

# Sanctifying Ethnic Memory and Reinforcing Place Attachment: Cultural Identity, Sacred Place, and Pilgrimage in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan

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Résumé de l'article

Le 8 novembre 1908, l'église Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption a ouvert ses portes dans la communauté catholique hongroise de Kaposvar en Saskatchewan (située à 4 km au sud de la Ville actuelle d'Esterhazy). Près d'un siècle plus tard, le centre de ce district agricole demeure un important lieu commémoratif de l'est de la Saskatchewan pour les descendants des pionniers qui se sont établis en 1886 dans le district de Kaposvar dans le cadre du projet de colonisation hongroise du comte Paul d'Esterhazy. Tenus sur les terrains de l'église, la célébration commémorative et le pèlerinage annuel ont constitué d'importants moyens de conservation de la culture des Canadiens hongrois de la région. Ce document porte sur l'évolution de l'identité culturelle dans l'ancienne enclave ethnique de Kaposvar et révèle le rôle d'un pèlerinage religieux traditionnel dans le renforcement de l'attachement à un lieu porteur d'identité.

Jason F. Kovacs<sup>1</sup>

## ***Sanctifying Ethnic Memory and Reinforcing Place Attachment: Cultural Identity, Sacred Place, and Pilgrimage in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan***

### **Abstract**

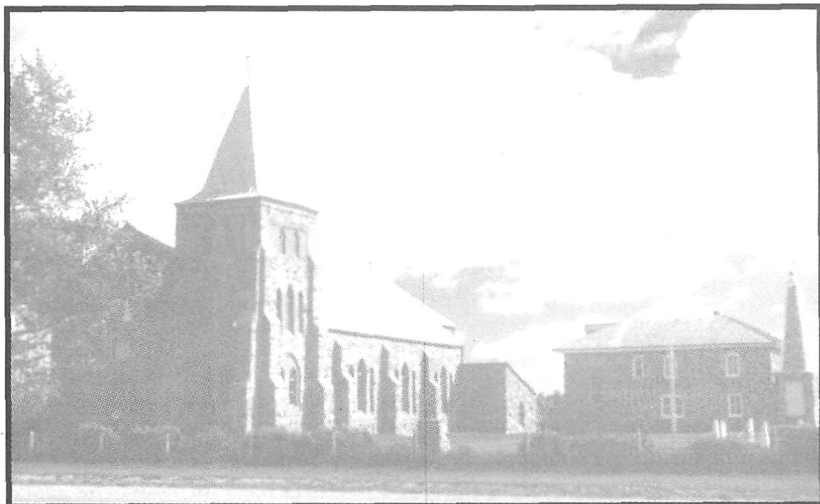
*On November 8, 1908, the Our Lady of Assumption Church was opened in the Hungarian Catholic community of Kaposvar, Saskatchewan (located 4 km south of the present-day town of Esterhazy). Nearly a century later, the focal point of the early farming district remains an important commemorative site in eastern Saskatchewan for descendants of the pioneers who settled in the Kaposvar district under Count Paul d'Esterhazy's 1886 Hungarian colonization initiative. Centred on the church grounds, commemorative celebration and an annual pilgrimage have served as important agencies of cultural retention for local Hungarian-Canadians. This paper explores the evolution of cultural identity in the former ethnic enclave of Kaposvar and reveals the role of a traditional religious pilgrimage in reinforcing identity forming place attachment.*

### **Résumé**

*Le 8 novembre 1908, l'église Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption a ouvert ses portes dans la communauté catholique hongroise de Kaposvar en Saskatchewan (située à 4 km au sud de la ville actuelle d'Esterhazy). Près d'un siècle plus tard, le centre de ce district agricole demeure un important lieu commémoratif de l'est de la Saskatchewan pour les descendants des pionniers qui se sont établis en 1886 dans le district de Kaposvar dans le cadre du projet de colonisation hongroise du comte Paul d'Esterhazy. Tenus sur les terrains de l'église, la célébration commémorative et le pèlerinage annuel ont constitué d'importants moyens de conservation de la culture des Canadiens hongrois de la région. Ce document porte sur l'évolution de l'identité culturelle dans l'ancienne enclave ethnique de Kaposvar et révèle le rôle d'un pèlerinage religieux traditionnel dans le renforcement de l'attachement à un lieu porteur d'identité.*

### **Introduction: "An Everlasting Monument"**

Our Lady of Assumption Church of Kaposvar was opened on Sunday, November 8, 1908 to a large congregation that filled the new structure "to its utmost capacity."<sup>2</sup> Built by local parishioners under the guidance of their pastor, the church was constructed from over 1600 loads of fieldstone from surrounding farms.<sup>3</sup> The hard labour involved in its construction made the opening of the church one of the most important events in what was by then



**Figure 1.** Kaposvar Catholic Church, Our Lady of Assumption.  
(Photograph by the author)

regarded as Canada's first Hungarian prairie settlement.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting the importance of the occasion, the gathering included several visiting priests, the Archbishop of St. Boniface, and delegates and guests from other Hungarian Catholic communities in the Prairie West. Prior to a sermon in Hungarian, Archbishop Adélaré Langevin addressed the congregation and declared that no finer rural church existed in Western Canada. He also claimed that the newly constructed church "was an everlasting monument to their faith and to their good will towards the church, and one to which their children and their children's children could point to with pride."<sup>5</sup> Nearly a century later, the focal point of the early Hungarian farming district (see Figure 1) remains an important commemorative site in eastern Saskatchewan for descendants of the pioneers who settled in the Kaposvar district (located 4 km south of the town of Esterhazy) under Count Paul d'Esterhazy's 1886 Hungarian colonization initiative. Centred on the church grounds, commemorative celebration and an annual pilgrimage have served as important agencies of cultural retention for local Hungarian-Canadians.

