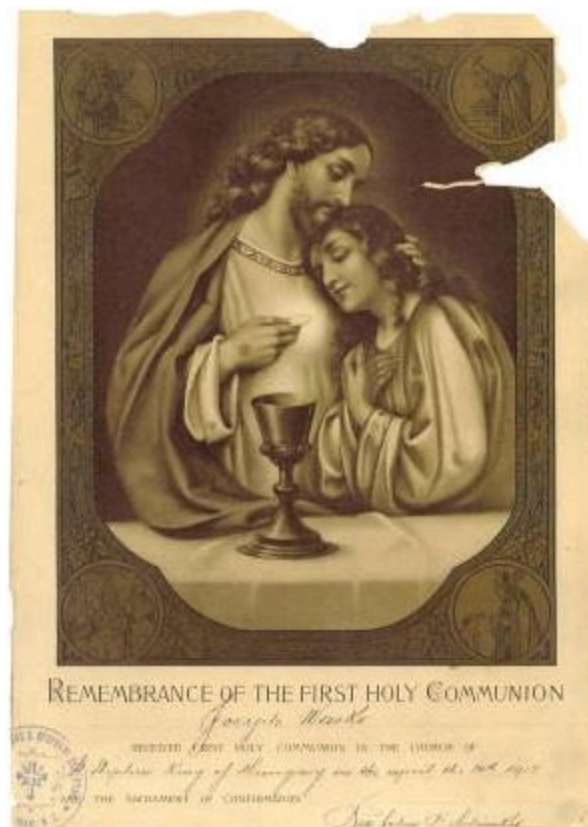


Church History

St Stephen's Church History

The Beginning

Many Hungarians came to the U.S. even before the end of the 19th century looking for an opportunity to improve their prospects. The harsh economic realities of their native land and the hope of a more prosperous existence in the land of promise lured them onto the immigrant's path. Passaic, "peaceful valley", named so by its Native American founders with its textile mills and teeming industry was a natural magnet for these newcomers.



Soon they found that daily bread alone did not suffice. There was a void in their lives. They had brought a deeply intense Catholic faith to the new world and they now felt that something was lacking. It was this spiritual hunger, the example of other ethnic groups, but most of all Father Charles Boehm's (a Hungarian priest

at the Cleveland, Ohio parish) zealous exhortations appearing in the publication, "A Hírnök" (The Messenger), that resulted in the founding of a society, the purpose of which was the eventual establishment of a Hungarian parish. Up until this time, many Hungarian Catholics had been attending services at St. Mary's Church, Passaic, where the Rev. Emery Haitinger was pastor. Being able to speak Hungarian, he ministered to their spiritual needs. Nevertheless, they still felt they were outsiders. This gave them added incentive to build a church where they could worship God through prayer and song in their own language.

They made their first real step in this direction when they purchased four lots, and, in 1902, the Most Reverend John O'Connor, Bishop of Newark, sent them their first Pastor in the person of Father Géza Messerschmiedt, who had been ordained in Kassa, Hungary.

A Parish is Born

The actual parish life of St. Stephen's began with Father Messerschmiedt's arrival. Until then, the various sacraments had been administered in other churches, but on Christmas Day, 1902, the Parish had its first baptism. It was on this day that their very own pastor baptized Elizabeth Berki, who had been born on December 16. She was the daughter of John Berki (Komárom County) and Júlia Grusz (Fehér County). The first wedding in the new parish was that of Charles Molnár (Söréd) and Mary Krivda (Abaúj County) on January 18, 1903. The first funeral was that of Theresa Schuster, who died at the age of 50 on December 21 and was buried on December 24.

Father Messerschmiedt himself delivered the first sermon. The text of this sermon appeared in the "Magyarok Vasárnapja" (The Hungarian's Sunday) on January 29, 1903. He wrote to the editor of this newspaper as follows, "...I found a spiritually inspired people, whose only wish was that they could celebrate Christmas together according to their own customs and language. But where? Every church was holding its own services. None of the necessary items for celebrating Holy Mass were available. It was but one day before Christmas. And yet, on Christmas Eve at twelve midnight, everything was ready. We rented a suitable, large auditorium

and, while families everywhere gathered together beside warm fireplaces and shining Christmas trees to await the coming of Christ, we worked feverishly, setting up our altar, decorating it and arranging the sacred vessels for Mass, all of which had been secured, as the saying goes, 'with the speed of a steam engine.' The next date, Christmas Day, in an auditorium filled to capacity, I celebrated our first Holy Mass. When I intoned the 'Gloria,' my eyes became filled with tears and I thought of the Infant Jesus, the Holy Family, who also could find no place to stay, who turned to a cold, shabby stable. How merciful is God! He blesses those who work for His glory. It goes without saying that the blessings belong to those zealous men and women who, despite their family duties and ties, placed God before everything else."

"Shortly after, we held our first Parish meeting. There were many items, which we still needed to perform our church services. I did not really know my people or to what extent their generosity would go. Therefore, it was with some misgivings that I read a list of things that needed to be purchased. I told them that these purchases could not be made with parish funds. They would have to be donated. I need not have feared. As each item was read, a donor volunteered immediately. In fact, there were more donors than items and at the meeting's end, we found ourselves richer by \$250.00."

The early 20th century Hungarian-Americans worked six days a week with hardly a dime to spare for anything extra. Their willingness to sacrifice for the church knew no limits. Their example endures today, as their descendants and those who joined them throughout the course of the 1900's still work, offering time, money, and unending dedication for the good of the parish.

The founding parishioners looked forward to Sunday, the Sabbath, as the day they could spend with family and friends. They understood that spending time together would strengthen the bond of the Church and its people, while giving appropriate glory to God.

