate into Hungarian culture and away from traditional Jewish faith; he kept his businesses running on the Sabbath and educated his children in the best schools, regardless of their religious affiliation (47).

As early as 1920, members of the Weiss extended family were baptized as Catholics. Morić and his wife Marianne were at first hesitant about baptism, but Marianne agreed after being convinced by reading a popular play arguing that all three monotheistic religions were equal (51). Their granddaughter Daisy was enrolled in a Catholic school and was immersed in the Catholic faith; when her mother lovingly explained that they believed being Catholic or Jewish wasn’t as important as being a good and honest person, Daisy innocently asked if they knew any Jews (52). Similarly, Puppa, a generation older than Daisy, did not self-identify as Jewish; when anti-Semitic

activities began occurring on her college campus, she thought, “It didn’t involve me... I was Catholic” (52). Clearly, the family had largely severed ties to the Jewish faith.

Their assimilation became politically irrelevant by 1939, however. A law was passed that defined a Jew as anyone who had at least two Jewish grandparents. The law did allow exceptions for those who had converted to Christianity, but only if the conversion occurred before the end of the short-lived Communist rule in 1919 and their families could provide documentation of Hungarian citizenship since 1849 (53). Szegedy-Maszák poignantly writes of her family, “No matter how deeply they themselves identified as Hungarians, no matter how perfectly they spoke Hungarian and loved the country, they were, world without end, Other” (50). The tolerance once extended to minorities who wanted to assimilate through Hungarian self-identification and language was over: Scholar Armin Vámbéry wrote that, “A Jew cannot be a Hungarian in Hungary, although I have long been an agnostic and researched the origins of the Hungarian language” (qtd. in Lendvai 346). It didn’t matter that, as one Hungarian put it, “Jews who settled in Hungary in the nineteenth century worked hard.... They made Hungary a modern country. They became influential in its social, intellectual, and political circles” (qtd. in Teleky 155); as tensions rose with Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, ethnicity trumped all of their contributions.

### Destiny

As improbable as it seemed, the love affair of Aladár and Hanna, representing greatly different subcultures within the Hungarian identity, is actually in the spirit of the csodaszarvas myth, where Asian men married Ukrainian women and formed a new nation. Also, the need for supernatural guidance and the strong sense of destiny

prevalent in the origin myth appear time and again in the stories of both the Weiss and Szegedy-Maszák families.

Hanna's family had a New Year's Eve tradition of melting lead and then telling fortunes based on the resulting shapes (39); at the time, the action of predicting the future was a fun family affair. However, by the time that the Nazis invaded Hungary and split the family, references to destiny had shifted to a darker, more personal phenomenon. The author's aunt, Puppa, woke on the morning of the invasion "haunted by the fragment of a dream that lingered. All that she could recall was the Greek work *ananke*, or fate" (116). She shared the dream with her father upon their parting, knowing he would be the only person to "understand so completely the weight of the word, or the significance that it was in Greek, another ancient civilization that had disappeared forever" (117).

As for Aladár, he was intrigued by the occult in spite of his Christian background and wrote, "I have the feeling that the forces of predestination, reincarnation, and free will blend with each other, that there is some sort of logic in my life, that there is some interdependence" (36). The sentiment aligns well with the research presented by Fehérváry; although her focus was on post-Russian Hungarians, the desire for some semblance of certainty in an uncertain world applies to Aladár as well. Like the men of *The Book of Fathers*, he is influenced by forces beyond his control but still retains a measure of individual influence of his own.

Aladár sought to discover the "sort of logic" in various ways. His daughter wrote that he felt he was "part of a greater purpose that involved nothing less than the survival of Hungary" (35), and as a result of that belief, he frequently consulted mediums and

astrologers (36). He even had a favorite psychic, Várady, whom he consulted on the eve of one of his most important missions to save Hungary (91). When it was evident that Hitler would invade Hungary, he “hoped that another yet-untried option would reveal itself as in some spiritual vision” (106), and later still while debating whether to accept a position in the United States, he remembered a psychic’s words to him: “*Sie müssen an Ihren Stern glauben und werden durchkommen*. You must trust your star and you will succeed” (231).