While there is a growing body of literature on place attachment (Mazumdar 2000; Hidalgo and Hernández 2001; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004; Kyle et al. 2004; Manzo 2005), or "the connection and desire people have for particular places" (Mazumdar 2005), few studies have explored the multigenerational bonds that often exist between long-established immigrant groups and former ethnic enclaves. The point is that people often "make a ritual pilgrimage to lost enclaves to remember and relive their collective past" (Mazumdar et al. 2000, 320). Moreover, the recent resurgence of literature on place attachment has, with few

exceptions, focused on secular places and settings (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004, 385) through a social and environmental psychology framework. As such, scholars, particularly in cultural and historical-based studies, have largely ignored the role of religion and attachment to sacred places for ethnic identity formation. Further, only a limited number of studies have examined ethnic identity representation and maintenance at traditional religious pilgrimage sites (Hall 2004, Tweed 1997; Rutledge 1985). The absence of Canadian case studies in this regard is surprising given the large number of Catholic pilgrimage shrines in Canada, many of which are situated in the former ethnic bloc settlements of the Prairie West.<sup>6</sup>

This paper charts the evolution of ethnic identity in the enclave-turned-pilgrimage site of Kaposvar: the community's 1911 and 1936 jubilees, which were important occasions for the celebration of a vibrant transplanted culture; the unveiling of the Kaposvar Marian shrine in 1942 and its role in Hungarian identity representation following the post-war erosion of Hungarian community life; the 1961 jubilee and the emergence of a heritage preservation movement following the 1967 Centennial; and the 1986 jubilee and subsequent cultural revival in the Esterhazy-Kaposvar area as expressed through an annual pilgrimage.

### **Kaposvar's Silver and Golden Jubilees: "Planting National Sentiment"**

On August 15, 1911, parishioners of Kaposvar celebrated the colony's twenty-fifth anniversary. As the "first" Hungarian settlement in the Canadian Prairies, the jubilee had great significance for the Hungarian-Canadian community both within and outside the Esterhazy area. One month prior to the event, the editor of the Winnipeg-based Hungarian language newspaper *Canadai Magyar Farmer* (Canadian Hungarian Farmer) claimed that every Hungarian settlement, homestead, and family in Canada was anxiously awaiting news on the progress of the jubilee festival's preparation by the "path-clearing" Kaposvarians.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, the symbolic importance of the event was not lost on the other Hungarian Prairie communities. The names of their representative leaders who were intent on traveling to Esterhazy for the celebration were subsequently posted in the *Canadai Magyar Farmer*. In addition, Hungarian cultural leaders and clergy members attempted to reinforce the importance of the anniversary. For instance, Father Menyhért Érdújhelyi declared that those with even a drop of Hungarian blood needed to travel quickly to Esterhazy and if that were not possible they should be united in spirit with the event's participants.<sup>8</sup> It was, as he argued, a time for the scattered Magyar settlements to demonstrate cultural solidarity.<sup>9</sup> For organizers of the event, the jubilee was an opportunity to showcase the accomplishments of their rural community to more recent immigrants as well as to exhibit the agricultural potential of the region to relatives and friends who remained in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Several members of the jubilee committee hurried to

Winnipeg a day before the last pre-jubilee newspaper was issued to post additional information alongside their jubilee advertisement, which welcomed all of North America's Hungarians.<sup>11</sup>

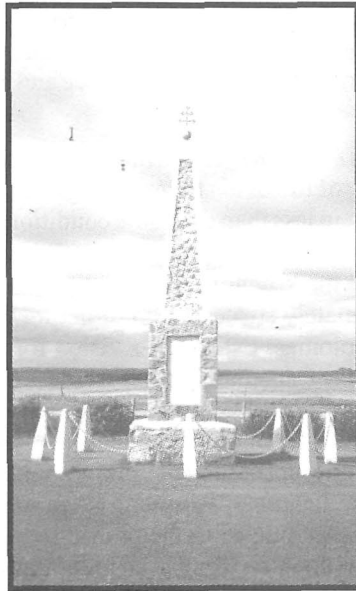
The first large contingent of visitors to the Silver Jubilee arrived at the nearby Grand Trunk Pacific railway station of Zeneta during the afternoon of August 14. There they were greeted with a display that was likened to a scene from the Hungarian Conquest.<sup>12</sup> Dressed in hussar-style outfits, a mounted honour guard assembled in a display that was meant to evoke the equestrian traditions of Hungary. A second group, dressed in the horse-herding costumes of the Hungarian *Puszta*, soon joined this *banderium* formation. Over sixty riders were involved in the spectacle, which was repeated at the Canadian Pacific Railway station of Esterhazy in the evening and again the following morning. In addition to the honour guards, a Hungarian brass band from the adjacent village of Stockholm greeted the arrival of a second and third party of visitors that included members of the Hungarian consul as well as several provincial government and railway officials. Following a number of speeches at the station, the honoured guests left the predominantly English and French populated village of Esterhazy by carriage towards several large tents erected on a homestead near the Kaposvar Church. Accompanied by the honour guard, musicians, and hundreds of the town's residents and visitors, the officials headed towards two large ceremonial arches *en route* to the celebration's homestead centre for a jubilee lunch. By 3 p.m. the focus of the event shifted from the homestead tents to the church grounds where earlier that day a commemorative banner from Hungary had been blessed during a well-attended morning service.<sup>13</sup>

Red, white, and green ribbons and the flags of Hungary and Britain decorated the interior of the crowded church of Kaposvar. Standing next to the jubilee banner, Father Oszkár Solymos, a visiting priest from Benchonzie, delivered a sermon in Hungarian in which he praised the homeland, the pioneer settlers and their children, and the noble ideals of Canada. Church services concluded with the singing of the Hungarian national anthem after which parishioners regrouped outside for an additional congratulatory address by Saskatchewan Attorney General William Turgeon. A longer and more formal program of speeches in the jubilee tents followed the ceremony on the church grounds. When the name of the colony's founder was mentioned by a representative from the Immigration Department the crowd erupted in cheers. The hills and forests surrounding the homestead purportedly echoed for several minutes with Esterhazy's name.<sup>14</sup> But Count Esterhazy was not in attendance. Owing to failing health, he was unable to leave his residence in New York. However, Esterhazy had responded to his colony's anniversary invitation with a letter that was undoubtedly read to the celebration's gathering:

Upon this solemn occasion I beg God to bless you with His choicest blessings for the meritorious labor you have realized. [...] My dear countrymen, may you live in peace and happiness. This is my sincere wish and desire.<sup>15</sup>