The Building of the Church

The enthusiasm of our founders knew no limits and it was not long before they decided to build a church. At the parish meeting held in March 1903, they decided to build the church of brick in the Gothic style. Later they changed this to the Gothic-Roman style. Francis Averkamp, an architect from Newark, undertook the work. Just as the project was ready to get under way, it was discovered that the site that had been purchased near the banks of the Passaic River was in a flood area and the insurance company demanded an increase in coverage to \$10,000. This stirred up a mild storm of protest, which was subdued by the intervention of His Excellency, the Bishop of the Diocese, under whose direction the present site on Third Street was purchased. This choice was especially fitting, since it was in the very heart of the Hungarian colony.



Before long, the building plans were drawn up and the project was opened to bidding. The Frederici-Armezzani Company's bid of \$31,684.00 was accepted and ground was broken on May 1.

On June 21, the bishop sent his representative, Msgr. John Sheppard of Jersey City to the blessing of the church's cornerstone. The representatives of the parish greeted him at the Passaic railroad station and escorted him through the city to the church. A colorful band led the procession followed by parishioners, Louis Szóják, John Géczi and John Juhász, in Hungarian Huszár uniforms on horseback. Young girls of the parish wearing beautiful Hungarian costumes with wreaths on their heads, the various societies and organizations of the parish, the priests of Passaic and vicinity and visiting priests from other cities and states, all riding in decorated carriages followed. Dr. Paul Virágh, pastor of the Trenton Hungarian

Parish delivered a sermon in Hungarian, while Msgr. Sheppard addressed the congregation in English on this day, which was crowned with unending sunshine following weeks of rain.

While their own church was under construction, the parishioners held their services in the basement auditorium of St. Joseph's R. C. In October, a terrible blow struck the young parish. After days of heavy rain, the Passaic River overflowed and within minutes, floodwater filled the basement of the church. Everything would have been lost had it not been for the bravery of a handful of our parishioners: Dezső Papp, Gustáv Genzereit, Louis Szóják, Tivadar Leszõ, John Faubel and John Tóth. They risked their lives to save what they could of the sacred vessels, vestments and other church possessions. Even so, the parish suffered a loss of more than \$1,000. This blow heightened their yearning to escape the catacomb like oppression of their temporary quarters and served to accelerate the rate of construction.

Meanwhile, the new church neared completion. To facilitate and expedite construction during the winter months a steam heating plant had been installed. Finally, on May 15, 1904, the building was completed and on May 22, Pentecost Sunday, the first Mass was celebrated in the new church.

The Church

The architecture is in the Gothic-Roman style. The nave measures 100 x 65 feet. The central part rises to a height of 60 feet and the side aisles to 27 feet. Fourteen steel columns support the building. The sanctuary is dominated by the beautiful Gothic main altar, which was designed by Father Messerschmiedt and built by Anton Schimmel, a Tyrolean master woodcarver.



The altar is 40 feet high and 18 feet wide and bears the image of St. Stephen in his royal garb offering the crown of his beloved homeland to the Blessed Mother while an angel appears above him in the clouds bearing a Hungarian banner, pointing to the Virgin Mary who is beyond the dying king's sight. These images exude artistic quality and an impressive realism, which makes them seem lifelike. St. Elizabeth and St. Margaret of the House of Árpád appear in the form of miniature statuettes alongside the centerpiece. Beneath them are life-size wooden statues of St. Imre, the son of St. Stephen, and St. László, the knight king of late 11th century Hungary. The tabernacle has praying angels on either side of it. The entire altar was carved of wood and painted a cream color with a modest gold trim. The work cost the early parishioners \$1,510. This was reasonable for both the artist and the parish. The artist charged much less, than the regular fee and considered the difference as free advertising. The church benefited by receiving the beautiful artistry for a bargain price. The St. Anne Altar Society of our parish paid this fee, which was still a rather large amount for citizens of the turn of the century. These women, who for the most part toiled in the local factories, were able to raise this money in one year. On July 26, 1904, St. Anne's day, Rev. Emery Haitinger blessed the altar.

The church was not immediately outfitted with permanent furnishings. The parish made do with temporary seats until 1906 when permanent pews were installed. After 7 years, in 1910, side altars were erected at a cost of \$1,100.00 and dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Our Lady of Lourdes. The statue at the Sacred Heart Altar was restored in the early 1990's. Below it is the beautifully decorated Holy Grave of Christ, which is opened on Good Friday every year. The altar home of Our Lady of Lourdes is adorned with gold netting during the annual May Crowning.

The 132-foot high steeple atop St. Stephen's stands tall as a beacon of the faith of these Hungarian-Americans. Three bells ring daily calling the people to Mass and prayer. The two original bells were the gift of Mrs. Stephen Dobos. The larger of the two weighs 1,200 pounds and the smaller 350 pounds. One of Father Messerschmiedt's fond hopes was to have a third bell, a wish that became reality in 1958 with the installation and dedication of the Hungarian Liberty Bell. The generosity of several parishioners made the restoration of these bells in 2001 possible. They now ring every day at 12:00 noon to commemorate János Hunyadi's victory over the Turks at Nándorfehérvár in 1456.

The highlight of the anterior of the building is the 18 x 10 foot stained glass window surrounded by a cement frame. The large relief above the main entrance is a depiction of St. Stephen, the first Christian king of Hungary, offering up the Holy Crown of his beloved homeland to the Virgin Mary just five days before his death as a symbol of his devotion to Christianity and his special dedication to the Virgin Mother.

