Chapter 9

The People of the “Five Hundred Villages”: Hungarians, Rusyns, Jews, and the Roma in the Transcarpathian Region in Austria–Hungary

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1 Introduction*

With the establishment of Austria-Hungary in 1867, independent systems of administration developed in the two halves forming the union. The Austrian half was divided into historically defined provinces, of which the largest and most populated province, Galicia, achieved the greatest independence, functioning practically autonomously after 1867. By the early twentieth century its population exceeded 8 million people, with two hundred thousand of them living in its capital city, Lemberg (Lwów/Lviv). By comparison, historic Transcarpathia, within the Kingdom of Hungary, was a significantly smaller region, with significantly fewer inhabitants.

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1 The region known as Transcarpathia took shape as a political entity only in the twentieth century, under names that varied over time and between languages. The geographical extent of the territory also changed several times. Prior to First World War it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. From December 25, 1918, to September 10, 1919, it was known as the “Ruska-Krajna” Autonomous Area, but the continuing warfare prevented the establishment of exact boundaries for this territory. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (March 21 to August 6, 1919), this area took the name of “Podkarpatská Rus” [Subcarpathian Ruthenia] and became part of Czechoslovakia under of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. During the brief period of a federated Czecho-Slovakia (October 1938–March 1939), the region was designated on November 22, 1938, as an autonomous territory with the official name of “Karpatska Ukraina” [Carpathian Ukraine]. This territory then became independent for a few hours on March 15, 1939. Occupied by Hungary, and thereafter remaining under Hungarian control, the region became a Hungarian administrative entity as the “Kárpátaljai Kormányzóság” [Subcarpathian Governorship]. The territory then came under Soviet control in October 1944 as “Zakarpatska Ukraina” [Transcarpathian Ukraine], and became formally incorporated into the Soviet Union on January 22, 1946. On August 24, 1991, the region became the “Zakarpattia Oblast” [Transcarpathian county] of independent Ukraine and in general sense “Transcarpathia” or “Subcarpathia”. Nándor Bárdi, Csilla Fedinec, and László
The northeastern corner of the Kingdom of Hungary was one of the unique regions of Europe; it was a Zwischenraum, “in-between space,” or “borderland.” Until 1918, it was never a single administrative unit, but was divided between several Hungarian counties, although from a Rusyn and a Jewish historical perspective, the border region between Prešov (Eperjes) and Maramureș (Máramaros/Maramarosh) was a homogenous region (in the direct neighborhood of East Slavic territories belonging to the Austrian Empire of the Monarchy). The events that took place from the end of 1918 onwards “decomposed” this historic-cultural unit and split its territory between a number of countries. This was the time of the emergence of a new minority in the area: ethnic Hungarians. The political borders of the region have never coincided with its ethnic, ethnographic, linguistic, or cultural borders. Furthermore, it remained on the periphery, and several centers of power have exerted their influence on it to this very day.

Nationalism, the trend of the eighteenth century, placed the concept of nation before social order, class, and religion. Nationalism clearly is also closely connected to the question of languages and their development. Until the end of twentieth century, Transcarpathia was a typically multilingual peripheral region. In the era of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the local population consisted of Hungarians, following western Christianity and the corresponding cultural traditions; Rusyns, residing in the area since the Middle Ages and attracted to both western and eastern Christianity and cultural traditions; and Jews, living in the region from the sixteenth century onwards, but in larger numbers after arriving in several waves of migration from Galicia—northernmost province of the Austrian Empire—up to the mid-nineteenth century. Hungarians had their own kin state and were the nation-building people; they turned towards their centers (Vienna as the Monarchy’s primary capital and Budapest as the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary) and tried to assimilate others. The Rusyn community tried to find its place and was under the influence of several power centers simultaneously: the intellectual and professional classes tended to be attracted to Hungarian assimilation attempts, but there was also the hesitation between Russian (Pan-Slavic) and Ukrainian identities and languages. The question was whether they would accept the Pan-Slavic principle and thus choose the Russian standard or the Ukrainian