

Hungarians in East Africa: An Historical Perspective

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Lions hunting zebras, giraffes munching on acacia leaves, elephants bathing in a pond with the snow-covered, mighty Kilimanjaro in the background – most people associate East Africa with such “exotic fantasies”. These romantic images are not far from the truth, but East Africa has much more to offer. This continent has abundant natural and man-made heritage, and it is a melting pot of diverse cultures. Travellers have come from far and wide in the past to discover, study, and understand these wonders, and to share what they experienced here. But due to the geographical conditions, the journey here was certainly difficult and uncomfortable. For most of Hungarian history, this region could only be approached by the sea. Hungarians were never a maritime nation. We assume that the first Hungarians (who fled the Ottoman Wars) may have arrived on Portuguese ships, arriving long after other groups (such as the Phoenicians, Arabs, Indians, and Chinese) that had already visited this region.¹

It is just as uncertain if any East Africans were brought to Hungary in the 18th century. It was not uncommon among the aristocrats to have black butlers to impress puzzled guests. Still, we have no records of their nationalities. However, we have clear pieces of evidence from the 19th century. With scientific advancements in geography, explorers were eager to discover Africa’s inner lands after centuries of being limited to circumnavigating the continent. Many took off to discover the secrets of the Nile. The opening of the Suez Canal and relatively cheap travel with steamers brought East Africa closer to us. Tourism to Africa, primarily to Egypt, began in the first part of the 19th century. In 1842, Count Iván Forray sailed on the Nile and visited the Libyan deserts. Lajos Batthyány, first independent prime minister of Hungary, also travelled to the pharaohs’ country. By this time, the curiosity to explore more extensive parts of East Africa along the Nile was present among visitors. For example, Count György Károlyi and Count Zichy Edmund travelled there to explore the region. Zichy was portrayed in Jókai’s *A Kőszívű ember fiai* (The Baron’s Sons) as Ödön Baradlay. His brother, Jenő, was court-martialled and executed after the 1848 Revolution due to the fatal mix-up of their first names. Unfortunately, they only made it to Semna (Nubia).² János Kovács, the Tisza family’s private tutor, who is considered the first Hungarian Africanist, took a long journey on the Nile. Still, he could not fulfil his bigger plans. We should also mention Alfréd Zichy, the eldest stepson of István Széchenyi, who tragically ended his life in a hotel room in Cairo.³



Flóra Sass and her husband

The plan of many Hungarian "hodophiles" was finally realized in a rather unusual way (at least in international comparison) by a woman, Flóra Sass. She was rescued from the Vidin slave market by her husband, Samuel Baker. They set out from Cairo on the Nile in 1861. Their mission was to find the source of the White Nile. Along the way, Baker fell ill, while Flóra Sass took on all the expedition's burdens. After many struggles, they discovered Lake Albert (Albert Nyanza) in March 1864, which they believed to be the White Nile's source. They named it after Queen Victoria's husband, who had died during the time their expedition. The Bakers never met Prince Albert, unlike Zichy Edmund who was photographed with the Prince in 1860. Baker and Flóra Sass were celebrated as heroes back in England, although it later turned out that their discovery was not complete. The thousand-year-old Nile mystery was finally clarified only in 1934, but this does not make their extraordinary scientific achievements any less valuable.⁴ In 1884, Béla Rakovszky, an Austro-Hungarian Consulate employee in Port Said, also travelled through the Nile Valley from Egypt. After reaching the Indian Ocean, he spent two years in the Sultanate of Zanzibar. He returned to Pozsony (Bratislava) in 1887, carrying an invaluable collection.⁵ His performance is quite significant. It was not until 1903 (half a century after the Sass and Baker's expedition) when the most prestigious travel agency of the time, the Thomas Cook, began to offer the first East African tours for their adventurous clients. To return after travelling through the Nile Valley, passengers could use the Uganda

railway from Lake Victoria to Mombasa by that time. The British had the railroad built with the labour of thousands of Indian workers.