Upon entering the church, the faithful find themselves in a wide vestibule. Its double doors lead the parishioner to the central nave of the church. The tall and slender Corinthian columns, the colorful light that dances across the beautifully painted stained glass windows, the faint light that trickles down from the mural of stars above the altar, the harmonious colors, and the towers that crown the main altar, create a feeling of serenity, peace, and oneness with the Lord. The nave and the choir loft can seat 500 people. The apse's lateral doors lead to the sacristy and

the altar servers' dressing room. The choir loft is comprised of three sections and is reached by two staircases on either side of the main entrance. The confessionals currently located in niches to the right and left of the main entrance, were originally, where the Mission Cross and Heroes' Altar are today.

There are eight busts placed above alternating columns. They depict four leaders of the Eastern Church: Sts. Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom; and four leaders of the Western Church: Sts. Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great. They are the Magni Doctores Ecclesiae, or the Grand Doctors of the Church.

It was the intent of the first pastor to make the inside of the church brighter than neighboring churches. The fourteen original windows of the church were clear, but were later replaced by stained glass windows depicting scenes from the lives of particular saints and Scripture. These windows are approximately 16 feet tall.

Two pulpits served the pastors of St. Stephen's during the course of the century. The original was a tall, carved pulpit in the Gothic style with a finial. It was lowered during Father Gáspár's tenure. The installation of a new pulpit in the 1950's was made possible by the proceeds from László Kertész's, a parishioner's, popular plays, which were performed at the church.

Stations of the Cross adorn the walls between the windows. The originals were made of plaster. They were taken off and buried in the 1940's when they were replaced by new ones made of hammered copper and bronze. These Stations were restored at the end of the 1990's.

Originally, gaslights and candles hanging from the columns illuminated the church. In time, these were replaced along with the church's heating system.

Many statues add to the splendor of the church. Besides the statues depicting the Hungarian saints and the Doctors of the Church, many of the world's most popular saints appear in the form of statues. A lovely likeness of St. Theresa of Lisieux, bearing a rosary and her roses, stands near the Heroes' Altar. Beneath the Mission

Cross is a smaller version of Michelangelo's Pieta. A statue of St. Joseph and the Infant Jesus is on the left of the Blessed Mother Altar. The Infant of Prague's statue stands to the left of the Sacred Heart Altar and the statue of St. Francis of Assisi stands on the right. These statues add greatly to the church's aesthetic and spiritual value.

The Peragallo Organ Company installed the current electric organ in 1953. The organ has nine rows of pipes and can create the sounds of various musical instruments. It was restored in the 1990's and has since been invaluable in the performance of beautiful classical and liturgical music by local musicians and by the parish's organists during Holy Mass.

The rooms located under the church have served many purposes during the course of 100 years. In the 1920's and 1930's, the cantor of the church, Andrew Molnár, Sr. taught Hungarian language and catechism classes there. The local BSA Troop 31, sponsored by St. Stephen's later used this room for their meetings. The lower rooms of the church served as a storage area until 1997, when parishioners cleaned them out. Since then, they have been designated as parish meeting rooms and since 2000; they have been home to the Bishop László Irányi Memorial Library, housing thousands of books of various genres and languages. Some of the books date back to the late 1800s and are considered priceless.

The Blessing of the Church



On August 21, 1904, the church was formally blessed and dedicated. This was a day even more memorable than the day the cornerstone was blessed. As Father Messerschmiedt wrote: "This was our day. We could well repeat the words from Holy Scripture: 'This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad therein.' We wept together with joy. As I passed through the throng of people, which filled the streets around our church, I heard not a sound. Not a person spoke but I could see that every eye shone with tears of joy."

At 9:30, the procession to the center of Passaic began to await the arrival of His Excellency, the Bishop from South Orange. The Revs. Géza Messerschmiedt, Michael Molcsany and Valentine Chlebovszky, all pastors of Passaic parishes greeted the Bishop. As the bells of all the Catholic churches of Passaic — Irish, Polish, German, Italian, Slovak — began to ring the procession wound its way to

St. Stephen's. Crowds of people marveling at the colorful sight stood on both sides of the street. Five bands and the various societies and organizations from St. Stephen's and the neighboring parishes marched magnificently dressed in Hungarian Huszár and Polish dress uniforms with flags unfurled. The women's societies followed in their own beautiful costumes, their banners flying. Then came pairs of young parish girls dressed in pure white. This sight prompted the Bishop to smile and say, "Haec est revera ecclesia filialis" — "This is truly a filial parish."

Upon reaching the church, the ceremonies began: first the blessing of the church followed by Solemn High Mass. The Bishop occupied his throne in the sanctuary while Rev. Francis Dienes, a pastor from New York celebrated Mass. Rev. Emery Sebok, Professor of Christian Doctrine in Budapest, who was visiting America at the time, delivered the sermon. The Blessed Virgin Mary Choir of St. Stephen's sang the Latin Mass, which had been written for the occasion by Father Messerschmiedt himself. Then the congregation sang the soul-stirring hymns of its native land.

When the Mass was over, the Pastor addressed the Bishop in Latin. He stated, "At this moment, 2,000 Hungarian hearts are filled with an inexpressible joy. This joy is theirs not only because with God's help this beautiful building now stands, but also because you, Your Excellency, the representative of the Vicar of Christ on earth, through whose help and guidance this project was completed, can be here with us. We are overjoyed at being able to meet you and thank you sincerely. Be assured that we are all aware that the glory of this day belongs to God. The Hungarian people truly believe in the One, True, Catholic Church of which you, Your Excellency, are the representative. Behold, the eyes of everyone here are upon you at this moment, expressing their reverence and love. Although these good people were torn from their native homes, their native priests, they have found in your person a Father in Christ." "Your Excellency, please accept our humble words of thanks, which are not ours alone, but also those of St. Stephen of Hungary. He will reward your charity for having embraced his people." There followed a formal banquet at the parish house. "This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad therein. Blessed be His Holy Name."

