

Bridge among Cultures and Worlds – István Zimonyi's Work Related to the Arab World in the Light of Egyptian–Hungarian Cultural Relations¹

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Abstract:

The history of relations between the Arab world and Hungary dates back a very long time, and the role of influential personalities like István Zimonyi is of paramount importance in it. Speaking of two distant cultures, among which there is no common ground for effective communication, these people can make the missing bridges and construct links. Prof. Dr. István Zimonyi is the head of the Department of Medieval Studies at the University of Szeged, a well-known researcher of Hungarian early history and the medieval Turkic speaking nomads living in Eastern Europe, as well as the former director of the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Cairo between 2007 and 2011. Nevertheless, Zimonyi is also an Orientalist who has a deep knowledge of the Arab world, language, and culture. In his works as a researcher the collection and translation of Arabic sources with commentary has an important role. The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the diplomatic and cultural relations between the Arab world and Hungary with a special focus on Egypt, as well as to demonstrate the role of István Zimonyi's work in it.

Keywords:

Arab world, Cultural relations, Egypt, Hungary, István Zimonyi

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Introduction

When looking at the scepter of Hungary, one of the crown jewels, most of the Hungarians do not even know that it is decorated by a mountain crystal stone that originates from Egypt. It is the same case with the fast and reliable motor coaches running alongside the banks of River Nile, as most of us have never heard that these are still called “Magari” for the reason that their prototypes were produced by the Hungarian Ganz Factory (Magyarország Nagykövetsége Kairó, n. d.). Nor is it a common knowledge of Hungarians, including football fans, that besides Puskás' well-known activities in Egypt Hidegkúti also led the Al-Ahly football team to championship. However, according to Professor István Zimonyi's experience, based on these facts in Egypt “the Hungarian name has a good sense, people associate it with fastness, accuracy and reliance. This is the basic knowledge that an average Egyptian knows about Hungary. (Kovács, 2013, p. 93). Although Hungary's links to the Arab world and Egypt are deep-rooted, looking through history, they show a diverse picture with varied intensity. Influential personalities such as the aforementioned football stars or István Zimonyi, whose work forms the subject of this study, have played and continue to play a very important role in the development of these relations in all fields.

First, in the following thesis I will briefly describe the development of Egyptian–Hungarian diplomatic relations, wherein I will discuss in details the cultural, scientific and educational field, as well. Then, I will introduce the work of István Zimonyi, focusing on his connections with the Arab world and Egypt in particular, as well as highlighting the significance of his activities in the context of the Egyptian–Hungarian bilateral relations. It represents the Professor's activity well how his students, colleagues and friends talk about him in the book published in honour of his 60th birthday: “This perseverance is still enviable and those who are close to him know that he never gave up even in the most difficult moments, what is more, he can gain strength from the difficulties.” (Kincses–Nagy, 2017, p. 5).

Overview of Egyptian – Hungarian Diplomatic Relations

Historical relations between Hungary and Egypt date back to the 16th century, when Egypt and the central regions of the Kingdom of Hungary also became part of the Ottoman Empire. However bilateral relations in all fields, including cultural relations, as well, only began to revive significantly at the end of the 19th century. Members of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's colony living in Egypt maintained good relations with the Khedive's (Viceroy) court and thus played an influential role in Egyptian politics. One of the most prominent among them was Marianna May Török Szendrői (1877–1968)³, who came to Egypt as the wife of Abbas II Helmy (1900-1913) and was

³Szendrői Török Marianna May (1877–1968): Hungarian noble lady born in America, daughter of Tivadar Puskás, writer, pianist and painter. Abbas Hilmi II (1874–944), the last Egyptian khedive's Hungarian wife

also a well-known patron of arts. As a result of the Treaty of Trianon and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Hungarian successor state's privileges over the Suez Canal and over importing Egyptian goods were also abolished, creating a new base for the bilateral relations (Al-Naggar et al., 2021, pp. 5–8). The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was also a milestone in the history of Hungarian–Egyptian diplomatic ties, as these could only develop after the country's independence.