Hunters followed the explorers. They took steamers to get from Suez to East Africa. (Previously, sailing in the Red Sea was problematic due to low winds.) Among the Hungarian "globe-trotters", Count Vilmos Zichy was the first to make the news. This was the last piece of information about him: *"Starting from Mashaua, Zichy visited the land of the Bogos people. He climbed the Rora-az-Geret Mountains and went to Barka in the Zad Amba Mountains. Later, he explored the saline planes of Assal in the Danakil Depression. He wrote his book in German, providing the first reliable data on the geography of those lands. Count Zichy fell victim to his travels and was killed in a battle."* The deadly battle took place in 1875. After it was over, Ethiopian ruler Yohannes IV properly buried the Hungarian aristocrat. János Jankó mentions other travellers in his book *Afrika és a magyarok* (Africa and the Hungarians) published in 1888. One passage from the book reads as follows: *"Cirer travelled through the shores of the Red Sea and sent reports of his journey from Suakin on 12 October 1884, which were published in the journal Fiume but did not have any valuable scientific interest"*. The first Hungarian hunter on East Africa's shores was István Kégl, son of a landowner in Fejér County. He travelled through Zanzibar and some parts of the mainland and brought back many exciting items to Hungary. He planned to write a book about his journeys. Due to his unfortunate early death at age 30, he could only finish a few newspaper articles.

The East African travels of Count Sámuel Teleki and Lajos Höhnel (born in Bratislava but usually considered Austrian) between 1887-1889 began as a hunting trip.⁶ Nevertheless, they resulted in unprecedented, internationally recognized scientific value. Teleki financed the tour, spending funds from the sale of a larger piece of land.⁷ They started from Zanzibar, and they were the first to map the Great Rift Valley. Teleki climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya to the snow line, higher than anyone before him. The expedition's capstones were the discoveries of Lake Rudolf (Lake Turkana), Lake Stefanie (Lake Chew Bahir) and an active volcano. Höhnel named the volcano after Teleki. This is the most important geographical name of Hungarian relevance on the entire African continent.⁸ On their way back in 1899, they visited Harar (Ethiopia) where they met the poet Arthur Rimbaud, who had settled there. A memorial plaque on the side of Kilimanjaro commemorates their expedition covering about 3,000 kilometers. This journey revealed one of the last regions unexplored by Europeans on

Sámuel Teleki



the map of East Africa. Upon returning to Hungary, the world-famous hunter and explorer donated 338 East African items to the Hungarian National Museum. The results of the expedition were published by Lajos Höhnel, mostly in German. However, his most important work was published in Hungarian in 1892 under the title *Teleki Sámuel gróf felfedező útja Kelet-Afrika egyenlítői vidékén 1887–1888* (Count Sámuel Teleki's Expedition in the Equatorial Region of East Africa 1887–1888). Teleki returned to Africa in 1895, attempting to climb Kilimanjaro again, but once again failing to reach the summit.

Baron Pál Bornemisza, one of the greatest African collectors of his time, visited East Africa several times and spent one and a half decades on the continent from the 1880s. He collected many ethnographic and zoological items from the southern slopes of Kilimanjaro, including

ritual idols known as the “nungus”. Hungarian museums were the first in the world to exhibit these idols. He kept detailed records, so his collection is scientifically authentic. He sent about 2,600 ethnographic items, including 19 African (Teita, Masai, Chaga and contemporary) skulls to the Hungarian National Museum and a few to the British Museum. The Hungarian National Museum opened an exhibition showcasing the Bornemissza collection in 1904. The exhibition featured hunting trophies, elephant legs, panther and leopard skins, and ostrich and marabou feathers. They also showed various works of art, carvings, utensils, utility items, idols, and weapons. A separate room served to present the ethnography and anthropology of Africa.