A New Era



Our founding fathers and mothers had succeeded in establishing the parish. This fledgling parish bid its founding pastor, Fr. Messerschmiedt farewell in 1911. For the next few years, between 1911 and 1915, there was a succession of pastors, including Reverend John Schimkó and Reverend Louis Kovács, who stayed only two years each. Then in 1915, Reverend Joseph Marczinkó arrived at St. Stephen's, where he remained for the next seventeen years. Father Marczinkó guided the parish through the trying days of World War I and the early days of the Great Depression. The church was hit hard by the Depression, as was all of Passaic. It took some time to recover from this financial disaster and to implement the next step planned for the development of the parish — a school. In the interim, Father Marczinkó was reassigned. The parish came under the pastorate of Reverend James Raile from 1932 to 1933. With the arrival of Rev. James Raile, a new era began. The growing parish was in need of a place where young and old could carry on the work of the parish. Up until this time the small basement of the church had been used for all parish functions — meetings, bazaars, dinners, etc. The Bishop granted permission to purchase a site for a building. The problem was where to find one.

There was an abandoned wooden foundry building behind the church on Market Street. This property was purchased and plans were made to tear down the

building and erect a new one, also of wood. Father Raile's reassignment in September 1933 put an abrupt stop to these plans.

From 1933 to 1937, Reverend William Furlong acted as administrator, while Reverend János Gáspár took care of the pastoral needs of St. Stephen's and guided the parish in its endeavors to build a new school. With the help of the able trustees, Stephen Wizler and Joseph Boska, the project was resumed. The Bishop, seeing the need and desire of the people, provided the necessary funds for creating not only an auditorium but a school building. The parishioners were filled with ambition to see their school built and occupied, and worked hard at the project.

In years to come, Father Gáspár was to assume an important role in bringing about long-sought stability and ensuring the future of the parish. His work rekindled the enthusiasm of the parish, which resulted in two decades of expansion.

The Building of the School

The parish began its newest undertaking, building a school under new leadership and with heightened excitement. The cornerstone of the school and auditorium was laid in September 1936. The dedication of the auditorium took place on March 15. The school was dedicated six months later, on September 19, 1937.

The Most Reverend Archbishop Thomas Walsh dedicated the new school building and hall, since Passaic was still in the Archdiocese of Newark. Father Gáspár, who had assumed the pastorate by this time, assisted in the dedication ceremonies.

The blessing of the school took place on September 19, 1937. The program included a procession with a band from the President Palace Meeting Hall at the corner of President Street and Parker Avenue, led by the St. Anthony Society. (This was the headquarters of the St. Anthony Sick and Death Benefit Association.) After a brief service in the church, the Bishop blessed the school and then delivered his address. Then the parishioners and their guests viewed the new building. There followed a banquet at which the guest speaker was the Rev. Dr. Stephen Diteljan.

On this occasion, Father Gáspár spoke to his parishioners as follows, "Celebrating this great day are the children of St. Stephen who came to Passaic and worked hard so that they may have spiritual as well as material bread. The road to this celebration was slow and difficult but now it is completed and we ask every good-hearted Hungarian to join in our happiness. We want the spirit of this joyous occasion to remain with us for years to come. We want our building to stand for the glory of God and to serve as a gathering place for all. Our school will be an aid to the parents of our children, a place where they can be taught the right path to follow throughout life. It will be dedicated to instilling respect and love of God, parents and country."

The next goal was to pay off the mortgage as quickly as possible. The energy and perseverance of the parishioners made this possible and within five years, on October 31, 1942, the mortgage papers were burned and every brick of the school belonged to St. Stephen's! The energy of the vibrant parish of the late 1930's and early 1940's was far from depleted. The parishioners and their charismatic leader began their next undertaking, the redecorating and refurbishing of the church. This project encompassed the next two decades, the so-called Golden Era of St. Stephen's.

Redecorating and Renewal: The Golden Era

New plans were underway for the refurbishing of the church. The first goal was the replacement of the windows. In total, 51 new stained glass windows were installed, 17 of which are from 14 to 16 feet high. Their cost was \$350.00 for the large ones and \$40.00 to \$80.00, according to size, for the smaller ones. Donors volunteered to defray the cost of each. Each large window is dedicated to the intention of the donor and the smaller ones to the memory of the parish's war heroes. The large windows on the right hand side depict various scenes from the Holy Scripture and the smaller ones show the Seven Sorrows of Our Lady. The large windows on the left hand side depict various Hungarian Saints and Martyrs and the smaller ones symbolize the Seven Sacraments. The two large windows high on either side of the main altar are dedicated to Christ the King and Our Lady of

Hungary. The total cost of the windows was \$8,000.00. This amount would be \$800,000 today.



Another phase of the redecorating program was the building of new confessionals, which were erected on either side of the entrance. The Heroes' Altar on which are inscribed the names of young men of the parish who gave their lives in World War II replaced the old confessionals. The names of those who served in the Armed Forces are also listed on this altar. The centerpiece is a painting by a Polish artist. Doig & Doig, woodcarvers created the altar and Frank Wasko the gilded inscriptions. The total cost was \$1,900.00. The last two names, Béla Kapotsffy and Béla Keresztes, Jr. were added and dedicated on Veteran's Day, 2001.

On the day of the school's dedication in 1937, the Archbishop asked the Daughters of Divine Charity to take over the religious instruction of the children. Reverend Mother Alexandrine, Provincial Superior, appointed two Sisters.

These Sisters commuted daily from 82nd Street in New York City to St. Stephen's School, where they prepared three hundred and fifty children for the Sacraments of Penance, the Holy Eucharist and Confirmation. Then, in January 1939, Father Gáspár had one of the classrooms divided into a kitchen and bedroom, providing living quarters for the Sisters and thus eliminating the long hours of commuting between New York and New Jersey.