In his relationship with Hanna, he also believed in the role of destiny, writing in his proposal letter that he wished to tie their fates together (205). Even more importantly, he referred to her as his personal fortune-teller, telling her “I think I am going to turn to you for any prediction” (xxiii). His references to her supposed clairvoyance may have been flirtatious, but he sincerely believed that she might offer him some spiritual guidance (36) - until, of course, they were separated by the events of the Nazi Invasion.

### Action and Reaction

Notably, while Aladár believed strongly in forces beyond his control or understanding, he placed considerable emphasis on the consequences of his own actions. When he was unable to help save Hungary, he placed all blame on himself, leading to shame, guilt, and depression for the rest of his life.

Because of his experiences in the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, Aladár believed he would be able to influence the political events that would determine Hungary’s fate. He began with an essay to the Hungarian Studies journal; although it was written with a pseudonym, it forcefully articulated the “importance of having a foreign policy that was completely independent of that of the Germans” (82). Not content with merely

encouraging others to think about autonomy, however, he also orchestrated a conspiracy reminiscent of the Wesselényi Conspiracy of the 1600s. Called Operation Spiderweb after the tenuous nature of his web of potential foreign contacts, his conspiracy involved contacting potential allies in a number of other countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, and Turkey (83). He posited that Hungary would be willing to surrender to an Allied invasion of American, British, or Polish forces, but they would not surrender to the Russians (90). Just as Hungarians had centuries before, he believed that choosing a relatively lenient victor could guarantee a slightly better chance at some level of autonomy, and in a 23 page memorandum, he proposed that a Hungary free of German or Russian influence would allow for a new democratic and Western alliance (98). His daughter wrote that Aladár's goal in creating the plan was to "break Hungary's isolation and somehow convince the West that it was worth saving" (92), but the Allies were not receptive to his ideas and remained distrustful of Hungary. The British response to the memo referred to "blatant opportunism" and called for unconditional surrender instead (100). Hungary was unable to do so, however, because it had not been directly invaded.

When it became apparent that there would be no help forthcoming from the West, Aladár wrote an inscription in Latin: "*dixi et salvavi animam meam*, I spoke and thus I have saved my soul" (101). The contrast between this inscription and István Stern's in *The Book of Fathers* is striking; whereas István believed silence would ensure his survival, Aladár felt compelled to speak. However, both write in Latin, not in Hungarian. As Szegedy-Maszák explains, Latin was the language used in 19<sup>th</sup> century diplomacy,

but it also indicates a shift away from the Magyar. Perhaps both men felt that the loss of hopes for Hungary required a language other than Magyar.

In spite of his noble pronouncement, however, he did not later feel that his soul had been saved. In fact, he became increasingly depressed and withdrawn. Journalist and close friend Éva Dessewffy reported that she tried to encourage him, but he could not respond to her, only nodding his head and walking away. She wrote that “he was wounded for life in his heart and his soul” (122). The wound only grew when he was imprisoned for his suspected links to the Allied forces following the Nazi invasion. His father and sister were able to visit him in jail, but they were “shocked” at his mental state, calling him “utterly distraught” (170).

Later he was sent to Dachau and became the subject of medical experiments. He nearly died of typhus, and later described his mental state there as “passive... strangely detached, almost indifferent” (200). Even the liberation of the camp by Americans was not an occasion for joy. He wrote during this time of what he termed *decompression*, the effect on behavior in people who had been “compressed” by their traumatic experiences; the shift to freedom was actually traumatic (199).

Immediately after World War II, and just before Russia took sole power of Hungary, Aladár was again placed in a position of power, as the Hungarian Minister to the United States. Reunited with Hanna, whom he quickly married, he began a new life, full of hope for a new path for his home country, although he could not live there. Again, however, his hopes were thwarted. When the Russians took control of the Hungarian government, Aladár refused to recognize their leadership as legitimate. He hoped that the United States would follow his lead, but when the American government appointed a

new ambassador to Hungary, he knew that his job and his influence in the destiny of Hungary were over. The American memo describing his resignation called Aladár “demonstratively dejected” and “obviously depressed” (304-5), and an article in *The Evening Star* reported that he paced back and forth, “obviously aroused by events” (307). After years of being forced to “dance on eggshells” (83), he was no longer capable of action, becoming what the author described as “one of Hungary’s many Hamlets” (87).