While Esterhazy's 1885-1887 colonization activities were directed at improving the quality of life of his fellow Hungarian countrymen, many of whom he found living in less than desirable conditions in Pennsylvania, his land settling efforts were also guided by a romantic desire to establish a "New Hungary" on the Canadian Prairies (Kovacs 2006). However, although he was ultimately successful in initiating the establishment of a half dozen Magyar colonies, Esterhazy's vision for a strong perpetuating Hungarian culture in the Canadian Prairies was less than assured.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the outbreak of the First World War, three years after the jubilee, signalled the rapid cultural demise for many settlements associated with the "enemy alien" denotation. The abrupt ending of immigration from Hungary and the banning of Hungarian language schooling were important factors in the weakening of Hungarian culture in the prairie settlements. Although the reopening of Canada's doors to Hungarian immigration in 1924 resulted in a second significant influx of Hungarians into Saskatchewan, a number of economic factors led to the provincial out-migration of the newcomers along with many first and second-generation settlers from the Hungarian colonies. The result was a major shift in the geography of the Hungarian-Canadian population from a predominantly rural base set largely in Saskatchewan to a more urban one in Ontario (Dreiszigler 1999). The population change served to erode the Hungarian character of nearly all of the small scattered settlements. However, Kaposvar was one of the few exceptions in that it continued to be regarded as a strong Hungarian ethno-cultural island and, in fact, one of the more important Magyar communities in Canada. Despite the absence of Hungarian cultural organizations and programs, Kaposvar survived the inter-war period as a visibly strong ethnic enclave largely due to the presence and symbolism of its church.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of the stone edifice as the basis of the farming community's cultural solidarity was particularly evident during Kaposvar's fiftieth anniversary celebration. According to the July 9, 1936 edition of *The Esterhazy Observer*, 3000 people turned out to enjoy an elaborate program in Kaposvar on July 7, the opening day of the Golden Jubilee celebration. Visitors, including several representatives from church and government, arrived from all over Canada and the United States. As in 1911, a *banderium* was organized for the occasion. Consisting of twenty riders, the honour guard travelled into the village of Esterhazy on two occasions to escort Archbishop Peter Monahan of the Archdiocese of Regina and Hon. William Motherwell, the province's first Minister of Agriculture, to the church grounds. Besides the celebration of Hungarian culture and Canadian citizenship the jubilee was also an occasion for the community to demonstrate its prodigious religious faith: church services,



**Figure 2.** Kaposvar Pioneer Cairn.  
(Photograph by the author)

which commenced at 6 a.m., only ended at noon. Following the morning services, Hungarian meals were served to the large jubilee gathering and pioneer settlers subsequently made their way around the church grounds in a “parade of progress.” But the dominant event of the afternoon involved the unveiling of a pioneer memorial by members of the Kaposvar Young People Society (KYPS). The name of the colony’s founder and of the forty-one pioneers who settled in the district between 1886 and 1890, along with those of the archbishop, missionaries, and priests who served the parish were inscribed on the sides of the Kaposvar cairn (Figure 2). An evening program in Esterhazy followed these and other religious and cultural displays. The fiftieth anniversary celebration of the arrival of the first Hungarians in the Kaposvar area was clearly not restricted to the Hungarian farming community. Rather it extended even more than the Silver Jubilee into the ethnically diverse village of Esterhazy. However, the festivities were still geared towards articulating the Hungarian cultural roots and “accompanying” religious heritage of the rural community. It was an opportunity to celebrate the “Hungarian national sentiment” that had been “planted in the souls of the second and third generations.”<sup>18</sup>

The Kaposvar Golden Jubilee festivities in Esterhazy took place in the village’s community hall. An overture of Hungarian and Canadian patriotic hymns, followed by an address by a community elder, began the evening activities. Interspersed between congratulatory speeches by guests that included Hon. J. G. Gardiner, the Federal Minister of Agriculture, and Hon.

Stephen Petenyi, the Hungarian consul at Winnipeg, were selections of music, dance, and story: Hungarian musical performances were made by a local choir, quartet, and orchestra; a story entitled “A Typical Hungarian Town Ideal” was narrated by a family; and a guest from a smaller Hungarian enclave gave an elaborate folk dance performance. The program featured additional cultural presentations and was brought to a close with the Hungarian anthem followed by “God Save the King.” The jubilee celebration continued the following day in Kaposvar albeit with a more religious focus: masses, blessings, a Eucharistic procession, and benediction added a sacred dimension to the historical narrative of the jubilee—the successful transplantation of a strong religious faith to the Prairies by the pioneers. Emphasizing connections between the religious heritage of the Hungarians of Kaposvar, the earlier sacrifices that were made by them, and the religious values of Hungary, which had once acted as a buffer between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire, this underlying narrative of the Jubilee would be transferred to successive commemorative events.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, the religious and cultural displays of 1936 revealed the strength of the district as a Hungarian cultural island in the inter-war period. However, the population of the compact farming community was in the initial stages of decline. A noticeable out-migration of Kaposvar’s youth to central Canada closely correlated with the eastward movement of the Hungarian-Canadian community. At the same time, the cultural strength in the Kaposvar district was slowly deteriorating as a result of assimilation. The, by then, conspicuous use of English words in local Hungarian dialect was, for example, an important indicator of this ongoing process. What was not waning on the eve of the Second World War was the strong local tie to the Catholic faith. While the vitality of other Hungarian prairie settlements had rapidly deteriorated with population loss, Kaposvar remained an important centre of Hungarian Catholic influence and devotion (see Figure 3). However, the more visible expressions of ethnic identity at the church site were frowned upon after Hungary’s entrance into the war on the side of the Axis powers. As an indicator of the wartime atmosphere, a series of nostalgic newspaper articles on pioneering life in the Esterhazy area focused exclusively on the recollected stories of Czech settlers with no reference to the district’s Hungarian and Slovak heritage. Under both natural (acculturation) and unnatural circumstances (Second World War), Hungarian identity in the Esterhazy area was encouraged to reconfigure itself more towards the celebration of religious tradition.

### **Kaposvar’s Marian Grotto, 1942: “A Small Inconspicuous Shrine”**

In 1941, donations for a second monument for the Kaposvar Church grounds were raised by the KYPS. However, rather than an historical-cultural memorial, the project involved the construction of a shrine of

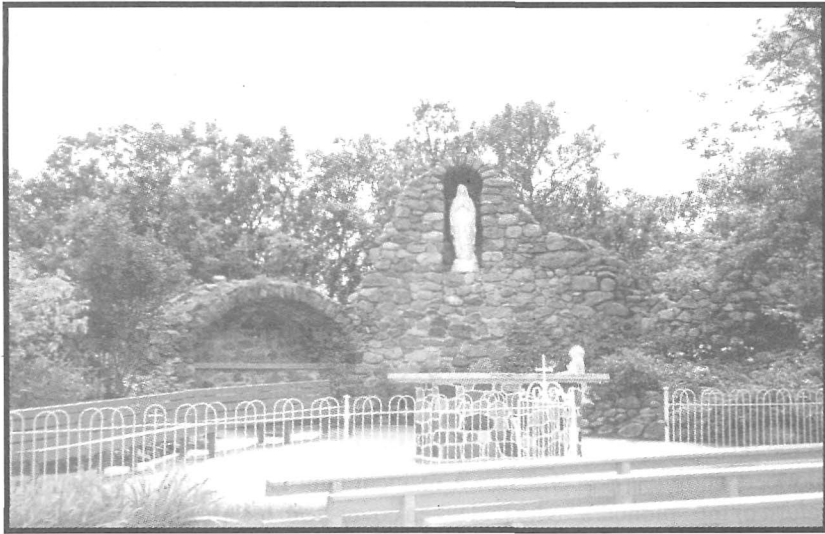




Figure 3. Celebrating the Eucharistic Congress of Budapest, Kaposvar May 26, 1938.  
(Martin Kovacs Papers, University of Regina Archives)