The next year, on November 30, 1940, the new convent, situated next to the rectory, was dedicated. The lovely chapel housed within was dedicated to St. Elizabeth of Hungary. The convent was soon named the "Little House." There were three Sisters now working with the children, under the guidance of Father Gáspár.

Another important improvement was the installation of a new, modern, automatic oil heating system. The old radiators were large and made the beautiful walls of the church black. John Förhéz installed the new system in 1945 for \$5,600.00.

In that same year, Fr. Andrew Molnár, Jr., the son of the cantor and organist who had done so much for the parish in the 1920's and 1930's became the chaplain. Like his father, Rev. Molnár did wonderful work with the youth of the parish.

In 1946 the redecorating of the church interior commenced. The Frederick Pustet Co. of New York undertook the work, which required six months to complete. The walls were painted to resemble two-toned Indiana limestone. The German artist, Hans Schmidt, painted the beautiful pictures found on the ceilings and walls. On either side of the church are the twelve apostles. The center ceiling is adorned with scenes from the life of our Blessed Mother. The cost of the paintings was \$6,000.00.

The following year, in 1947, the floors were entirely reconditioned with 95% pure rubber flooring which would last a lifetime. The sanctuary floor is covered in an oriental pattern while the monograms of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin are at the side altars. The Holstein Company of Connecticut did the work at a cost of \$8,000.00. A combination of donations and parish funds served to defray this amount. Frigyes Kormann made and executed plans to overhaul the entire lighting system. Nicholas Romano, a local electrical contractor, installed chandeliers according to plans designed by Frederick Cook. The cost was \$2,500.00.

The pews were completely refinished and padded foam cushions were installed on the kneeling benches. The Necker Company designed the new Stations of the Cross made of hammered copper and bronze. Generous parishioners donated each station costing 60 dollars apiece.

In 1925, the original wooden parish house was sold to a parishioner, Joseph Boska, who had it moved to 196 Fourth Street, where he lived in it with his family. A new brick parish house was built in its place at a cost of \$14,000.00. The architect was Morris Mandel and the builder, Mr. Morro.

As the parish and its school grew, the teaching Sisters needed more space. The parish house was converted into a convent and a chapel was added onto the building. Meanwhile, our priests moved into the building, which had been occupied by the Sisters, until the new rectory could be completed.

The parish purchased the property at 223 Third Street and razed the building on it. Frank Kaleta, a parishioner constructed the rectory in 1950 according to plans by Frederick Cook, Newark architect. The masonry contractor was Fred Gembala. The cost of construction was \$43,500.00. Passaic's East Side can well be proud of this modern building to this day.

Property Purchases and Sales

At the time of its founding, the parish property consisted of four lots. In the 1920's the property and building located at Market and Morris Streets had to be sold. This sale provided the funds needed to build the Rectory, which is now the chapel.

In 1932, Fr. Raile decided that instead of selling property the parish would have to acquire some. It was then that Bishop Walsh authorized the purchase of 210-218 Market Street from the De Vries heirs for \$12,000.00. This proved to be a farsighted move since the school was built on this land five years later. In 1941, the parish purchased the property on 215 Third St. at a price of \$5,600.00 to serve as a temporary convent and a few years later the building on 223 Third St. for \$6,900.00, to become the future site of the new Rectory. Subsequent purchases were a plot of 25 x 100 feet, which enlarged the playground for our school, the house and property at 211 Third Street for \$14,000.00 on June 1, 1952, and the lot across Third Street in the 1980's. This became a new parking lot for the church, once the house on it was torn down.

These purchases were crucial and called for generosity in dollars, time, and work. The parishioners of the church have always done and continue to do all they can to sustain the parish. The foresight of these purchases has allowed the church to move forward and satisfy the needs of the community. May God bless all those whose generosity has made it all possible!

A Decade of Trials

In 1952, the parish family of St. Stephen's celebrated its 50th anniversary. It was a time for jubilation. The parishioners' enthusiasm, created by a strong leadership, successful expansion, and a flourishing population was at its peak. Unfortunately, this energy was about to be taxed in a series of trials and tribulations over the next ten years.



On a tragic night, the following May, fire broke out in the basement of the church, under the pews on the left side of the building. Fire fighters arrived to stop the blaze. However, the water did not reach the flames, which ravaged the church. Firefighters began to chop through the floor under the pews. The priceless windows had to be broken to allow the black smoke to escape without destroying the treasures of the church. Many heroic fire fighters were taken to hospital, suffering from smoke inhalation. The blaze was extinguished, but by the grace of God, the inner strength of the parish was not!

For many months, Holy Mass was celebrated in the auditorium. Father Gáspár's leadership proved invaluable. This tragedy, which might have meant despair, actually brought the parish family together and created an era of cooperation and perseverance. The many new parishioners who had been refugees of World War II experienced their first taste of the dedication to community in St. Stephen's. They added their strength and determination to the unwavering parish in rebuilding the fire-ravaged church.

World War II took its toll on Hungary and all of Europe. Many of the young men of St. Stephen's went off to war and never returned. Then, in October 1956, revolution broke out on the streets of Budapest when protesters of all ages stood up to the Communist regime, which governed Hungary at the behest of the Soviet Union. Both of these tragedies brought many young Hungarians and their families to Passaic to join the ranks of St. Stephen's Church. The parish received more than 120 refugee families after the revolution, an event that stirred Hungarian-Americans and prompted them to new acts of charity. Therefore, this new generation of Hungarian families found not only a warm welcome from Father Gáspár, but also more often than not, the comforting words, "What can we do for you? If you need anything, please ask." Together with the Hungarian Reformed Church and its pastor, Rev. Imre Bertalan, St. Stephen's helped these families establish new lives.

