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ABSTRACT

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**VARATIONS OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE
LIFE-WORK OF DEZSŐ SZABÓ**

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THE SUBJECT OF THE DISSERTATION AND ITS METHODOLOGY

The present dissertation is rooted in the thematic scheme that served as the basis of orientation at the beginning of my investigation, the objective of which was to reconstruct and demonstrate Dezső Szabó's Hungarian consciousness, the collective identity present and determinant throughout his life-work. When applying the concept of "collective identity", I adopt its sense elaborated by Jan Assmann, who defined it by the terms of "sense of We-ness" and "sense of belonging". Therefore, throughout my work, the definition of Assmann's "collective identity" shall apply.

I also accepted Jan Assmann's argument that similarly to all collective identities, national identity is also based on a certain "knowledge of concretion of identity" that serves as an orientation when answering questions such as "who we are" and "what our mission is". Seen as ideological elements of the national concept, answers to such questions in Dezső Szabó's times appeared basically within the framework of either theories on the role of the community, on the national concept and characteristics, or those elaborating on past interpretations with the help of symbols and narratives rooted in experiences in the past. Therefore, as the objective of my dissertation is to identify and investigate Dezső Szabó's collective identity, I decided to pay special attention to and emphasize those ideas of the writer which tend to reveal his concept of the Hungarian people and of the nation as well as his idea of the community's mission and of the Hungarian past.

In spite of the ideological and conceptual adaptations described above, my approach does not follow Jan Assmann's methodology in one aspect. The reason for this is my conviction that national concept serving as "the knowledge of concretion of identity" is far from being as consistent and homogeneous within the community itself as it is suggested by Assmann's theory. In my perspective, "senses of We-ness" based on different beliefs and "knowledge of concretion of identity" can be attributed to one community. This supposition is not exclusively based on John A. Armstrong's assumption concerning Hungarian nationalism that within one national community several, even competing past interpretations and "myths" might exist without becoming a polyphony to weaken the communal consciousness of the members. Basically, when

referring to different “senses of We-ness”, the hundred-year-old, fading idea of Friedrich Meinecke serves as the basis of my argumentation. The German historian argued that national theories like all other theories do not operate as supra-individual abstractions, but they are the representations of the individuals’ emotions and ideas imbedded in their personal world view. Without investigating this personal world view, we can by no means arrive at identifying and understanding the theory rooted within. Unquestionably, this idea is the cornerstone of my work, as it leads us to regard Dezső Szabó’s collective identity as the theoretical revelation of an original and unique personality.

This conceptual core serves as the basis of the demarcation line between the approach of work and the one applied by the so called modernist and symbolist theories on nationalism. Representatives of both tendencies regard national identity and concept as factors initiating collective integrity. Their interpretation is based on the idea that nationalism and all connected “myths” function as the main social cohesive and homogenizing power. The difference between the two systematic approaches lies within their opposing convictions: whereas the modernist-instrumentalist theories argue that based on “false traditions”, the ideology of nationalism is a damaging power manipulated artificially by the elite, symbolists claim that, rooted in historical and cultural values, national identity is a creative power initiating social coherence. Both approaches find that national idea bears a dominant integrative aspect, being normative, homogeneous and supra-individual.

Apart from above highlighted approach of my work, i.e. national idea shall be seen as a concept imbedded in the personal world view, I also lay special emphasis on the assertion that writings devoted to the nature of nations hardly ever make clear distinctions between the national and the human cause. This is true for the writings of the “Classicist” J. G. Herder, G. W. F. Hegel and J. G. Fichte, too. Up to our time, these writers were the settlers of all theoretical evolutions concerning national ideologies such as those pointing out the role of national languages, emphasizing the mission of nations in humankind among others. The theory can also be authenticated in its Hungarian aspect: the writings of István Széchenyi and József Eötvös or those born between the two world wars by Mihály Babits, László Németh, or Tibor Joó serve as reliable sources for us to show how the responsibilities for the Hungarian nation and humankind are intertwined. We might as well include the name of Dezső Szabó in the above list. It is

important to point out the fact that this correlation is almost completely ignored by the national theories.