Arzén Damaszkín, a landowner from Bácska County, was good friends with Sámuel Teleki. The renowned explorer motivated Damaszkín to take a trip to East Africa in 1903. He “only” killed 250 game by the time he had returned home. In 1904, his book *A maszáj fennsíkon* (On the Masai Plateau) was published in Budapest. His name might have been forgotten if he had not taken the taxidermist Kálmán Kittenberger with him. Kittenberger otherwise could not have reached Africa due to his financial situation. Damaszkín soon returned to Hungary but left all the equipment with Kittenberger, who also worked for Bornemissza and began a zoological collection at the National Museum’s request. His collection contained nearly 300 new species of animals, 300 of which were named after him. He visited East Africa a total of six times, spending more than 16 years in the wilderness of present-day Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. He played a crucial role in the scientific exploration of the region, which brought him international recognition. His books written about his travels are classics in Hungarian hunting literature.⁹

At the end of the 19th century, the first Hungarian travelogues about East Africa were published in addition to summaries of the expeditions and hunting adventures. Of these, the six-volume work of Dr. Ferenc Gáspár titled *A Föld körül* (Around the Earth) was on the bookshelves of most bourgeois families. After finishing his medical studies, he served in the Navy of the Monarchy from 1886 to 1892 as a naval physician, then continued to work on merchant ships for more than a decade. During this time, he travelled to the shores of East Africa several times. He reported his experiences to his readers in an excellent scientifically based, informative, yet easy-to-read style. The contemporary press often reported on “our bold apostles in the heart of Africa”. Every new book and every single page written about Africa was “a drop of fresh oil in the lamp that illuminated a hitherto inaccessible and unknown part of the world”. Thanks to

this enthusiasm, the continent became studied more and more in Hungary. This is proved by the fact that at the turn of the 19th century, Hungarian high school students learned quite a bit about African geography. The Nile Delta, Nubia, Ethiopia, the "Somalis", the coast of Zanzibar, the African Great Lakes, Mozambique's coast, and the "Coast of Sofala" were included in the textbooks. The students also indulged in many new books that were published at the time. Such was the East African hunting diary of Count Kázmér Zichy, which he wrote about his journey from 1907 to 1908. It was first published as a book in 1910, titled *A Guaso Nyiro mentén a Natron-tóig* (Along the Ewaso Ng'iro to Lake Natron).



Kálmán Kittenberger's tent in an exhibition

Although East Africa became a popular hunting ground for the Hungarian aristocracy, other grandiose plans could not be made with the British and German colonization efforts already underway. However, independent Ethiopia offered some exciting opportunities. Count Gyula Andrásy, imperial and royal foreign minister, received an Ethiopian delegation in 1872. Many citizens from the Monarchy tried their luck in the country. For example, Arnold Szél, a Viennese businessman of Hungarian origins, opened stores in Djibouti, Dire Dawa, and Addis Ababa in 1903. Among other things, copper and enamelled utensils and umbrellas were exported from Hungary to Ethiopia.¹⁰ Menelik II was interested in building multifaceted European relations to preserve his country's independence. Recognizing this, a sizeable Austro-Hungarian delegation led by Lajos Höhnel visited Ethiopia in 1904. The delegation had two Hungarian members: Count László Széchenyi, who financed his journey himself and probably went to East Africa for the sake of hunting, and Pál Szántó, the nephew and business agent of Arnold Szél. This visit ended with a free trade agreement of sorts, signed in 1905 but ratified only in 1909. This also provided an opportunity to set up consulates. The Monarchy exercised this right only in 1912, when a Hungarian, Károly Schwimmer (born in Novi Sad) was appointed to the post. Many protested his appointment, citing his Jewish origins, including Hungarians such as Count Jenő Mirbach who spent much time in Ethiopia and applied for the post himself. An excellent example for the not-so-transparent local conditions is the story of Major Lajos Königsegg, a traveller and writer who was born in Arad County. He claimed that Emperor Menelik II made him an "adviser to the court" in 1910. Some people took this information for granted, although no other sources confirmed it. However, many questioned whether he had visited Ethiopia at all. Nonetheless, in the novels that recorded his travels (*Menelik császár birodalma* [Emperor Menelik's Empire], 1918; *Soliman ben Darja. Miért nem lett Magyar gyarmat Afrikában?* [Soliman ben Darja. Why does Hungary not have a colony in Africa?] 1926; *A fehér orrszarvú* [The White Rhinoceros, 1928]), the details seem to be based on real experiences. Therefore, they can be considered as the first authentic travelogues of Ethiopia by a Hungarian author. Károly Inger, who also visited Ethiopia and Somalia and was mentioned by Königsegg, wanted to find "markets for Hungary" in East Africa. He named himself King of Somaliland, and he even recruited people to his court in newspaper advertisements. He even wrote a book to prove his beliefs, titled *Magyarország gyarmata Szomáliföldön – hivatalos és eredeti levelezések* (Hungary's Colony in Somaliland – an Official and Authentic Correspondence).¹¹

