Almost every Hungarian town and hamlet has its own choral society, and
some can boast even two; this is perhaps not a bad thing, since what comes
up from the throat does less damage than what goes down. One or two
fiery songs can intoxicate the mind more than three bottles of wine.
However, to be honest, I prefer listening to a village girl singing her sorrow
on the meadow, or a sulky village lad singing his woe in soft or robust
tunes, to watching a ridiculous group of elderly men with white mustaches
and deformed faces wailing in unison with the flapping arms of a conduc-
tor. . . . Singing suits them about as much as ballet suits a cow. . . . Small-
town caterwauling societies1 are notorious for many a casus bibendi. . . . At
least people are not bored, so they won’t start revolutions.2

This satirical appraisal of choral societies was written by Kálmán Mikszáth
(1847–1910), a famous nineteenth-century novelist who made fun of the atti-
tudes and rituals associated with the singing culture that defined the social life
of Hungary in the late nineteenth century. After criticizing the quality of their
voices, Mikszáth mocked the pride and eagerness of choirs to win prizes at
singing competitions. He ridiculed the prize-winning ceremony at the national
song festival held in Debrecen in 1882, where the jury had to give some sort
of certificate to almost every participant in order to avoid a scandalous fight
among the choral societies who all claimed to have delivered the best perfor-
mance. When they returned home with their prizes, each choral society was
celebrated with great pomp and circumstance by passionate crowds who took
pride in the extraordinary achievements of their melodious townsmen.

Choral societies were a matter of prestige that involved whole communi-
ties, and sometimes divided them. They provided for many happy occasions
advancing social cohesion, but often they became the breeding grounds for
political conflicts and class struggles. According to the writer Ferenc Móra

1 In the original text the word dalárda (choral society) is replaced with dalárma, combining
dal (song) with lárma (noise).
2 Mikszáth (2005), 588. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.
(1879–1934), who published a history of the choral society in Szeged, political oppression forged unity, while liberty created dissent among the people. After the Ausgleich of 1867, some ‘good Hungarians’ formed a green-tag party and wanted to elect a mayor who supported the Austro-Hungarian compromise, while the ‘even better Hungarians,’ cherishing the memory of the failed anti-Habsburg revolution of 1848, formed a white-tag party and campaigned for a mayor who did not disavow this revolutionary heritage. In order to resolve this excruciating difference, an anonymous cartoonist proposed to have both candidates sit on a hot stove, and the one who remained seated the longest should become the new mayor of Szeged. However simple and effective this solution might have seemed, the elections were not decided by the hot-stove method. Instead, the city of Szeged itself became a hot hell for a while. The Greens and the Whites did not greet each other, did not shop in the same stores, and did not frequent the same pubs. “The Whites were cursing the Germans in the Zrínyi Restaurant on the church square, while the Greens were glorifying the homeland in the Grapevine pub. Of course, where patriots are so divided even over drinking matters, singing will also reflect dissonance.”

The director of the first choral society in Szeged, Ede Hánki, was a white-tagged ‘true’ Hungarian, whose relentlessly temperamental and outspoken nature became the source of much irritation among the Greens, who eventually paid him back for all the discomfort by establishing their own ‘élite’ choral society. The differences between the old and the new ‘élite’ society were magnified by the two local newspapers, who were looking for dramatic stories. Finally the ‘élite’ choral society fell apart and Hánki, with all the active members of his choral society, founded a new choir which he called the ‘civic’ choral society, as against the ‘élite’ one that had been disbanded. This ‘civic’ society was active, and there was hardly any charity in the town which the society did not support.

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3 The Ausgleich or Compromise of 1867 was the result of many exploratory talks and negotiations between the Austrian and the Hungarian governments after the failed Hungarian revolution and war of independence in 1849. The compromise led to the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In the dualist system Hungary and Austria each had complete independence in domestic affairs, but surrendered their sovereignty in matters relating to foreign and military policy. The emperor had more power than a traditional constitutional monarch, since he could interfere in the decisions of the executive and had absolute authority over his dominions. Public opinion in both countries was divided about the success of the Compromise, and many were convinced that the other party had the better deal.

4 Móra (1922), 10.

5 Ibid., 11–13.