devotion to the Virgin. Fashioned after the pilgrimage shrine of Lourdes, the Kaposvar Marian grotto (Figure 4) was built on the southwest corner of the church grounds and blessed the following year. The purpose of visiting a Marian shrine, whether it was a world-renowned one like the Lourdes grotto or a “small inconspicuous” one like the Kaposvar shrine, as Rev. A. Kulcsar later declared, “was to pray for the atonement of sin.”<sup>20</sup> Following the blessing of the informal procession site, the Kaposvar Marian grotto became an important site of prayer. Yet although it was constructed for a religious purpose, the shrine also served as an important monument to local Hungarian culture. In fact, the grotto gradually replaced the pioneer cairn as the central memorial to Hungarian cultural heritage following its dedication as an official pilgrimage shrine in the late summer of 1954. It was then, in a proclaimed Marian year, that the ten acre churchyard was once again crowded with visitors at the first official pilgrimage to Kaposvar’s “Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine.”<sup>21</sup> The pilgrimage ceremony, which to this day continues to be held in August following the Feast of the Assumption, began with a procession to the grotto where Rev. Kulcsar celebrated high mass.<sup>22</sup> Msgr. Paul Santha of Stockholm subsequently delivered a sermon in Hungarian to the estimated 2000 pilgrims in attendance. He retraced the history of Kaposvar and urged pilgrims to maintain the religious traditions that were brought over from Hungary by the pioneers.<sup>23</sup>

The Hungarian cultural presence in the Kaposvar district was still somewhat noticeable during the early years of the Catholic pilgrimage. For example, sermons given during the first pilgrimages were made in both



**Figure 4.** Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine, Kaposvar. (Photograph by the author)

English and Hungarian. In addition, visiting clergy made indirect references to political developments overseas, including Hungary's fall into the Soviet sphere. The annual pilgrimage, however, was not directed solely towards parishioners of Hungarian ancestry. From the very first pilgrimage, pilgrims and clergy made their way to the event from communities in the Esterhazy Deanery that were not founded by Hungarian settlers. As such, while local priests often preached in Hungarian, visiting clergy gave their own sermons in English, although they did often acknowledge the Hungarian heritage of the church. For example, during the pilgrimage of 1957, Rev. Desmond Dorion, of the largely German inhabited village of Langenburg, paid tribute to the founding pioneers of Kaposvar who had dedicated their church to the patroness of Hungary.<sup>24</sup> However, although some elderly residents played Hungarian music and sang folk songs following the ceremony, the visibility of Hungarian culture was in a sharp stage of decline as a result of the out-migration of Hungarian youth, inter-ethnic marriage, and the absence of Hungarian community organizations and language programs.<sup>25</sup> The visibility of Hungarian culture at the pilgrimage weakened in a relatively short period of time. The lack of recorded references to the use of Hungarian during the pilgrimages of the 1960s reflected this decline.

### **The Diamond Jubilee, 1961: "The Centre of the Community is Still the Church"**

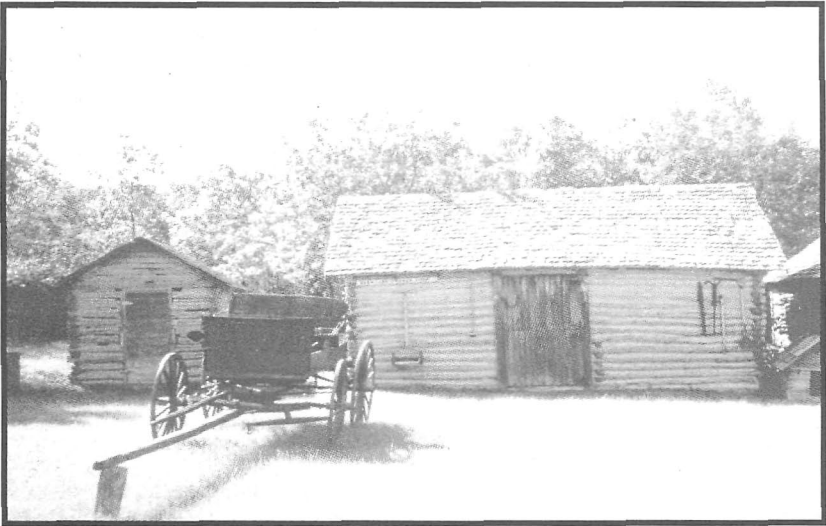
Similar to the Silver and Golden Jubilees, festivities of the seventy-fifth Kaposvar anniversary of July 9, 1961, commenced with morning high mass at the church. However, the religious service at this jubilee was not followed by a hussar-style procession but rather by a simple picnic, parade, and program of speeches. A newspaper summary of the Diamond Jubilee was devoted to a description of the latter two events.<sup>26</sup> According to the reporter, a "parade of progress" was the highlight of the Sunday afternoon celebration. Unlike the previous jubilee, the parade was centred on the streets of Esterhazy where spectators' attention was drawn to four floats representing the colony's beginnings, progress, hardships, and future. The floats were intended to express the district's cultural and religious heritage to the residents of the town while celebrating the accomplishments of the pioneers and their descendants. A resident later greeted in Hungarian the return of the "pioneers" who had taken cover from the broiling sun beneath a tree-shaded shelter on the church grounds. In addition to two-dozen representatives of the Hungarian pioneer generation, several elderly Czech-Canadians from the adjacent Kolin district were also in attendance. Again the celebration of the pioneers and their faith was expressed during a program of speeches. James Snedker, the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Saltcoats brought greetings on behalf of the provincial government to the 2000-strong crowd. He stated that the best way tribute could be paid to the pioneers who had arrived from the "cradle of civilization" into the "western wilderness" was by engaging problems with "the same faith, courage, fortitude and determination [that] they [had] possessed."<sup>27</sup> On mentioning the hardships of the year's drought, John Chelle declared: "We need today that wonderful faith in Providence, and the perseverance of our forefathers, who weathered many such reverses as we have today."<sup>28</sup> Rev. A. Kulcsar outlined the history of the settlement and spoke of the religious vocations, which included four priests and twelve nuns that had arisen from the parish: "Our stone church here is one of the best symbols of the parish's dedication to their religion, and their community."<sup>29</sup>