The General Consulate of Hungary opened in Cairo under the leadership of Andor Semsey as the *Chargé d'Affaires* in 1923, and shortly after it in 1928 the Embassy of Hungary in Cairo also opened its doors to the public. Félix Parcher was appointed as the first Ambassador of Hungary to Cairo, although it should also be noted that Hungarian diplomats did not actually work from Cairo until 1939 (Al-Naggar, 2015, pp. 64–69). Egypt also sent its first ambassador to Budapest during this period. Among the official diplomatic visits, which are always considered to be significant events, the visit of Ismail Sedky Pasha, Prime Minister of Egypt, to Hungary in 1932 and the visits of the son of the Hungarian regent, Miklós Horthy Jr., to Egypt (1932, 1934, 1938, 1939) brought the most outstanding results in all areas of bilateral relations. The Hungarian Mission in Cairo operated uninterrupted until 1941 being the only Hungarian embassy in Africa at that time, but in 1942, during the World War II, diplomatic relations became temporarily cut off (Al-Naggar, 2011, pp. 7–14).

The suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was an important event in the 20th century Egyptian–Hungarian relations, in which the Suez crisis also played a major role. Hungarian diplomacy started to put a focus on the Arab region from the second half of the 1950s, and even though political relations gradually deteriorated after the 1960s, with a shift towards economic and trade, it continued to be important with a significant level of interaction in these areas. There was also an ideological shift within the bloc of socialist countries starting from the 1960s, which led them to open up to conservative states with large financial reserves. Accordingly, the Hungarian state leadership also tried to compensate for the problems caused by the 1973 oil crisis through trading with Arab states. The Hungarian export capacity to Arab countries increased tenfold between 1965 and 1980. However, this intensive growth came to a halt in the late 1980s as a result of the Arab–Israeli wars, and in particular as a consequence of Hungary's opening towards Israel. The first significant step in the improvement of diplomatic relations between Hungary and Israel was the meeting of Péter Várkonyi, Hungarian Foreign Minister of Foreign Affairs, with Jichlak Samir, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the margin of the 40th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, which was followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1989. Initially, the main focus was on the establishment of better relations in the fields of culture and tourism, but the scope of these connections gradually expanded, which

who after converting to Muslim religion became known as Djavidan Hanem (Al-Naggar-Prantner, 2022, pp. 659–669).



resulted in an ever worsening relationship with the Arab countries (J. Nagy, 2020, pp. 628–631). Looking at the Hungarian–Egyptian relations, even the regime change did not bring any improvement as Mubarak saw the rapid collapse of European communist regimes as a dangerous example for his country. Moreover, Hungary was also among the countries that supported Soviet Jews emigrating to Israel, which was not considered as a friendly gesture from the perspective of Arab countries. Nevertheless, Egyptian–Hungarian relations gradually began to improve, as Egypt found it important to maintain the good relations and was usually quick to adapt to the changing circumstances. József Antall, the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, also visited Egypt between 4–6 November 1991 and had meetings with President Hosni Mubarak. They expressed a mutual desire to expand economic, trade, cultural and educational ties between the two countries and signed an agreement on the abolition of double taxation. This visit had symbolic importance and manifested Hungary's intention to continue to see Egypt as an important partner after the regime change, as well (J. Nagy, 2020, pp. 627-639).

Even though József Antall's visit to Egypt was symbolic, Hungarian–Arab relations were not a real priority after the regime change, and accordingly neither were they intensive, as the transatlantic integration became the main priority for Hungarian diplomacy. The sudden disappearance of large state-owned enterprises also limited temporarily the Hungarian economy's ability to export. Since then, the attitude and interest of the actual governing Hungarian leadership towards Arab countries is also manifold. The most active of these periods was the 'Arab opening' of the second Orbán government, continued by the Hungarian prime minister's visit to Egypt in 2011 (Ladányi, N. Rózsa, 2012, pp. 128-131). Since 2004, the Hungarian–Egyptian relationship should also be considered in the context of the European Union. From this point of view as well, Egypt is a significant partner and an important participant of the various institutional frameworks of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Szalai, 2021, pp. 6-10). In recent years, relations with the Arab world have been steadily developing, especially in terms of economy (by 2015, Egypt had become the most important export market for Hungarian goods in the Arab and African region). State leaders and ministers of the two countries also visit each other frequently, while inter-ministerial and inter-institutional interactions are also intense. This was well-illustrated by the visit of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to Budapest in 2015 and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's visit to Cairo the following year (Magyarország Nagykövetsége Kairó, n. d.).⁴ New areas of cooperation such as defence policy are also emerging. For example, in 2016 a general

⁴Egyptian–Hungarian political relations are particularly active in terms of official visits. In addition to those mentioned above, György Szabad, Speaker of the National Assembly of Hungary, visited Egypt in 1993, President Árpád Göncz in March 1996, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in 2000, the Minister of Culture in 2001, the Minister without portfolio responsible for Secret Services in 2002, President Katalin Szili and Bálint Magyar, Minister of Education, in 2003, István Hiller, Head of the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage, in 2004, and Kálmán Kovács, Minister of Information Technology and Communications, in 2005. In 1992, Fathi Surur, Speaker of the Egyptian Parliament, also visited Hungary (Magyar-Egyiptomi Baráti Társaság, 2009).

framework agreement on military cooperation was signed by the ministers of the two countries (Magyarország Kormánya, 2022).