The above outlined assertion is closely connected to a more general remark that in spite of the fact that everyone tends to bear a dominant collective identity, an individual hardly ever identify itself with only one “We”; What makes Dezső Szabó special in this respect is that several collective identities can be detected in the writer’s life-work; nevertheless, the dominant role was assigned to the “sense of We-ness” connected to the Hungarian and to the humankind. Throughout the whole life-work, an indisputable intention to reconcile the two latter variances of the “sense of We-ness” can be detected; however, the role of the dominant collective identity in the two phases of the writer’s life was different. Accordingly, from the beginning of the 1920’s until the birth of his novel entitled *Az elsodort falu*, the “sense of We-ness” of Dezső Szabó was attached to the human species, and belonging to the Hungarian nation was regarded as of peripheral importance; whereas according to the evidence of the novel, by the end of the decade, belonging to the Hungarian nation had been initiated the dominant collective identity for the writer. Notwithstanding, this change in the writer’s ideology did not vanish the perspective of the unity of humankind. As a consequence, it would be totally misleading to investigate the Hungarian conscience of Dezső Szabó without involving all other structures of his collective identity in our study.

It is evident that the above outlined approach concerning the collective identity of Dezső Szabó can hardly be fitted into the still dominating portrait depicted by the writer’s reception. The latter interpretation represents the ethnical and language-based concept of nation as the dominant characteristic of the writer’s life-work and yet ignores the fact that he attributed little importance to his belonging to the Hungarian people in the 1910’s. The reason for the defectiveness of Dezső Szabó’s portrait might be found in the effect of the “effective history”.

Indisputably, the traditions of interpretation rather differing concerning Szabó’s estimation do agree in the sense that they all focus on Dezső Szabó’s Hungarian consciousness, forgetting about all other forms of his collective identity. We can differentiate between three tradition lines of interpretation the origins of which are settled by Gyula Szekfű, György Lukács, and Dezső Szabó himself.

When estimating the role of the writer, Szekfű based his concept exclusively on the period beginning with the novel entitled *Az elsodort falu*. In his writings, the historian focused all his attention on Dezső Szabó’s influence on the young generations,

being convinced that Dezső Szabó's inspiration manifested itself predominantly in his forming of the youth's national idea. According to his interpretation, after Trianon, it was Dezső Szabó who continued to incorporate Endre Ady's Hungarian concept, representing the aspiration born at the beginning of the century after transferring the core of collective consciousness from the concept of nation collecting all citizens of Hungary to the ethnical and language-based collectivity.

In the Communist era, the origin of Dezső Szabó's estimation can be traced back to György Lukács's the works born after 1945. Accordingly, Dezső Szabó was regarded as a writer acting in the historical and ideological stream of irrationalism. By this compromising positioning, Lukács did not intend to free the Hungarian public from the "dangerous" spiritual heritage of Dezső Szabó; his motivation was to drag the adored populist writers into the stigmatized spiritual stream identified with the dead Szabó. In his work entitled *Az ész trónfosztása*, Lukács presented race theory as an inseparable accessory of irrationalism. Logically, this evaluation structure concealed and excluded certain facts and biographical aspects such as the civic radical, social-democratic and internationalist orientations, humanistic patterns and the belief in evolution much characteristic of Dezső Szabó in the first half of the 1910's. The portrait depicted by Lukács served as guidance for the politics laid in 1958 by the Party on the populist writers concerning Dezső Szabó, but it also delineated the orientation of the monograph of Dezső Szabó written by Péter Nagy. In his book just as well as in the autobiography published by him, even by means of misrepresentations and falsifications, the aim of Nagy was to prove his thesis that an all-penetrating element and even the core of Dezső Szabó's life-work is nothing but his irrationalism and race myth.

Undoubtedly, the self-portrait of Dezső Szabó given after 1919 had a decisive role in discarding certain aspects of his career and ideology. After the fall of revolutions, the civic radical ideology characteristic of Dezső Szabó's writings published in the periodicals *Nyugat* and *Huszadik Század* was wildly attacked. Accused of being a "windbag", Dezső Szabó was determined to defend himself by arguing that he never ceased to act for the interest and sake of the Hungarian, insisting that only the means he chose were altered. In order to provide evidence for the consistency of his ideology, he decided to publish his studies in a collection entitled *Egyenes úton*. Doubtlessly, the selection of his earlier studies, not including the ones conflicting his

self-portrait, reflected this intention. In fact, the writer also made some necessary “corrections”.

The tradition of the self-image insisting on the ever-consistent collective identity of the writer was carried on by the book written by Gyula Gombos. In his monograph, he portrayed Dezső Szabó as the man focusing exclusively on the interest of the Hungarian throughout his life, even when turning to the “left wing” socialists, just in order to cure the wounds of his people.

