

Building America Through Americanized Immigrant Energy

A coöperative immigrant mining enterprise on an American plan that has turned wasteland into productivity and given America a new growing industrial field and a thriving community of happy homes and contented workers who are proud of the country of their adoption and love it for the opportunities they found here

By EUGENE S. BAGGER, in the Survey Graphic

[This little story of immigrant ingenuity, fortitude and willingness to struggle almost beyond the point of human endurance for economic independence, is giving an apt illustration of the impediments that block the road for those who venture beyond the employment office of the big lords of finance. The success achieved for the Magyar coöperative mining company at Himlerville in Kentucky illustrates what can be accomplished by immigrants who acquire a sufficient knowledge of America to plan and work according to the American code, placing honesty plus trained intellect at the helm. Pooling financial and physical powers into what is called coöperative action is nearly always the sure way to succeed. What Himler has accomplished can be accomplished everywhere if the main asset to the venture is there—implicit faith and honesty. Beyond the foreign colony confines are waiting opportunities. Those who quit being interested in the foreign societies and foreign affairs and acquire a knowledge of America and American interests will presently find themselves pushing forward along a new trail, the trail to American independence. With their souls wrapped up in America they will soon discover where, besides material gain, they can help in putting America right, right for themselves and their children, the Americans of tomorrow.—The Editor]

NO MOVIE SCENARIO writer could have invented a more dramatic contrast than that afforded by the two banks of the Tug River.

Martin County is the easternmost salient of Kentucky. Local chroniclers relate how in the early days of steam—the trip down the Ohio. Yet for half used to make a stop on the Kentucky bank of the Tug, opposite Kermit, West Virginia; how the mate and a gang of deck hands would go on shore with a pick and shovel and dig up, out of an exposed seam of coal, a supply to last the trip down the Ohio. Yet for half a century the inhabitants of Martin County were living poor amid all this plenty. The railroad engineers avoided the hills of Martin County as if by conspiracy; the county, with all the riches dormant in its soil, remained closed to the outside world.

Today all this is changed. Thousands of acres of coal and timber land, lying fallow for half a century, are being opened up, thanks to Martin Himler, Hungarian immigrant, newspaper editor and mining promoter.

Mingo County, on the West Virginia side, has been the scene of one of the bitterest episodes in American class warfare, the battlefield of armed miners and the detectives and gunmen of operators. In Martin County, on the Kentucky side, a small group of foreigners have found

their own solution of the problem of capital vs. labor in what is perhaps the only coöperative coal mine in the United States.

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Sixteen years ago Himler, a young Hungarian boy fresh from school, landed in the port of New York with exactly nineteen cents in his pocket. He was eighteen years old and had originally studied to become a grade school teacher; but he changed his mind and came to America, the land of his dreams. He had no special training that he could utilize in the new country; he did not even speak a word of English. After beating around in New York for a while he did what the pluckier of his kind usually do: he went to West Virginia and got a job as a coal miner at Thacker. There and at other places he stayed for about two years; then he returned to New York and for six years extracted a living from odd jobs. He worked in a shoe factory, he was a dishwasher, a messenger, what not. At last he landed as a clerk in a Hungarian-American business concern; there he spent a year, at the end of which he went into business for himself. With the magnificent capital of eight dollars he inaugurated, on the lower East Side, a Hungarian weekly newspaper called Magyar Banyaszlap (Hungarian Miners' Journal).

For Himler had not forgotten the time he had spent in the coal mines. When he named his little newspaper the Miners' Journal other Hungarian publications scoffed at him, called him a parlor miner and asked what the Hungarian miners needed a special newspaper for anyway. But Himler had his own ideas and kept them to himself—for the time being.

There are approximately one million Hungarians in the United States, and about thirty thousand of them are said to be engaged in the coal mining industry. Most of them are located in the West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio coal fields.

The miner-editor had acquired a first hand knowledge of the problems and needs of his fellow countrymen in America. He saw them doubly uprooted—in coming from Hungary to America, and in turning, for livelihood, from agriculture to an industry. He saw their restlessness, their craving for independence—the craving that had urged them on to the New World, only to find them in new shackles. He began to realize, dimly at first, that the only solution of those problems would be one that could unite the habitations acquired in the new surroundings with those imported from the old; one that would be based on the land-owning, home-making instinct of the peasant.

These things were growing upon his

mind when he set going his Miners' Journal on the lower East Side of New York. To say simply that he was publishing it is an understatement. For he was publisher, editor, reporter, book-keeper, advertising agent all in one. But the business expanded; the paper began to gain circulation among the miners in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. When his readers came to New York they looked him up. His modest office gradually developed into a sort of labor exchange and social center combined. All the while the other Hungarian newspapers either ignored or ridiculed him. Life within an immigrant community has an element of harshness which is the fruit of isolation; of people living too near one another, inquiring too much and knowing too much; it is, also, a fruit of the frustrated desire for expansion and self expression. Disillusionment is the Leitmotiv; for the successful immigrant, in most cases, leaves the colony and becomes American; only the failures remain. But Himler kept on; nothing could swerve him from the straight line of his plans.

Now the Hungarians, like the Poles, are an eminently romantic and easy-going people. Individually the Hungarian peasant is shrewd, industrious and thrifty; he is as good as any. But he is, or was until recently, slow to collective action. Corporate life with him is merely an opportunity for oratory and personal politics. In America he has so far achieved nothing to vie with the compact and elaborate organization of the Finns or Japanese or Czechs; nothing, in fact, apart from a few fraternal societies, doing insurance business honestly enough but with antiquated methods. From time to time there is an attempt to "do something" in the way of organization; it usually fizzles out in after-dinner speeches and newspaper polemics.

Himler saw these odds against him but he did not give in. He acquired a reputation for honesty and a genuine interest in the everyday affairs of the working man; and he built up a following.

About 1918 he finally sprang his plan on the Hungarian-American community. He announced, through his paper, the formation of a coöperative mining company, and offered stock for sale. The idea was unique: a mining corporation where the workers would be stockholders and the stockholders workers, where the profits would be issued as dividends to the miners themselves. The chief difficulty he had to contend with, however, was not the newness of his idea, but its age. Selling stock to the immigrants through newspaper advertising is an ancient and dishonorable game. Honest promoters are ruined by the distrust that grows up in the wake of swindlers. But Himler