One of the most significant events of recent years took place in Budapest in July 2017, when after the first summit of the Visegrád Group with Egypt, the leaders of the five countries made a joint declaration regarding possible areas of cooperation, highlighting, among others, the fight against terrorism, the management of the migration crisis, and further development of the economic cooperations (Szalai, 2021, p. 10). According to the official communication of the current Hungarian government in power, Egypt also considered as an important partner with regard to the European energy crisis that has recently unfolded in the wake of the Russian–Ukrainian war (Magyar Hírlap, 16 November 2022). Most recently, László Kövér, Speaker of the National Assembly of Hungary, visited Egypt in November 2022, where he met with Hanafy Ali El-Gebali, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Abdel Wahab Abdel Razeq, President of the Egyptian Senate, the President and members of the Hungarian–Egyptian Friendship Society, moreover, with Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, President of Egypt (Magyar Hírlap, 16 November 2022).

Cultural Relations between the Two Countries

Egypt, with its millennia-old cultural and historical heritage, also became a major intellectual centre of the Arab region by the first half of the 20th century, and thus remained an important partner for European countries. At the same time, cultural links between the Carpathian Basin and Egypt date back to the time of the ancient Roman Empire. It is proved by the fact, that in the area of Pannonia province, which once stretched across the present-day Transdanubia (Dunántúl) region of the country, an Isis shrine and other archaeological finds of that period were also excavated attesting the existence of a religious cult coming from Egypt. Contemporary Arabic sources also prove that there was interaction between the two areas in the Middle Ages, as well, as a result of Turkish conquests and Christian pilgrimages. Furthermore, those soldiers who believed to be the ancestors of 'magarabs' also arrived to Nubia in the late 16th century, which is subject to István Zimonyi's researches, as well.

Hungarian refugees of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 also created a colony in Cairo. The beginning of Hungarian researches in the field of Egyptology also dates back to the times before the First World War, when Fülöp Back⁵ sponsored the first

⁵ Fülöp Back (1862–1958): Merchant, businessman, sponsor, 'co-owner of the Paris-based Orosdi-Back World Trading Company, "a multi-billionaire by today's standards." In 1907, he decided to start excavations at his own expense and to donate the findings to his "beloved hometown of Budapest." "The excavations proved to be very successful. Not only did they uncover tombs from the Old Kingdom, but they also discovered a temple, the temple of Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter, with beautiful hieroglyphic inscriptions and reliefs," said Győző Vörös, also adding that the stones of the white limestone temple wall are now the part of the Museum of Fine Arts's collection. Thanks to this success, Fülöp Back was awarded



Hungarian excavations (Gamhud excavations) in 1907. Hungarians also played an important role in the foundation of scientific research of the Islamic world, for instance the researcher Ignác Goldziher⁶ or Miksa Herz⁷, who became internationally renowned for his reconstructions of monuments in Cairo. However, the First World War caused disruption in this field and consequently cultural and academic relations with Egypt were not considered intensive between the two world wars, partly as a result of British influence over the Arab state (Al-Naggar, 2015, pp. 87–90).

However, the establishment of the Egyptian agricultural museum founded by King Fuad in 1938 with a significant Hungarian involvement, represents an interesting yet less-known example of cultural relations of the period. In 1930, Galal Bey Fahim, Secretary General of the Ministry of Agriculture of Egypt, visited several museums across Europe with the mission to find the best expert who could help Egypt establishing an agricultural museum. The Secretary General chose the Hungarian Agricultural Museum in Budapest as well as asked Alajos Paikert, the director of it, to carry out the necessary tasks to organise it. With the establishment of the museum, he contributed to the strengthening of the Ministry's position in Egypt and to raise public awareness of its activities (Al-Naggar, 2015, pp. 94–100).