Rather than placing blame on the mysterious supernatural forces he believed in, he placed blame solely on himself: “I somehow felt responsible for everything... as Hungarians we were not able to prevent these things from happening” (225). The author writes that even decades later, she witnessed “how powerfully he pounded his chest during the confiteor, the confession. He muttered, “Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa” - through my fault, through my most grievous fault” (172).

### Escape

Aladár was not the only one devastated by Hungary’s fall. While Aladár was in prison and at Dachau, Hanna’s family was experiencing its own trauma. When the Germans invaded Hungary, the close family immediately split, and Hanna recorded in her journal, “Everything that once was, is over” (118). The women were separated and hidden at homes of Christian friends across Budapest; although they were ostensibly safe from the anti-Semitic threat, during bombings they were not allowed to join their hosts in bomb shelters to avoid exposure, choosing instead to hide in closets until the bombs stopped falling (126). The older men hid at a local monastery, where Ferenc Chorin actually asked a monk to obtain poison for him in case he decided to commit

suicide (123). Later Ferenc and Morić were both discovered and imprisoned at the Hostel Astoria, which had become the site of Gestapo interrogation. There they were subjected to beatings and questioning at gunpoint (124). They, too, were sent to a camp, where Ferenc Chorin was described as “mired in deep, almost existential pessimism and despair” (142).

The extended Weiss family’s wealth, however, provided an opportunity that was unheard of for other Hungarians of Jewish descent. When SS colonel Kurt Becher transferred to Hungary, he lived in the Chorin home. Sensing an opportunity for personal profit, he summoned Ferenc Chorin from the concentration camp with the goal of working out a deal to take over the Weiss factories before Goring could incorporate them into his own factory system (146). Becher negotiated with Chorin in order to receive 5% of the gross income of the factories as well as to own a portion of the company. He offered visas and safe passage for the Weiss family to other countries with a stipend of roughly \$600,000 with the stipulation that some family members remain in Budapest as hostages who could help run the factories (148).

Chorin, aware that he had no real choice in the matter, agreed to the deal and effectively split his extended family. They were allowed to meet once more, but five remained in Hungary, while the others were sent to either Portugal or Switzerland (149). Importantly, the SS defaulted on Becher’s promised stipend, meaning that the family received approximately one third of the promised amount, equivalent to just over \$2 million in today’s currency (160). They left with only a fraction of the vast fortune they had owned, and they carried with them suitcases full of reminders of Hungary’s glory days: a diszmagyar outfit with its ceremonial saber and 19<sup>th</sup> century ball gowns.

Although the family members were largely saved from the horrors many of their countrymen experienced, they still experienced significant, lasting trauma. The tightly-knit family, which had once lived in neighboring houses, was scattered across Europe, and later two continents. Like Aladár, they experienced significant depression. Ferenc Chorin wrote years later about the humiliation of being forced to “stand quietly while being slapped and not be able to hit back” (131), and although he was able to use his wealth to save his family, his daughter described him with downcast eyes, a defeated man (153).

Once they had been saved, they were forced to deal with the consequences of their deal: fellow Hungarians resented that they could buy their way into freedom, while people in other countries regarded them as potential spies for the Axis nations. The author records that she asked her mother and aunt about the feelings of guilt this provoked; both women replied that they did feel guilty, but they shrugged and said, “What could we do?” (217). They had been, as Morić phrased it, in the impossible position of choosing whether they would like to be “eaten, boiled, or fried” (44).

### Hope and Despair

Two of the only bright spots for both the Weiss and the Szegedy-Maszák families during this period were the wedding of Aladár and Hanna and the birth of their first child, a son. The couple was able to reunite in Budapest after World War II was over, and their marriage was viewed as a hopeful occasion: “a new life was starting, not just for the fifty or so people who gathered for the wedding, but maybe for Hungary, which at least had the opportunity to become the kind of democratic, civil society that the best of its citizens imagined it could be” (239). The two quickly moved to Washington, DC, to

begin their new life among the political elite of the United States and hopefully to influence current affairs in favor of their country; however, as Hungary increasingly fell under the control of Russia, their hopes for their homeland were dashed.