The Kaposvar Church certainly remained an important ethno-religious symbol despite the declining population of the Hungarian farming community. However, the absence of mounted honour guards, the involvement of fewer Hungarian guests, and the smaller number of visible references to Hungarian identity at the sacred site closely reflected the ethno-cultural weakening of the Kaposvar district. While the pilgrimage that followed the celebration was thought to have attracted the "largest crowd ever," few references to the ancestral Hungarian culture were noted. In fact, the magnitude of population loss in the area had reached such a point that the church was subsequently closed for regular services. The closure of the Kaposvar Church in 1961 played a significant role in eroding what

remained of the once thriving ethnic island. This was particularly the case with the Hungarian language. Although mass was conducted in Latin until the late 1940s, when English replaced it, sermons had always been given in Hungarian. The weekly gathering had also provided an important occasion for Hungarian to be spoken amongst parishioners. The Catholic parish in Esterhazy, however, attracted an ethnically diverse congregation, which minimized the opportunity for the language to be practiced by those of Hungarian ancestry. Despite the end of regular services, weddings, funerals, and the annual pilgrimage continued at the stone church. However, while the church remained the centre of the community, as the editor of Esterhazy's newspaper wrote, its closure negatively impacted attendance at the culturally significant pilgrimage event.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Rise of a Preservation Movement**

Community interest in preserving the historical heritage of the church site increased throughout the 1970s in spite of the significant decrease in attendance and demise of sermons in Hungarian at the Kaposvar Pilgrimage. The local preservation movement that emerged during the early years of multiculturalism that followed Canada's Centennial saw the incorporation of several permanent historical exhibits into the church in 1973.<sup>31</sup> It was the first of many steps by members of the Esterhazy parish to have the entire church complex, including the grotto, rectory, and pioneer cairn, designated as an historic site. By 1974, visitors and pilgrims had the opportunity to view the new exhibits and were thus exposed to the area's historical-cultural heritage. Religious articles, vestments, and photographs were showcased in the displays while bulletin boards provided an "outline of the community history dating back from the advent of the first settlers under Count Esterhazy and subsequent arrival of the first missionaries to the area."<sup>32</sup> The mention of the founder of the old colony in the newspaper review is not without significance. It was during this period of time, when the church was becoming recognized by the local community as an important historic site, that the story behind the "mysterious" colonization agent was being researched. Dojcsák's (1973) investigation into the "Count's" putative Hungarian aristocratic lineage and Kovacs' (1974) study of Esterhazy's 1902 immigration pamphlet undoubtedly sparked more interest into the formative period of the colony. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, newspaper reviews of the pilgrimage made greater reference to the history of the church and colony. However, the initiative to maintain and redevelop the Kaposvar grounds as a historical site was primarily triggered by local residents' concern over the fate of their cultural heritage. This underlying concern led to the formation of the not-for-profit Kaposvar Historic Site Society (KHSS) in 1975. Two of the society's main objectives involved the restoration and maintenance of the Kaposvar Church, rectory, and surrounding properties as a historic site, and the acquirement of heirlooms and articles that represented the site's heritage.



**Figure 5.** Log Building and Carriage on the “Pioneer Farmstead.” (Photograph by the author)

The formation of the KHSS led to a more intensified preservation program and quickened the Kaposvar Church’s transformation into a historical site. Kept open by volunteers during the summer months, the church was increasingly noted in the Esterhazy *Potashville Miner-Journal* as an important destination point for weddings, school tours, and tourists in general. Newspaper reviews of the annual pilgrimage, moreover, also covered the progress that was being made in the Kaposvar Church heritage project as it related to the event. For example, by 1976 pilgrims could view displays of historical literature, church goods, photographs, and a miniature model of the first church.<sup>33</sup> By 1977, a Hungarian-style costume was showcased near the altar and the exhibits now included newspaper extracts, photographs, and artifacts of the early jubilees.<sup>34</sup> In addition to the museum component within the church, visitors could also tour through a partially refurnished rectory that predated the stone church. Prior to the 1977 pilgrimage, the KHSS also obtained a small pioneer house, log cabins, and antique furniture from two of the area’s residents. Representing a pioneer farmstead, the collection was set up immediately after the pilgrimage in the northwest corner of the churchyard (Figure 5). This extensive local initiative to celebrate the Kaposvar Church as an historical site did however face several challenges. For example, the KHSS was notified by the Department of Culture two weeks before the 1980 pilgrimage that the pre-existing funding arrangement for maintaining the church had expired. Under the new regulations of the Heritage Site Assistance Program, structures of a purely religious nature were no longer eligible for assistance. Nevertheless, the transformation of the Kaposvar Church site into something more than a religious centre was already underway. By 1982, the

outdoor museum included a replica of a pioneer school, and the rectory, which was by then filled with antique furniture, Hungarian books, and folk art, was open for viewing to the 1200 pilgrims who attended service at the grotto.<sup>35</sup> Thus, as a result of the heritage preservation initiative, the Kaposvar Church site became more than a religious centre; it developed into a place where visitors could learn about the rich historical and cultural underpinnings of the district.

In addition to the community's efforts to exhibit the material culture of the Hungarian pioneer settlers at the church site, the increasing importance of local heritage was also becoming apparent in the homilies given throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Leading up to the 1986 centennial, clergy members made far greater reference to the pioneers and their religious traditions than ever before. The underlying theme of their sermons increasingly involved the long established meta-narrative of the pioneers' success in overcoming frequent hardships by maintaining religious faith. In his homily during the 1976 pilgrimage, Rev. Schaffer of Regina paid tribute to the pioneers and praised their "fortitude and exemplary lives in which time was always given to God."<sup>36</sup> Archbishop Charles Halpin recalled in his homily in 1983 "the work, the prayers, and the sacrifice made by the pioneers in building [the] province."<sup>37</sup> For Father John Reidy of the Balgonie parish, "Kaposvar was both a historical site and a reminder of the deep faith of the pioneers."<sup>38</sup> Increasingly, members of the clergy also highlighted the district's history as it related to the church. During the 1984 pilgrimage, Father Gordon Rushka reminisced on his community's history and paid tribute to Joseph Szmerekovszky, one of the first Hungarian settlers of the colony, who had donated part of his homestead lands for the purpose of building the colony's original log church.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the long established act of commemorating the Hungarian pioneers, as well as the Catholic missionaries who served the colony, was becoming a more noticeable component of the pilgrimage. However, by the time of the district's centennial, the ritual commemoration on the church grounds was also increasingly being adopted by Canadians of other ancestral origins as a source for ethnic identity maintenance. As one of the few remaining visible remnants of the pioneer era near the town of Esterhazy, the Kaposvar Church was evolving into a shared symbolic site that reflected a pluralistic group nostalgia for the region's formative settlement period.<sup>40</sup>