In 1958, having survived the World War II era, a devastating fire, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and financial difficulties, St. Stephen's and its newly expanded population was ready to celebrate. The Hungarian Liberty Bell was dedicated. Founding Pastor, Fr. Messerschmiedt's dream had come to fruition nearly half a century after his departure. The proceeds from a series of plays written and directed by parishioner László Kertész paid for the bell, which was a symbol of survival after the most difficult decade in the church's history. After its dedication, the bell pealed out the spirit of perseverance in this corner of Passaic. Little did the parishioners realize that in a few years, this very bell would toll for their beloved pastor, Father Gáspár.

A Parish Mourns

An insight into the character of Father Gáspár, whose stern countenance often belied his gentle nature, is demonstrated in an incident, which occurred during the budding popularity of air conditioning. It seems that the convent was stifling during the summer months. Sister Aurelia, hoping to find some relief for her Sisters, approached Father Gáspár, saying, "Father, it is so hot in the convent, do you suppose we could have an air conditioner?" It seems that Father Gáspár, a large, portly man, swung around abruptly and before rushing off, spoke only two words in reply, "No money."

No one was more surprised the next morning than Sister Aurelia when two workers showed up at the convent to install an air conditioner.

Father Gáspár, who has been described as "the last of the great Patriarchs", had once again demonstrated that his bark was certainly much worse than his bite, and that the comfort and care of those in his charge were important enough to procure funds from somewhere. This kindly, saintly priest won the affection of his people through a personal concern for them as individuals.

For more than thirty years, he showed this concern in a myriad of ways. His death, on February 21, 1963, plunged the parish into deep mourning. He left behind not only his spiritual flock but also a parish of friends, loved ones, brothers and sisters in Christ who loved their pastor as a father, a brother, a son. He was, after all, the head of the family — the parish family. And for the Hungarian people, to lose a loved one is, as the Psalmist has said, "...in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me; and he shall set me upon a rock."

For the people of St. Stephen's, their parish was their rock. Just as in the past, the church became the haven they sought in time of sorrow, the place where they offered prayers for the repose of the soul of Father Gáspár.

A New Beginning

The parish was still mourning the death of its beloved pastor, Fr. Gáspár in 1963. Someone was needed to continue his invaluable work. The parish's prayers were answered with the arrival of a new pastor, Rev. Anthony Dunay. Born in Hungary, he received his higher education in Vienna, Austria, and was ordained there on July 9, 1939.



During his years at St. Stephen's, Father Dunay, an outstanding pastor, and an intellectual, was the initiator of many new developments in the parish. For instance, when city authorities condemned a part of the school building, Father Dunay, who did not want the children's education disrupted, arranged to have the children transferred temporarily to the Hungarian Reformed Church, whose pastor, Reverend dr. Aladár Komjáthy, welcomed the sisters and students to the schoolrooms of Calvin Hall. Meanwhile, the pastor appointed a committee to compile a report outlining the changes necessary to ensure the safety of the school. Construction of a new wing with expanded facilities commenced based on the committee's recommendations. A fund-raising drive helped defray costs which, coupled with the necessary alterations on the old building, totaled \$398,000.

It was during Fr. Dunay's tenure that Cardinal József Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary said Holy Mass at St. Stephen's. It was Sunday, May 19, 1974 and over 500 Hungarians, parishioners and guests crowded the church to witness to this historical occasion. A banquet at which the parish paid homage to this legendary figure of Hungarian history followed the Mass.

It was also during Fr. Dunay's tenure that the laity became more involved in the liturgy. In the wake of Vatican II, many new lectors were appointed and the first group of over 20 Eucharistic ministers were trained and installed to serve the Lord and the parish. Some of the faces have changed, but the momentum created by Father Dunay in the 1970's is reflected today in the way the laity is involved in the church.

In order to preserve Hungarian-American language and culture, classes in the school were prolonged for another hour daily for those who wanted to learn to read and write Hungarian, and about the culture of the nation that gave the world Liszt, Kodály, and Bartók. Lay teachers instructed the children in the fundamentals of Hungarian culture. The Saturday morning Hungarian school, which still thrives at the beginning of the 21st century has replaced these daily classes.

Unfortunately, Father Dunay's declining health prevented him from implementing all the new ideas he had for St. Stephen's. He returned to his Maker on May 29, 1977.

A Parish Recovers

The year was 1978. St. Stephen's had lost two beloved pastors in the last 15 years. Fr. John Cusack, the chaplain saw to the administrative needs of the church while numerous Hungarian priests would come to the church to say Hungarian Mass, baptize, and perform weddings and funerals. Just months before celebrating its 75th anniversary, the parish needed new leadership. The arrival of Rev. Béla Török from Michigan met this need.

During his twelve-year tenure, Fr. Török was especially concerned with the spiritual and physical well-being of the elderly and sick members of our parish. Father Török was responsible for the church's much needed exterior restoration. The church's interior was also painted and decorated. Our parish underwent another very trying period in June 1987 when a fire devastated the auditorium. For the next three years, it seemed that all was lost since the church's insurance was hardly enough to cover the cost of rebuilding. However, through God's grace, a new and more modern auditorium was built with both young and old volunteering their time and effort. The auditorium reopened with a dinner dance on May 19, 1990, exactly 16 years after the visit of Cardinal Mindszenty. Friday Bingo games began again in the St. Stephen's Cultural Center, which has since been renamed after Cardinal Mindszenty.

Unfortunately, with pastoral duties taking a heavy toll on his health, Father Török retired to Austria in 1990. He celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination in 1993. Fr. Török passed away on February 22, 1998.

