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Immigration, Acculturation, Assimilation in the 20th
Century United States – As Reflected in a Hungarian
Family's Life Story

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Aims and Scope

This dissertation is aimed at taking a closer look into the New Immigration period by examining the history of one family, focusing primarily on the head of the family. There have been many accounts telling the history of the New Immigration but one of the biggest shortcomings of this field is the lack of professional approach to individual life stories and family histories. These are, to adopt a vivid phrase of Pierre Nora “shards of the past”, which bring us closer to understanding of a certain part of history. For this, I think the best way, rather than writing about politicians and other prominent figures, is to capture the experiences of ordinary people who did not necessarily shape history but lived through it in the current of events.

Following this direction, Victor Gondos Sr. and his family (Irene Gondos, Victor Gondos Jr, Robert Zoltan Gondos) are in the center of this thesis. I attempt to analyze their life story embedded in the wider context of Hungarian–American immigration. Victor Gondos was a Hungarian intellectual who, after a short sojourner period, immigrated to the United States with his wife and two sons in 1911. Analyzing their story full of twists and turns, the following questions arise: what push and pull factors motivated them to immigrate? How did the many difficulties and historical adversities of two world wars and an economic depression affect their lives? How and to what extent did they assimilate into the American society? This work is basically a microhistorical case study through

which I attempt to examine these topics. Some biographical studies have already proven that not particularly important persons can carry within themselves features characteristic to a certain social group in a certain historical period. My assumption is that, although their story is unique in the Hungarian historiography of the American diaspora, it captures the essence of an era.

Sources and Methods

This original research is based on primary sources I found in the Gondos Family Papers records at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. The cornerstone is a memoir titled *Recollections of My Early Youth, 1908–1921* written by Robert Zoltan Gondos, around 1978. The bulk of the contents of this 13-boxes worth of archival documents is the family correspondence. The largest and most significant part of this dissertation is based on the approximately 1.200 letters the family members sent to and received from each other, relatives, friends and officials. I also gathered more than 100 newspaper articles, both in English and Hungarian, from American and Hungarian newspapers, and used online databases such as Familysearch, Ancestry, Find-a-Grave etc. to find biographical data of the extended family.

As Pierre Nora puts it, the “obligation to remember makes every man his own historian”, in this case this individual is Zoltan, who was the youngest member of the family, so most of the events are reconstructed from his

memories. Apart from the memoir, several other types of sources are utilized in the research such as personal correspondence, contemporary newspapers and official documents. Used in combination with these, the memoir can prove to be a remarkably useful and informative primary source. With the help of these, answering the proposed questions becomes possible.

Findings

Regarding their push and pull factors, the Gondos family did not belong to the ordinary immigration category of poverty stricken Hungarian peasantry. Although they immigrated to America with the wave of the New Immigration, they were not driven by survival or hunger. They did have, however, characteristics which fit into the patterns of New Immigration: better opportunities and the possibility of personal advancement pulled them to the United States. After seeing the advantages of the American industry and economy during his delegations, Victor Sr. realized that it was much more suitable for a young, skilled, and ambitious engineer than Hungary. The major push factors were the lack of career opportunities, the insufficient wages, and technological underdevelopment. Simultaneously, America favored people with entrepreneurial spirit and for them, it could really become the land of opportunity. So the combination of these push and pull factors resulted in permanent settlement of the Gondoses in their chosen country.

Based on the historical evidence I provided, the Gondos family, most importantly the father, seems to be a good example to illustrate how Hungarian immigrants, with hard work, could build a decent life for themselves and could fit into the American society successfully. Victor Gondos Sr, however, was different from the penniless, unskilled, manual laborer society constituting the bulk of Hungarian immigration. He was a well-educated, skilled intellectual who could not be considered to be poor either. But his goal is applicable to the general image of Hungarian immigrants, that is, seeking better employment possibilities, higher wages, and a better standard of living.

In their correspondence it can be followed quite well that all along the 1910s Victor Sr. and Irene wrote their letters to one another in Hungarian but the children, not surprisingly, wrote their letters in English, for example to their father in jail in 1915. In the 1920s, on the other hand, the parents also started writing to each other in English for which the earliest evidence is a letter from 1922. Though, it is interesting to see that when they needed to use unusual, rare phrases they put the Hungarian words into the English sentence even after twenty five years of living in the US.

It can be stated that the language acculturation of the whole family was fully achieved by the beginning of the 1920s. In terms of the other stages of assimilation, signs of each can be observed to some extent in the lives of the family members. There are couple of examples in the

sources which show that the Gondoses were bonded to the American culture, customs and lifestyle. Cinema, for example, a cornerstone of the American culture was surely an important part of their everyday lives. The attitude and behavioral reception stages of the family's assimilation took place without problems except for the special cases of the two world wars. In the First World War, being citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they had to face prejudice and from 1917 discrimination also appeared in the form of the Selective Service Act declaring them enemy aliens. What is more, the head of the family and his brother served a prison sentence for a minor crime because they were suspected to be enemy spies. In the Second World War, although there was prejudice against them, they were not discriminated officially. FBI did investigate Victor Sr. but without his and the family's knowledge. Apart from these occasions, there is no evidence in the records that they experienced unjust treatment or any kind of intolerance in their life by the host population. Finally, the last stage, civic assimilation also took place with their naturalization, and they also participated in the democratic process of the country since as it turns out from the sources, they were enthusiastic voters.

Looking at Arthur Mann's four categories of immigrants namely: total identifiers, partial identifiers, disaffiliates, and hybrids all four members of the Gondos family seem to fall into the second one as reflected in the sources. According to Mann, partial identifiers "define

themselves in nonethnic terms at work, in the community, or at college [...] they constitute a majority of Americans who retain ties to their ancestry.” This can be applied to the family, too. In their everyday lives their Hungarian ancestry did not seem to be of great importance. There is no mention in any type of the sources (the memoir, letters or any documents) that they would have attended Hungarian events, organization, churches, etc. It seems that they adapted to the American culture and circumstances very soon. Their ethnicity was not an actual, central issue in their lives. However, this does not mean that they lost their connection with their ancestry completely. They visited Hungary regularly and kept in touch the relatives in correspondence.