The First World War was a sad interruption. Hungarians in East Africa were interned by the British. Kálmán Kittenberger was forced to spend five years in British India, and his collection

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was lost. After the war, it took years for things to settle down and hunting trips to restart. A new element was that due to Hungary's increasingly turbulent conditions, not only aristocrats and hunters arrived. Doctors, engineers and others were coming to the region in the hope of making a living. However, their activities were not covered by the contemporary press, unlike the prestigious travellers. In the spring of 1929, the Tolna Világlapja newspaper reported that "in October last year, two Hungarian hunting companies set out in the African wilderness to confront the forces of nature and dominate the big game of the African rainforests. The companies included Jenő Horthy, the famous hunter and sportsman, István Horthy Sr., son of Governor Miklós Horthy, and Kálmán Kittenberger, the famous hunter respected throughout Europe. The other group consisted of two Hungarian magnates: Zsigmond Széchenyi and Count István Károlyi."¹² Zsigmond Széchenyi participated in several other hunting expeditions in East Africa, the last in 1963-1964. In the 1920s, Géza Demeter from Miskolc visited Africa several times. He published his book about his Ethiopian hunting adventures titled *Felfedező úton – Magyar Zászló alatt* (On the Way of Discovery – Under the Hungarian Flag) in 1928. He also published an introductory study on the Ethiopian justice system. The famous geographer, László Bendefy-Benda, was the central figure of the Hungarian Scientific Expedition to Africa planned for 1934–1935. This expedition could not occur due to the escalating Italian–Ethiopian conflict.¹³ The book of the military historian László Faragó, *Abyssinia on the Eve* (1936), was published in English in New York and it was cited frequently for a long time.¹⁴ In his book, the only Hungarian mentioned by Faragó is Ferenc Pádár, a doctor working in the hospital of the Swedish mission in Harari.¹⁵ However, Kálmán Mészáros, a Hungarian physician, also worked in the Ethiopian capital, caring for patients from the local elite. Based on his diary there, he also published a book in 1938 titled "*Abyssinia: Paradise of Hunters.*" Mészáros was in contact with Sándor Dörflinger, who took many photographs of the country and its inhabitants while living in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, these photographs were lost and have not yet been recovered.¹⁶ A Hungarian magazine, *Századunk*, published an article titled *Az igazság a négusról és Etiópiáról* (The Truth About the Negus and Ethiopia), which was about Béla Menczer, who lived in the court of the Ethiopian ruler in the 1930s. Mátyás Gajdács, a renowned ornithologist, was the wealthiest Hungarian in Ethiopia between the two world wars. He got stuck in the country in 1914, then became a successful entrepreneur in Addis Ababa; he helped many Hungarians who came to the country later.¹⁷

Dr. László Sáska, born in Nagyenyed, decided to emigrate to Africa with his wife in 1932.¹⁸ They first tried to make a living in Mogadishu, which was Italian Somalia's capital and the

centre of the Italian occupation in the region. Still, the climate here forced them to move to Ethiopia. After a short detour to Addis Ababa, they moved to Yrga Alem, the capital of Sidamo Province, where he was the imperial family's physician and the only doctor for about four million people. That is why he was labelled the "Albert Schweitzer of Ethiopia". After the Italians occupied Ethiopia, he moved to the Arusha (Tanganyika) where he lived and treated the locals until he died in 1978. In his spare time, Sáska went on many trips and hunting expeditions. He studied the natural environment and the ethnography of the region. Many plants and animals that he discovered are named after him.¹⁹ The events of the war in East Africa and the changes in Hungary once again shook the small Hungarian communities in the region. These communities could never recover, not even during the exoduses in the 1940s or after the 1956 revolution.

From the 1960s onwards, a new era began. Hungary maintained embassies in the region, Hungarian professionals arrived to work and teach, and many students came to Hungary to study.²⁰ Nonetheless, much time had to pass for Hungarian tourists to rediscover one of Earth's most beautiful regions.



László Sáska at work