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33

HUNGARIAN HISTORIES

ATTILA the Hun

Franz**LISZT**

Robert**CAPA**

SISI

Theodore**HERZL**

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Arthur**KOESTLER**

László**BÍRÓ**

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Leo**SZILÁRD**

Béla**LUGOSI**

Miklós M. Molnár

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HUNGARIAN HISTORIES

HUNGARIAN IDENTITY THROUGH PORTRAITS

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Preface

Hungary's saga sparkles with tales of brilliant individuals whose derring-do and perseverance shaped the essential spirit of modern Magyar existence, often changing the course of world history in the process. From nomadic warriors of the Dark Ages to refined adventurers of Europe's nobility to scientific luminaries launching into the Atomic Era, generations of notable Hungarians frequently overcome ever-daunting adversities to achieve planet-shaking accomplishments – all while living out colorfully exuberant existences that can make the wildest fiction seem tame.

As one of these venturesome Magyars who pursues dreams while enhancing reality, Miklós Molnár is an astute observer of history as it happens, with a wholehearted appreciation for the heroes of Hungary's past and present. As a teacher, translator, and international tour guide, Miklós continually brings together countless lives in his native country and on his global travels; as an expressive writer with a uniquely sagacious sense of perception, Miklós is extraordinarily suited to encapsulate the most momentous accounts of Hungary's greatest historical figures, including many whose efforts have gone largely unsung.

This chronicle of 33 remarkable figures from throughout Hungarian history will captivate aficionados of Magyar culture, while offering the casual reader insight to the many worldly contributions brought forth by Hungary's brightest stars. Miklós sheds light upon his subjects with an uncannily incisive blend of gripping narrative and good humor, utilizing a lighthearted voice of respectful reverence that makes him an excellent storyteller and

convivial company – the perfect person to share exhilarating anecdotes of Hungary’s idiosyncratic souls.

NICK ROBERTSON

Editor in Chief - Where Budapest Magazine

How to Read this Book

(Preface by the Author)

"HUNGARY. A mania (med. fixa idea) with a population of ten million. It is now generally regarded as curable, though this would take away much of its charm."

István Örkény

The purpose of this collection of portraits is to initiate the outsider to Hungarianness, to show from a Hungarian point of view what kind of people our culture produced in different periods of time in history and thus what Örkény meant by "its charm."

Once a Hungarian, always a Hungarian. Just like the accent, one cannot drop it. Being a Hungarian is rather a mode of existence developed by centuries in pursuit of surviving at the cross-roads of great power interests. Though I would not go as far as Arthur Koestler who claimed that "...to be a Hungarian is a collective neurosis," after reading these sketches, lives cramped into 600 words, the reader will have to admit that being a Hungarian is at least an adventure.

We, Hungarians, are a pretty self-content people. We tend to be proud of being Hungarian, speaking a unique language, surviving history against all odds, producing 'world famous' talents. At the same time we feel isolated (see language), victims of history (suffering from 'historical wounds') and

not recognized by the rest of the world (how come you don't know that Houdini was Hungarian as well?).

Problems start when we go abroad and have to identify ourselves. Even if we speak a foreign language (most Hungarians don't) we soon become perplexed when others cannot place us on the map, some more informed tend to think that the 'hungry people's' capital is Bucharest, which we take as an insult. And it's very easy to insult us since in spite of all the self-pride, Hungarians suffer from an inferiority complex. We want to be recognized as equal to the most civilized nations. A negative remark made about Hungary in a no-name newspaper in America, Germany or France generates headline news and hysterical reactions. Perhaps it's because our national pride is based on living in a historical haze. What's conquest for others is 'home taking' for us, what we call the 'adventures of the Hungarians in the 10th century' is brutally called 'raids' in English.

The life stories of the 33 people that follows are meant to be typical examples of how location and historical context can shape individual fates. Even those who left Hungary are good examples since they had a reason to leave, let it be political persecution or personal choice. The selection of who is among the 33 is definitely not representative of either Hungarian historical figures or geniuses of arts and sciences. If there is a common denominator, it's their Hungarianness, let them be statesmen, geniuses of arts or just vagabonds.

After reading some or all of these pieces and become more familiar with Hungary today you may come to the conclusion that Örkény was wrong in one thing: being Hungarian is incurable after all.

In Search of Roots

Attila the Hun, Our Hun



[Mór Than](#)'s painting “The Feast of Attila” based on a fragment of [Priscus](#)



Left: The Empire of the Huns and subject tribes at the time of Attila.
Right: Allegorical depiction by [Eugène Delacroix](#) (1843–1847) – Title: Attila and his Hordes Overrun Italy and the Arts (detail).