Active cultural relations between Hungary and Egypt, similar to other fields, started to develop from the 1950s. The reports of the Hungarian ambassador in Cairo reveal a rich cultural life in Egypt at that time with regard to cinema, music, literature, fine arts and science, which was further enriched by the presence of foreigners in the country. However, it can also be noted that cinema stood out as it had the potential to attract a much wider range of Egyptian society than theatre, for instance. For this reason, Hungarian diplomats also made efforts to ensure that despite of the dominance of American films, Hungarian films also gain the opportunity to be presented in the country. The Hungarian embassy often organized film screening events for a variety of

a new concession area, where an intact Ptolemaic cemetery from the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC, 72 painted wooden coffins, including a gilded anthropoid sarcophagus, and a huge quantity of artefacts were discovered. As it was an established practice of those years, archaeologists were allowed to claim half of the finds – Fülöp Back's part filled 70 crates, which he donated to museums in Budapest, Vienna and Krakow. In 1909, Emperor Franz Joseph granted Fülöp Back Hungarian nobility title and the name of "Surányi, with the Egyptian temple hieroglyph on his coat of arms, symbolizing the discovery of a new temple." (*Múlt-kor*, 2007).

⁶ Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921): World-renowned orientalist and the founder of modern European Islamic studies. The Ignác Goldziher Institute for Jewish Historical and Cultural Research, among others, bears his name. "His main fields of research were the history of Semitic philology and literature, as well as the history of the Muslim religion. His work has covered almost all areas of Islamic cultural history. He was the first to examine the historical development of this world religion and can be considered as one of the founders of modern critical Islamic studies. He was responsible for the identification and classification of the manuscripts written in Oriental languages - Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, Persian - in the Hungarian National Museum's collection." (*kultúra.hu*, 2020).

⁷ Miksa "Pasha" Herz (1856–1919): Hungarian enthusiast of monument preservation, museum director and architect. "He worked in Egypt for 35 years, 25 of which he directed the preservation and restoration process of Arab-Islamic and Copt art monuments. He was the director of the Arab Museum in Cairo (now the Museum of Islamic Art), but also designed many modern buildings." (*Terebess Online*, n. d.).

audiences, and usually with great success. Film previews and simultaneous interpretation were used to make the films more interesting and easily understandable, and it was also considered during the film selection processes that Egyptian people are used to Western-type of films. Culture also served as a mediating tool to relieve stress caused by political differences, and it made possible for Hungary to successfully promote itself in Egypt. With the advent of rental services, embassies also took advantage of this emerging opportunity. Accordingly, renting films became possible at the Hungarian mission as well, which brought closer the Hungarian culture to an even wider section of society. In 1962, the Hungarian Radio and Television signed an agreement with the United Arab Television on the exchange of television programmes, experiences and materials. In 1963, Egyptian film days were also organised in Budapest, but these only reached a limited success among the Hungarian audience (Fügedi, 2012, pp. 143–147).

Besides the success of Hungarian films, Hungarian achievements in the field of music should also be highlighted. Pieces of music by Liszt, Kodály and Bartók have also attracted great interest in Egypt, and musical events organised by the Hungarian Embassy have also become regular, as well as Hungarian music started to be broadcasted on Egyptian Radio programmes. In 1955, a cooperation agreement was also signed by the Hungarian and Egyptian Radio, which was similar to the agreement between the two television stations. As a consequence, the Hungarian Radio also started to play Egyptian music on a weekly basis. However, due to cultural misunderstandings, Egyptian Radio often referred to all kinds of Hungarian music as “Gypsy music” which the Hungarian side usually complained about. The Bartók Memorial Committee also achieved significant results in Egypt those years. Among others, a special concert commemorating Bartók was held at the Cairo Opera in 1956 thanks to the Committee’s initiative.

Other commemorations were also aired on the radio and were held in several schools and art-related associations. Pianist Lajos Hernádi gave successful concerts during a month-long tour across Egypt, again with the support of the Bartók Memorial Committee. As a result of these events, a special agreement on music education soon enabled students to earn scholarships and get the chance to study in Egypt or in Hungary. Hungarian dance groups visited Egypt on several occasions, as well. For example, in 1963 the Hungarian Wild Roses group took part in the 1st International Folk Arts Festival with several highly successful performances, one of which was personally attended by President Nasser’s wife as well, and which also attracted the attention of media. In addition to the above mentioned, the Hungarian National Ballet’s successful performance also has to be mentioned, just like Hungarian iceskater artists who were involved in the establishment of the Cairo Ice Revue and Ice Theatre (Fügedi, 2012, pp. 147–151). In terms of educational and scientific relations, 700–800 Egyptians obtained degrees or doctorate title in Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s, which was the result of the fact that in the 1970s among Warsaw Pact countries mainly Hungary could host Arab students wishing to pursue their university studies in the region (Kovács, 2013, p. 91).