Another opportunity for hope came with the birth of Timsi, christened as the fourth Aladár in a century (318). As seen in *The Book of Fathers*, the firstborn son carried great significance; Timsi was the symbolic union of the two different Hungarian families, uniting rich and intellectual, Christian and Jew. The Weiss family rejoiced even as they were separated by thousands of miles. One wrote, “Even though he was born as an American citizen, may he help in the resuscitation of Hungary” (318). Clearly, Timsi was expected to build on the legacy of both father and mother in shaping a new Hungary.

However, at the age of three months, he died of an intussusception that had been missed by doctors. The author wrote, “My father never recovered. His namesake’s death destroyed something in him forever. Gradually he crawled out from beneath the boulder of his pain and loss, but part of him carried that boulder for the rest of his life, even through the birth of three more children” (330).

With that final great tragedy, the author’s immediate family changed forever. She grew up with little knowledge of her cultural heritage or of her family’s importance in Hungary, and she felt a sense of isolation even in her own family, portraying her father as emotionally distant. Like István Stern, he occupied his days by staying in the house, reading and playing cards alone (xvii). On the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of Timsi’s death, he wrote that he was thinking about following in the steps of several relatives who had committed suicide. Her mother, too, contributed to her sense of isolation; identifying as

an American child, Szegedy-Maszák was often embarrassed by her mother's unusual accent, clothing, and musical tastes (xviii)

Importantly, she also grew up largely ignorant of the many languages that her cosmopolitan mother and diplomat father had mastered, including her parents' native Hungarian. She describes the Hungarian language from the position of an outsider, calling it "exclusive to the adults" and giving her "a potent and powerful and frustrated longing for linguistic versatility that has lasted a lifetime" (xv). Largely disconnected from her heritage until she stumbles upon her parents' letters and memorabilia, she is in many ways Other but for the continued presence of various family members in her life.

## Conclusion

The importance of family in both *I Kiss Your Hands Many Times* and *The Book of Fathers* is blatantly obvious. While borders, governments, alliances, and even religious affiliations regularly shift, family provides a measure of constancy that provides comfort and security — particularly important for Magyars who have consistently felt Othered by outsiders. By the conclusion of both works, it is clear that, in contrast to earlier times, neither physical location nor language can fully identify anyone as Magyar; Hungarian identity is portrayed as being transmitted from past generations, even if the family is separated by location or even death.

When Hungarian-American scholar Richard Teleky began exploring the meaning of ethnicity, he acknowledged the complexity of the issue. Like the Stern, Weiss, and Szegedy-Maszák family members, he relies heavily on older relatives and boxes of letters to learn more about his heritage. He takes a philosophical approach to the question of identity, concluding that if ethnicity is a social construct, then all of the missing pieces in his history allow space for the construction of his own version of events (171). Vámos, with his creation of a fictional Hungarian family to fill the gaps in his own history, clearly constructs a version of what it means to be Hungarian, while Szegedy-Maszák investigates her family's past to attempt to fill the considerable gaps in her knowledge.

Although they are formed differently, both constructions portray the heartache of constantly being Other. Whether the family members are caught in the conflicts between Ottoman versus Austrian, Nazi versus Communist, or Christian versus Jew, they inevitably experience the “catastrophes” that Tibor Déry so closely associated with

being Hungarian. Those events shape them and future generations, even when the traumatized try to actively suppress memories of those horrors.

Yet both works have a sense of hope in the midst of despair. *The Book of Fathers* tells of a new cycle for the Csillag men and for Hungary, and the novel ends with the word “reborn” (466). Similarly, in her notes for the epilogue of *I Kiss Your Hands Many Times*, Szegedy-Maszák closes with the words of an aunt commenting on how the family home was destroyed, but the land became a playground for children. She laments the loss but acknowledges the joy children would have playing there, writing to her niece, “From death comes rebirth” (362). That these very different works would both end on the exact same note is not truly surprising given that the “Wonder Horn” of the csodaszarvas was itself symbolic of rebirth (Hmori). Although the books were separated from the earliest Hungarian myth by centuries of confusing and even devastating changes, those changes also offer the hope of new life, emphasizing the Hungarian identity in which Magyars are faced with catastrophe but continue to dance.

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