### **Celebrating the Centennial, 1986: "To Relive the Colonization of a Small Section of the Prairie West"**

The Kaposvar centennial celebration of 1986 was heralded as one of the largest events to have ever taken place in the town of Esterhazy.<sup>41</sup> This was largely due to the arrival, from across North America, of several thousand descendants of the pioneers. According to one member of the KHSS, visitors "relive[d] for a short time the dreams, the hopes and reality of colonizing and taming a small section of the great Canadian West." Held

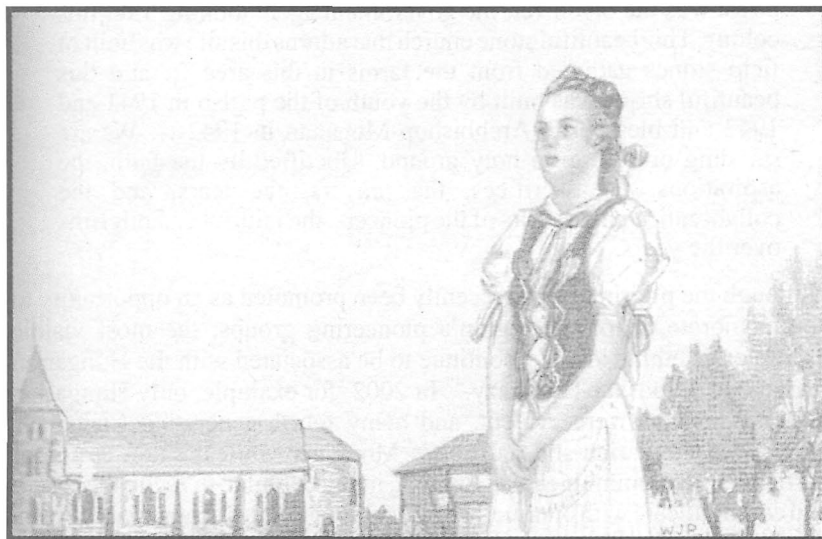
over a long weekend in late July, the celebration included picnics, parades, ethnic shows, and the unveiling of several cairns. The Kaposvar district's centennial anniversary was notably extended to celebrate the Czech, Slovak, French, and English heritage of the area. Tribute was given to the pioneers of all communities: the elderly were honoured at the church and four of the oldest representatives of the Hungarian and Czechoslovak communities were crowned kings and queens of the celebrations. In addition, five elderly Slovak-Canadians were also honoured before a cairn was unveiled in memory of their ancestors who had arrived alongside Count Esterhazy's Hungarian settlers in 1886.<sup>42</sup> Two ministers of Slovak descent provided homilies, several guests made speeches, and a Slovak choir from Esterhazy gave a performance. A second cairn was unveiled in honour of the Hungarian, Slovak, and Czech pioneers of the Esterhazy colony, the original name of the Count's "Hungarian colony," which later subdivided into the Hungarian and Czech districts of Kaposvar and Kolin. Several hundred spectators attended the ceremony in front of the former Esterhazy schoolhouse.

A more formal celebration of ethnic heritage occurred in the evening in the town community centre. Official greetings by Hon. Frederick Johnson, the Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan, and other guests, preceded music and dance performances, performances that were meant to represent all of the pioneering ethnic groups of the region. While there was no Hungarian dance group in Esterhazy, or club for that matter, the Balaton Ensemble from Regina performed "traditional" folk dances on behalf of the district's Hungarian population. A gathering of 250 assembled the next day in front of Kolin cemetery for an ecumenical service and the unveiling of a final cairn to the early settlers of the Bohemian colony. Kaposvar's "multi-cultural" centennial celebration concluded with the annual pilgrimage. Approximately 2000 pilgrims witnessed the unveiling of newly constructed Stations of the Cross, large fieldstones erected for prayer around the perimeter of the church grounds in memory of Count Esterhazy's pioneers.<sup>43</sup>

In many ways, the festivities of 1986 marked a revival in ethnic cultural display. A number of pilgrims have since attended the annual midsummer event in Hungarian costume reminiscent of the Hungarian "national dress" worn during special events of the inter-war period (see Figures 6 and 7). This emblematic expression of cultural identity is significant as it reveals a continued sense of pride among fourth and fifth generation Canadians of their Hungarian heritage. However, reflecting the evolution of the jubilee celebrations into more pluralistic events, commemorative ethnic displays at the annual pilgrimage have not been limited to Hungarian culture. On several occasions throughout the 1990s children attended the event in a variety of ethnic outfits to depict symbolically the first groups that settled in the Esterhazy-Kaposvar area. Further, recent advertisements for the

pilgrimage have encouraged pilgrims to wear costumes that, regardless of ethnic origin, are representative of the early pioneering years. In a similar vein, the tradition of commemorating the hardships and faith of the first settlers during the pilgrimage has been less geared towards honouring the Hungarian pioneers. Historical facts have, from year to year, often given way to more pluralistic interpretations of the site's pioneering narrative. This multi-ethnic group nostalgia was evident in 1998 when Jean Pask, a local historian, honoured the ninetieth anniversary of the church by recalling the contributions made by the various groups that had settled in and around the district: tribute was paid firstly to Rev. Julius Pirot, a Belgian priest who had overseen the construction of the church, followed by the several French families who settled south of the Kaposvar colony before Count Esterhazy's arrival. The contributions made by the Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks and First Nations people subsequently followed. But contemporary interpretations of the sacred site have not all been made at the expense of the Hungarian origins of Kaposvar. A newspaper reporter who covered the following year's pilgrimage wrote: "The Hungarian Catholics who first settled in the area at the turn of the century built themselves a majestic stone church ... They are 'ancestors' to all of us in the area, in the sense that they were the first Europeans to inhabit this place."<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, the long-established meta-narrative surrounding the Hungarian pioneer has not disappeared completely. During the pilgrimage



**Figure 6.** Inter-War Period Drawing of a Hungarian Girl on the Kaposvar Church Grounds.<sup>45</sup> (Illustration by W. J. Phillips in J.M. Gibbon, 1938, *Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, p. 328.)