Recent Years

In June of 1990, Father Török announced that he would be retiring to Austria in August. The parish was in need of a new pastor. The arrival of Father Stephen Mustos, a Piarist headmaster from Devon, Pennsylvania in August 1990 revitalized parish life. He became the ninth pastor of St. Stephen's on October 7, 1990. In addition to his duties as pastor of this beautiful church, Fr. Mustos also serves as the delegate to Bishop Attila Miklósházy, the bishop of Hungarians outside the borders of Hungary. Unfortunately, this means that Father Mustos must often be away from St. Stephen's to represent His Eminence around the United States. Although his parish misses him on days like these, his vital work brings great pride to the community of St. Stephen's.

Father Mustos's enthusiasm began immediately after his arrival. Among Father's priorities was the renovation of the old convent so that its chapel could be used for daily mass. The building was also dedicated to St. Elizabeth of Hungary and became a home away from home for Hungarian children recuperating from heart

surgery, under the Gift of Life Program sponsored by the Rotary Club. With Father's guidance and the work of some very dedicated parishioners, the program was very successful.

In an effort to strengthen our parish, Father Mustos avidly supports the weekend Hungarian School. American-born Hungarian youngsters have an opportunity to learn about their cultural heritage as well as to practice the Hungarian language here. Another organization, which enjoys Father Mustos's support, is the Hungarian scouting program dedicated to preserving our heritage, building character, and strengthening Christian values. Young people have an opportunity to perform many valuable services in the parish community through these worthy organizations.

Each year St. Stephen's plays host to the American Hungarian Museum Gala Ball held in our auditorium. The museum, dedicated to presenting programs dealing with Hungarian culture, has many interesting lectures, concerts, exhibits, and demonstrations throughout the year. These programs are presented in both English and Hungarian. Father has worked over the last decade to make music a central part of the liturgy and always stresses the importance of the choir because, as he says, "when one sings, he or she prays twice".

In 1991, Father Mustos established the Parish Council, comprised of elected and appointed members of the parish. This group is the driving force of the church aiding the pastor in his administrative and spiritual duties, raising funds for the church, maintaining the buildings, organizing activities, and making life in the parish vibrant and enjoyable.

In 1994, St. Stephen's celebrated its 90th anniversary. The years that have since passed have been devoted to preparing for this Jubilee in 2003. Renovations, reminiscent of the renewal during Father Gáspár's time, are now the order of the day. The main aisle of the church is now carpeted. The organ was restored in 1996. The Staudinger family donated a new, gilded processional cross to the church in 1998. The parishioners have added to the beauty of liturgical processions with the creation of a new baldachin.

In 1997, parish volunteers cleaned and emptied the basement of the church. In 2000, this space underneath the church, once ravaged by fire, became parish meeting rooms and the home of the Bishop László Irányi Memorial Library. In 2001, the bells of the church were restored and now ring every day at 12:00 noon. The same year parishioner Miklós Szamosszegi restored the large exterior cross on the church roof. It once again stands as a soaring symbol of our church and its century long history of Hungarian-American Catholicism in Passaic.

For decades, pastors and parishioners have been preparing in word and in deed for the church's 100th anniversary. Perhaps this sentiment began as just that, a dramatic feeling that they would do all that is necessary to survive within the framework of their Christianity and Hungarian heritage. Their dedication to this little ethnic parish in this often-unethical world has made this dream a reality!

The Future

In March 1903, a small group of Hungarian-Americans gathered to declare their intention of forming a parish. They knew what they wanted but were not sure of what they would achieve. In May 2001, another small group of Hungarian-Americans gathered to declare their intention of celebrating 100 years of community. They knew what they wanted but were not sure what they would achieve. Like the group that met 100 years earlier, they knew they were dedicated to this cause, but were uncertain as to the amount of support they would receive from others. Like the group that met 100 years earlier, they have surpassed their goals. This day, the most significant in the life of this parish, could not have been achieved without the help of everyone: young and old, men and women of all trades giving their time and expertise, named and anonymous donors who have given their time, money, and interest to support this celebration! Everyone's effort is deeply appreciated!

At the turn of the 20th century, Hungarian-Americans in Passaic had nothing. They worked hard, had little money, and little free time. It was very difficult to maintain a parish. After the turn of the 21st century, Hungarian-Americans in Passaic and vicinity have much more. Many have good jobs, nice homes, and cars, they send

their children to college and live the American dream. Even today, when we seem to have so much, it is still very difficult to maintain a parish!

This is exactly why this Jubilee is so important. As a community, we need to join together and celebrate this milestone with each other. We need to follow the example of those who came before us by remembering that our faith needs to be in God and our strength needs to be in one another. If we keep this in mind, those preparing to celebrate the church's 200th anniversary will turn to these chronicles for inspiration and guidance.

Our 100th Jubilee Mass will be held on April 27, 2003. Hundreds of people are expected to attend. However, they are not the only ones celebrating this joyous day. It has taken many more people to make St. Stephen's what it is today! Pastors and faithful, parents and children, hard-working parishioners and one-time guests over the course of 100 years have formed the face our church wears today. They will be joining us in spirit, in the same beautiful church, which celebrated the birth of Christ, on a cold Christmas Eve at midnight, in the black-and-white world of 1902. They will be joining us in spirit because they have helped create the community we know today! April 27th and every day before it and after it is the day the Lord has made! Let us give thanks and be joyful in it!