In my work, by challenging the above described traditions of Dezső Szabó’s reception and by revealing the ever-ignored elements of Dezső Szabó’s ideology, I undertake to reconstruct a portrait of the writer’s Hungarian identity more realistic than the one rooted in the “effect of the effective history”, and to identify all other forms of his “collective identity” inseparable from that portrait.

THE STRUCTURE AND RESULTS OF THE DISSERTATION

My dissertation is divided into four large parts. In the first chapter, I undertake to introduce the methodological-historical tradition lines that inspired my study. Within the framework of this chapter, I enumerate all the methodological aspects that governed my investigation.

In the second part, in line with the most important methodological concerns, I provide a mapping of Dezső Szabó’s world view, i.e. his ideas of the values and mission of men. Under this chapter, I embark on analyzing the writer’s answers to fundamental questions concerning human existence as well as how they were connected to the differing forms of the human community according to the ideology of Dezső Szabó. The importance of this chapter is due to my conviction that the means of this connection determines the fundamental characteristic of Dezső Szabó’s collective identity and Hungarian concept.

In the third chapter, I undertake to investigate Dezső Szabó’s ideas concerning the national matter dominant in the first phase of the writer’s intellectual career between 1911 and 1917. In accordance with one of the most essential methodological aspect, I present the ideas of Dezső Szabó on the nature of the Hungarian nation by outlining the

spiritual background within which his ideas were imbedded and can be understood. The method I follow is a comparative analysis of the partly opposing and confronting, sometimes parallel contemporary theories. As a consequence, to start with, I depict the dominant and sometimes even conventionalized national concept of the two last decades of dualism, pointing out its fundamental characteristics. Secondly, I also demonstrate the social democrat and civic radical national theories conflicting the dualist national concept. After all, I embark on reconstructing Dezső Szabó's theory of the national matter. The ideologies of the social democrats, the civic radical group as well as Dezső Szabó himself all share the same characteristic that the primary collective identity is not identified with the human's belonging to a nation, but it is determined by a certain idea of the unity of humankind. At the end of the chapter, I attempt to reconstruct the spiritual evolution matured by the sufferings of war as a result of which the hierarchy of the collective identities underwent a significant change in Dezső Szabó's ideology. Finally, as we cannot ignore Endre Ady's concept of the Hungarian nation, I also elaborate on its fundamental characteristics and attempt to find its place within the coordinate system of the already enumerated approaches to our matter.

In the fourth part, I investigate the forming, content and changes of Dezső Szabó's concept of the Hungarian nation, ideas concerning the mission of the Hungarian people and his view of the nation's past during the course of the period beginning with the novel entitled *Az elsodort falu*. Apart from this, another thematic unit is presented in this chapter, the subject of which examination is the relation between the state and the individual and the question of the ideal community, as it was seen by Dezső Szabó.

Concerning the results of my investigations, I find it important to emphasize three aspects of my dissertation. In my study I pointed out that in the first half of the 1910's, the significant characteristic of Dezső Szabó's world view was that all answers to the fundamental questions concerning human existence were closely connected to the "community" identified with the humankind itself: the will if the community is the source of righteousness, all actions taken for the sake of this community are the founding of ethical life. Life remembered in the eyes of the community is the only way to immortality. The harmony between the individual and social aims would have been reached by similarity of the ideas, the so called "psychical unity" of all members of the society.

In my analysis, I also proved that the above discussed ingredients of the writer's world view survived even after the switch from humankind to the Hungarian

people being regarded as the ideal, *par excellence* community, dated at the birth of *Az elsodort falu*. To put it differently, within the ideology of Dezső Szabó, the missionary role of the community never ceased to exist, the only difference is that by now the circle of Dezső Szabó's utopist citizens, i.e. humankind, is replaced by and restricted to the less populous group of the Hungarian people.

Another important result of my work is that as opposed to the effect of the "effective history", I proved that the pre-war ideas of Dezső Szabó concerning the national matter can be fitted into the coordinate system of the contemporary social democrat and civic radical approaches.

By analyzing Dezső Szabó's world view as well as by such a positioning of his pre-war theory on the Hungarian people, I managed to throw new light upon the writer's thoughts concerning the national issue. In my investigation, I claim to have elaborated a more complex and sophisticated portrait of Dezső Szabó's concept of the Hungarian national and history than what we were given before.

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