**Figure 7.** Hungarian Style Dress, 2002 Kaposvar Pilgrimage. (Photograph by the author)

of 2000, Bishop Peter Mallon of the Regina Archdiocese reflected on the historical and religious origins of the site:

This was a Hungarian colony and for a number of years the parish priest was the organizer, the government agent looking after this colony. This beautiful stone church that adorns this site was built of field stones gathered from the farms in this area ... and this beautiful shrine was built by the youth of the parish in 1941 and 1942 and blessed by Archbishop Monahan in 1942 ... We are standing or sitting on holy ground, sanctified by the faith, the aspirations, the sacrifices, the prayers, the tears, and the collaborative endeavours of the pioneers, the faithful and pilgrims over the years.<sup>46</sup>

Although the pilgrimage has recently been promoted as an opportunity to commemorate all of the region's pioneering groups, the most visible examples of ethnic identity continue to be associated with the Hungarian heritage of Kaposvar-Esterhazy.<sup>47</sup> In 2002, for example, only Hungarian cultural displays were evident, and many fourth-generation Canadians attended in Hungarian-style costumes. Moreover, while it is now easier for participants to communicate in English, many continue to recite the rosary and communicate with one another in Hungarian. As a documentary film on the pilgrimage suggested, such demonstrations of identity have earned the Kaposvar Church's continued reputation as an important site of Hungarian ethnic memory.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion: From Uni-Cultural Story to Shared Symbolic Site**

The setting of the majority of the early jubilee events at the Kaposvar Church revealed the importance of the edifice, the focal point of the rural community, for the perpetuation of Hungarian culture. It was only with the onset of significant out-migration in the 1940s that the vitality of the Hungarian community began to erode. The population loss eventually necessitated the closing of the church for regular services, which only served to further intensify cultural erosion in what remained of the ethnic enclave. However, Hungarian identity was not totally eliminated in the post-1945 period, nor was it passed down inter-generationally without change. Rather, it has since been maintained, redefined, and represented at the sacred site by local members of the remnant Hungarian diasporic community.<sup>49</sup> Members of a diasporic group often share a language and appeal to common religious, ethnic, and national symbols. In addition, as Tweed (1997, 84) argues in his study of Cuban diasporic identity, members of a diasporic community symbolically construct a common past and future while their shared symbols serve to bridge the homeland with the new land. In a slightly different manner, the group under study in this paper has, for several generations, been attempting to maintain a bridge between the long adopted homeland (Canada) and the ancestral lands (Hungary, and increasingly the former ethnic enclave of Kaposvar). However, similar to Tweed's case study, one of the main components of their bridge is a Catholic pilgrimage shrine.

The annual pilgrimage to the Kaposvar Marian grotto has played a significant role in Hungarian identity maintenance in the region as it affords parishioners of Hungarian ancestry from the farming district, town, and neighbouring villages an opportunity to congregate and collectively identify with their ancestral heritage.<sup>50</sup> It is an important event for what remains of the early Hungarian diasporic group as it serves to reinforce the community's psychic bonds to the lost ethnic enclave. An integral part of this identity-building process involves the ritualistic commemoration of the pioneer. Built on the pre-war meta-narrative celebrated throughout the 1936 jubilee, it serves to keep the collective place memory alive and reinforce place attachment by adding meaning to the material history of the site. As elsewhere in the country, the 1967 Centennial and the subsequent rise of multiculturalism sparked a resurgence of interest in local history and ethnic identity. In Esterhazy, Saskatchewan, many third- and fourth-generation Hungarian-Canadians were inspired to preserve the heritage of the Kaposvar Church site. The resultant reconfiguration of the church into a historic site and the gradual revival of Hungarian ethnic displays have since attracted the attention of Canadians of other ancestral backgrounds. As such, the Kaposvar Church grounds have since evolved from a simple Hungarian memorial focused around the 1936 pioneer cairn and Marian shrine into a complex of symbolic sites of memory. Much literature has emphasized how places of memory often become sites of cultural conflict

due to competing and conflicting meanings (Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996; Graham et al. 2000; Jeong & Santos 2004). Thus, rather than being sites of consensus building, places of memory become "contested terrain." In fact, even sacred pilgrimage sites have been referred to as dynamic sites of contestation (Digance 2003). The memory-complex of Kaposvar, in contrast, has been transforming into a site of inter-ethnic cohesion. That is, while it continues to be widely associated with Hungarian heritage, Kaposvar is, it seems, evolving from a uni-cultural Canadian story into a site with relevance to the shared ethnic pasts of the pioneer communities that settled in the Esterhazy area.

## Notes

1. The author would like to thank Brian Osborne for his insightful comments and suggestions during the preparation of this article. I would also like to thank Marcie Snyder and Marcus Létourneau as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and advice.
2. *The Esterhazy Observer*, November 12, 1908.
3. In 1906, the parish priest of Kaposvar, Father J. Pirot, returned to his native Belgium to obtain plans for the construction of the new church. He invited his three brothers to Canada, who were all stonemasons, to help with the construction of the church.
4. Although the multi-ethnic "Hunsvalley" colony (est. 1885) was often referred to in early government documents as the first Hungarian Prairie settlement, the predominantly Hungarian populated section of Count Esterhazy's second colony "Esterhaz" (est. 1886) quickly obtained that designation. Over one hundred families resided in the Esterhaz-Kaposvar district in 1900. The majority (61%) were Magyar, with Czechs (22%) and Slovaks (10%) comprising the bulk of the remainder.
5. *The Esterhazy Observer*, November 12, 1908.
6. For a brief history of Catholic pilgrimage sites in Canada and the location of Marian shrines see St. John (2002).
7. *Canadai Magyar Farmer* (CMF) [Canadian Hungarian Farmer], July 14, 1911.
8. *CMF*, August 11, 1911.
9. M.L. Kovacs (1980, 102) identified eighteen Hungarian "core" settlements in pre-1920 Saskatchewan with Kaposvar designated as one of the province's three principal Magyar settlements. The majority of Canada's 8000 Hungarian immigrants resided in the Prairie West. Saskatchewan was home to nearly all of the important Hungarian colonies and it was often looked upon before the First World War as Canada's "Little Hungary."
10. The first group of settlers in the Kaposvar colony originally worked in the mining and industrial towns of Pennsylvania.
11. The names of leaders chosen to represent fifteen Hungarian populated farming settlements as well as three Hungarian urban communities in the Canadian Prairies were listed in two newspaper reports. *CMF*, July 14, 21, 1911. Corresponding to the Pennsylvania origin point of the first settlers, the jubilee advertisement listed five addresses from the northeastern states where government subsidized train tickets could be purchased for the Windsor-Esterhazy route. *CMF*, August 11, 1911.