A fenti szöveget Marshall Tamás írta. Forrás: St. Stephen's R.C. Magyar Church, Passaic, New Jersey, 1903 — 2003 emlékkönyv



SAINT STEPHEN King of Hungary (977-1038)

St Stephen first King (AD 1000)

The later St Stephen – who had had the pagan name Vajk until he was baptized in his teens – had been in his early twenties when he succeeded his father Duke Géza (970-997). Promptly, forcefully and with ruthless efficiency he asserted his supremacy over the nation and several obstreperous elder relatives, who disputed his right to the succession (supreme leadership had hitherto been elective by seniority within the ruling family, not by primogeniture). He then asked for and received a royal crown from Pope Sylvester II – by his choice of patron demonstrating his determination to keep Hungary independent of both the Western and the Byzantine Empires – and with it he was crowned the first King of Hungary in the year 1000.

Next he set about converting all his people to Western (Latin) Christianity, founding and endowing two Archbishoprics – Metropolitan Sees directly under the jurisdiction of Rome – and eight Bishoprics, as well as a number of Benedictine monasteries (which introduced the vine alongside the Gospel). Parish churches were built in towns and larger villages and, to encourage the populace to attend these, St Stephen decreed that markets be held in places with a church, on Sundays (still vasárnap, market-day, in Hungarian). Within two decades the country was sufficiently Christian for the designation of an official pilgrim route to the Holy Land through it. Of earlier pagan beliefs all traces were soon to vanish, so that we now know nothing about what these had been.

In recognition of his success, in his lifetime the Pope granted him the title Apostolic King – not that different from the Byzantine Emperors' proud Equal of the Apostles (and five centuries older than Defender of the Faith) – and the right to use the Apostolic double cross. All Kings of Hungary styled themselves Apostolic until 1918, and the double cross is in Hungary's arms to this day.

When his tomb was opened in 1083, on the occasion of his canonization, his right hand was found to be uncorrupted – it is venerated as a relic to this day. (All in all the House of Árpád gave the Church five saints: Kings Stephen and László, Prince

Imre, and the Princesses Elizabeth, daughter of Andrew II, and Margaret, daughter of Béla IV).



St Stephen was equally energetic in dealing with secular matters, dividing Hungary into Counties – governed by royal officials, not feudal counts – that disregarded clan boundaries, and organizing defensive fortifications around the country's borders, also entrusted to royal officials. On the other hand, he carefully avoided creating territorially based feudal fiefs, then fashionable in most of Europe. Land was merely held freehold under the Crown, not by feudal vassalage. Moreover, large estates were not single blocks of territory, but numerous small packets of land scattered all over the country. No office, title or dignity – other than the Crown – was hereditary.

The acceptance and integration of persons of non-Hungarian stock – whether already in situ or new immigrants – was encouraged: a nation of one race is feeble, he wrote for his son's guidance. By his death the decrees issued during his reign – many informed by Carolingian precedents, but all tailored to fit the specific task in hand – that regulated every aspect of the administration, revenues and defense of the realm, as well as the rights (notably: as regards property and inheritance) and obligations of his subjects, filled two volumes. Many were still cited in lawsuits in the 19th century. And the earliest Hungarian coins, silver denarii, date from his

reign.

The Western Emperor was his brother-in-law, with the Byzantine he had concluded a treaty of friendship, thus he could get on with transforming Hungary unhindered by foreign wars.

There can be little doubt that but for St Stephen's successful efforts to transform the country into a Christian monarchy, endowed with administrative structures and a legal code that stood the test of time, there might be no nation and state called Hungary in Europe to this day.

The fourth Duke of the Huns of Hungary, by the name of Geysa, was converted to the Faith and baptized with his wife and several ministers. With the Christian missionaries, he labored to convince his pagan subjects of the divinity of this religion. His wife saw in a vision the protomartyr Saint Stephen, who told her they would have a son who would perfect the work already begun. This son, born in the year 977, was given the name of Stephen.

The little prince was baptized by Saint Adalbert, bishop of Prague, who preached to the Hungarians for a time, and was educated under the care of that bishop and a pious count of Italy.

When he was fifteen years old, his father gave him the commandment of his armies, seeing his virtue and Christian ardor. Already Stephen was beginning to root out idolatry and transform the pagan customs still existing among the people. At twenty years of age, he succeeded his good father, who died in 997. He suppressed a rebellion of his pagan subjects, and founded monasteries and churches all over the land. He sent to Pope Sylvester, begging him to appoint bishops to the eleven sees he had endowed, and to bestow on him, for the greater success of his work, the title of king. The Pope granted his requests, and sent him a cross to be borne before him, saying that he regarded him as the true apostle of his people.

Saint Stephen's devotion was fervent. He placed his realms under the protection of our Blessed Lady, and kept the feast of Her Assumption with great affection. He established good laws, and saw to their execution. Throughout his life, we are told, he had Christ on his lips, Christ in his heart, and Christ in all he did. His only wars were wars of defense, and in them he was always successful. He married the sister of the Emperor Saint Henry, who was a worthy companion for him. God sent him many grievous trials amid his successes; one by one his children died.

He often went out in disguise to exercise his charities; and one day a troop of beggars, not satisfied with the alms they received, threw him down, tore out handfuls of his hair and beard, and took his purse. He prayed to the Lord and thanked Him for an insult he would not have suffered from enemies, but accepted gladly from the poor who, he said to Him, "are called Your own, and for whom I can have only indulgence and tenderness." He bore all reversals with perfect submission to the Will of God.

When Saint Stephen was about to die, he summoned the bishops and nobles, and told them to choose his successor. He urged them to nurture and cherish the Catholic Church, which was still a tender plant in Hungary, to follow justice, humility, and charity, to be obedient to the laws, and to show at all times a reverent submission to the Holy See. Then, raising his eyes towards heaven, he said: "O Queen of Heaven, August Restorer of a prostrate world, to Thy care I commend the Holy Church, my people, and my realm, and my own departing soul." It was on his favorite feast day, the Assumption, that he died in peace, in the year 1038.