Every 7th of January I have to call four friends called Attila and congratulate them on their name day. A Hungarian table calendar tells you whose name day it is, and just to make sure, every morning the radio announcer congratulates those who are celebrating their name day. In addition, a little sign at the florist's reminds of the name day, just in case you forgot. Though less in fashion than in earlier decades, name days are still a good excuse for boozing and fraternizing in this country. The paradox of the Attila name day is that originally name days were an Orthodox Christian tradition, but Attila the Hun was neither Christian nor Hungarian.

What's his role in this book then? The short answer is: it's a long story. Actually, two parallel stories. One is the real historical version, the other, a colourful pool of legends and myths, the products of later centuries spiced with contemporary special effects. The latter is more interesting. Nevertheless, let's stick first to the real Attila.

The real story starts with the nomadic Huns roaming from the steppes of Inner Asia and reaching the Carpathian basin in the early 5th century. They consolidated their power by making conquered tribes their loyal vassals. Like all nomadic invaders (including the Hungarian tribes arriving in the present territory in the 9th century) they had one sole objective: to maintain their superiority by raiding and looting, while keeping people in constant fear of their military skill through a style of fighting unknown to their enemies.

Born the child of Hun Chief Mundzuk in 406, Attila only came to power at the age of 28, when his father's brother, King Ruga, died suddenly when he was struck by lightning. His elder brother Bleda inherited the title, but according to Hunnic tradition they shared power, at least until Bleda's

death in unknown circumstances in 445. Their eleven-year rule was a major blow for the Eastern Roman Empire. After rampaging in the Balkans, the Hunnic armies got as near as the fortified walls of Constantinople, where they negotiated three peace agreements that resulted in the Huns being well supplied with gold and riches.

The dual kingship ended with Bleda's death, and for the next eight years Attila assumed sole power over the Huns and their subordinated peoples. Of the two brothers Attila was more the warrior type and more ambitious. Looking to further expand his empire Attila soon terminated the agreement made by his uncle Ruga with the Romans, and started his long march to the western part of Europe, leaving no cities unharmed. At the peak of his rule, the short-lived Hunnic Empire extended from the Baltic to as far as the Atlantic; the devastation he brought to the west created the basis for his mythical image as, "the scourge of God". Attila's unexpected death due to internal bleeding in 453 left the peoples of Europe in disarray; his three sons (Ellak, Dengehizik and Ernak) were unable to hold the vast empire together, and in absence of a charismatic leader like Attila, the vassal tribes soon seceded. Attila's appearance on the 5th c. European scene represented a fatal blow to the Latin Roman Empire, which came to an inglorious end, opening the way for the formation of western Christian nations.

This is the historians' dry version of Attila's life and the role he played. More important is his mythical rebirth. Since authentic sources about his life are so scarce, his character is ideal for the creation of legends and myths. Western (German, French and Italian) popular literature portrays Attila as the epitome of Eastern barbarism, with dog's ears, he was a cruel, merciless warrior, the archenemy of anything civilized.

Hungarians on the contrary have their own story and it is deeply ingrained in our national consciousness due to literary works and those who ardently oppose the Finno-Ugrian theory concerning the origin of the Hungarians. Since Hungarians are obsessed with their ethnic genealogy, especially the Asian links, there are innumerable camps of those who believe in the various theories, and it's useless to argue with them. The circle of legends connected to the Huns and in particular to Attila is so widely taken for granted that it would be equivalent to a betrayal of the nation to say that all these myths are just the products of the vivid imaginations of a few chroniclers. To name just a few, here is a short list of the most common beliefs attached to Attila and the Huns:

The Huns and the Hungarians are practically the same nation (never mind the 400 years between the 460s when the Huns disappeared and the year 896 when Hungarian tribes under Chief Árpád conquered the Carpathian Basin). Some believers of the theory claim that Árpád is a direct blood descendant of Attila.

Contrary to the western view, Attila was a humane and wise ruler in the eyes of most Hungarians, even sparing Rome from destruction at the request of Pope Leo I.

Attila a popular first name, and other Hunnic characters also have domesticated Hungarian names, "Bleda" becoming "Buda" for example, the city being named after him.

The weirdest extreme you can reach in myth making is the case of prince Csaba, who is claimed by the Székely people living in Transylvania to be Attila's son. This would make the Székelys direct descendents of the Huns.

Finally, it's an ongoing national game to find Attila's grave at the bottom of a river where he was buried in three coffins, one gold, one silver and one iron.

No matter what historians and western image distorters say, Attila is great and he is ours, insofar as other peoples from the steppes have a claim too, and a lot of Turkish babies receive "Attila" as their first name, as well. Nevertheless, myth-making on such a large scale has also a boomerang effect: people are punished for believing what the myth-makers produced both in the West and the East. The figure of Attila will provide excellent ammunition for both second-rate Hollywood filmmakers and self-claimed researchers of our Asian roots for centuries to come.