12. The Conquest (*Honfoglalás*) refers to the entry of the Magyars into the Carpathian Basin in the late ninth century. The comparison between Kaposvar's honour guard and the ninth century Hungarian tribes was made in the August 18 edition of the *CMF*.
13. As an indicator of the predominant Catholic faith of the community, the red, white, and green bordered silk banner depicted the Virgin Mary. It was paid for by donations raised within the farming community. A local family donated a church bell with the inscription of the names of the pioneers shortly after the silver jubilee.
14. *CMF*, August 25, 1911.
15. Reflecting Paul Esterhazy's importance in communal memory, the congratulatory letter that he wrote was included in the colony's fiftieth anniversary souvenir booklet: *Almanac of the Hungarian Golden Jubilee of Kaposvar, Esterhazy, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1936*.
16. Esterhazy's ambition to create a "New Hungary" on the Canadian Prairies envisioned a densely populated region of Hungarian settlement. Although he was directly responsible for establishing two colonies—Huns Valley (Manitoba 1885) and Esterhazy (NWT 1886, later Kaposvar)—Esterhazy's initial colonization activities paved the way for early Hungarian immigration to Canada and the development of other Hungarian farming communities in what became the province of Saskatchewan (e.g. Bekevar, Otthon, Magyar, St. Laszlo).
17. Although parishioners of Kaposvar refused to support a Prairie-wide movement for the hiring of Hungarian teachers and clergymen to counteract assimilation (1910) the congregation received the first of many Hungarian priests in the district in 1915. Kaposvar together with the adjacent village of Stockholm became the foremost centre of Hungarian Catholic influence in Canada during the inter-war period. In contrast, several other Hungarian "bloc settlements" that participated in the anti-assimilatory efforts of the "Canadian Hungarian Fraternal Association" were unable to attract permanent clergy.
18. This quotation is derived from a congratulatory letter written by S. J. Petenyi, Hungarian consul of Winnipeg. In *Almanac of the Hungarian Golden Jubilee*.
19. The historical meta-narrative was especially evident in the golden jubilee almanac.
20. *The Esterhazy Miner*, August 21, 1958.
21. Marian Years are proclaimed on special occasions by bishops and can be announced for a particular diocese by the local bishop or for a whole country at a bishops' conference. The 1954 Marian Year in Canada coincided with Pope Pius XII's proclamation of the Dogma of Mary's Assumption. Source: [www.udayton.edu/mary/questions\\_yq/yq33.html](http://www.udayton.edu/mary/questions_yq/yq33.html). See also St. John (2002, 17).
22. The Catholic "Feast of the Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary" is a Holy Day held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August to commemorate the assumption, or passage, of Mary's body into Heaven. The Kaposvar Pilgrimage takes place on the Sunday nearest to the Feast of the Assumption.
23. *The Esterhazy Observer*, August 19, 1954.
24. *The Esterhazy Observer*, August 22, 1957.
25. Pers. Corres., P. Helmezczy (b. 1928), Esterhazy—August 21, 2002. By the time of Canada's Centennial, less than thirty families remained in the farming district where once there were over a hundred.
26. Although a Diamond Jubilee in Canada and other Commonwealth Realms commonly refers to a 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the American usage (75<sup>th</sup> anniversary) was employed in the *Esterhazy Miner*.

27. *The Esterhazy Miner*, July 13, 1961.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. Whereas, annual attendance throughout the 1950s and 1960s fluctuated between 1000 and 3000, it almost consistently averaged 1000 throughout the 1970s.
31. The unveiling of a provincial historic interest plaque at the Kaposvar Church and the opening of the community museum of Esterhazy in 1970 had undoubtedly encouraged the heritage conservation project.
32. *The Potashville Miner-Journal*, August 6, 1973.
33. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1976.
34. *Ibid.*, August 31, 1977.
35. *Ibid.*, August 22, 1982.
36. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1976.
37. *Ibid.*, August 17, 1983.
38. *Ibid.*, August 21, 1985.
39. Father Rushka also paid tribute to Father Agapite Page, an early French-speaking priest, and to Father Francis Woodcutter, a German priest-turned-colonization-agent who became fluent in Hungarian. *Ibid.*, August 29, 1984.
40. Apart from the Czech district of Kolin, which was originally established within Count Esterhazy's "Hungarian colony," other ethnic groups that settled in and around Esterhazy (later Kaposvar) included Slovaks, Swedes, French, English, and Germans.
41. *The Potashville Miner-Journal*, July 30, 1986.
42. Since the 1986 centennial, Kaposvar has occasionally been referred to in local information pamphlets and tourist maps as the first "Slovak and Hungarian colony" in the Canadian Prairies.
43. *Ibid.*, August 6, 1986.
44. *The Miner-Journal*, August 24, 1999.
45. This drawing is one of over two dozen illustrations in John Murray Gibbon's book *Canadian Mosaic* (1938) that depict various ethnic-Canadian "types." The drawing was mistakenly entitled "Hungarian Girl at Stockholm, Saskatchewan."
46. Video. *Kaposvar Pilgrimage Millennium Celebration*, August 2000. Kaposvar Historic Site Society.
47. Unlike more notable heritage tourism sites in the Prairies, these ethnic heritage displays were never intended to be performed for outsiders. Advertisements for marketable commodities commonly associated with popular Hungarian culture are absent from the site and have never been commonly associated with the old Hungarian district or the town of Esterhazy.
48. Video. *Kaposvar: The Faith of Lajos Nagy*, 1999. White Pine Pictures.
49. A cultural diaspora, as defined by Hague (in Coles & Timothy 2004, 6), "exists where connections between people are not so much based on a movement to return home, but rather they are grounded in the belief of common ethnic and cultural origins." This definition fits well with contemporary Hungarian identity in the Esterhazy district. While there has not been any longing for a return since the first generation established itself on the isolated prairies in the mid-1880s, and while the descendants of the pioneers have far less emotional attachment to the ancestral homeland, a palpable communal sense of "Hungarianness" does exist there to this day.
50. Of course, some Hungarian-Canadians in the district do make an "ethnic pilgrimage" (Kelly 2000, 65) to the ancestral homeland where their sense of ethnic attachment is likely strengthened. But in contrast to Kelly's study on

Lithuanian-American ethnic resurgence, this form of “ethnic identity reconstruction” through travel has been far less important for Hungarian ethnic revival in the Esterhazy area.

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