Gyula Germanus (1884–1979), the famous Hungarian orientalist, also visited Egypt several times, although his recognition and knowledge were not always used in the most optimal way for the advantage of Hungary by Hungarian diplomats. Germanus was a respected person in the Arab region, many of his works were translated into Arabic and he even participated in the work of the Egyptian Arabic Academic Dictionary Committee. His first trip to Egypt was back in the 1930s, when he became a student at Al-Azhar University where he obtained a wide range of academic contacts and, as a practising Muslim, also prepared for his pilgrimage to Mecca. During later visits, he also had the opportunity to meet with President Nasser on several occasions (in 1955 and again in 1964) (Udvarvölgyi, 2021, pp. 249–281).

The 1950s marks the beginning of the active presence of Hungarian Egyptologists and archaeologists in Egypt. The first to visit the country was the art historian and Egyptologist Aladár Dobrovits, and later in 1964, Hungary also participated with an expedition and several Hungarian researchers in the international project called “The Great Nubian Rescue Mission” organised by UNESCO, which allowed some of the finds to be transferred to the Hungarian Museum of Fine Arts. This project has also significantly raised the reputation of Hungarian science internationally, as well as paved the way for further excavations by Hungarian researchers in Egypt. The most notable of these further projects are linked to Egyptologist László Kákosy, as well as to Egyptologist and historian Vilmos Wessetzky, but also to ancient historian and Nubiologist László Török (Udvarvölgyi, 2021, pp. 271–272). In particular, Professor Kákosy continued his on-site research in Thebes in the 1980s, which laid down the foundation of Hungarian archaeological group excavations still active today (Kovács, 2013, p. 91).

One of the most recent major achievements of this process was the opening of an exhibition at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo entitled ‘Hungarian excavations in the metropolis of Thebes – Celebration for the 102 years of fieldwork in Egypt’ in 2009, which showcased a summary of the work of Hungarian archaeologists in Egypt from the very beginning. With two exceptions, the exhibition of 82 artefacts was built around the theme of ancient Egyptian cult of the dead, with a sculptural block depicting Djehutimes, the official of Ramses II, placed in a centre position. The idea of the exhibition came up in 2000, when the Egyptian Museum in Cairo celebrated its centenary. In this framework, it was also initiated to present the artefacts of foreign missions working in Egypt, including those of the Hungarians, by organising temporary exhibitions (*Múlt-kor*, 2009d). Finally, the exhibition was opened personally by István Hiller, Minister of Education and Culture, in Cairo. During his official visit to Egypt in 2008, the Minister also signed the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Work Plan between Hungary and Egypt for the period of 2008–2010 with Hany Helal⁸, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, in Cairo (*Pécsi Újság*, 2009).

⁸ Hany Helal: Former Egyptian Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, member of the Scientific Committee of the Egyptian Foundation for Research and Community Development. He

Hungary's first cultural institute outside of Europe opened in Cairo on 26 October 1974. Since 1977, the institute is known as the Office of the Hungarian Cultural Counsellor in Cairo (KTH), and its primary mission is to promote Hungarian culture, to support educational and scientific cooperation, and to foster the development of friendly relations between the two countries. The Institute also supports the archaeological mission in Egypt, which has a group of six to eight people and conduct field researches for three months every year. The KTH also operates in rural towns mainly as an office spreading informations, and also as an institution for the implementation of the bilateral work plans in the fields of culture, education and science. The director of the institute is the Cultural Counsellor of the Embassy of Hungary in Cairo (Ladányi, N. Rózsa, 2012, pp. 131–133).

Notable cultural events in Egypt attended regularly by Hungarian artists with the support of KTH, are the Cairo International Film Festival, the Alexandria International Dance Festival, the Cairo Jazz Festival, the Cairo Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival and the Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festival. In addition, the Institute also hold a number of literature nights, seminars and other self-organized programmes besides collaborating with the Hungarian guest lecturer at the Faculty of Languages of the Ain Shams University in Cairo, as well as providing place for Hungarian courses in its building. In the library of KTH, visitors can also find thousands of books in Hungarian (official website of the Liszt Institute - Hungarian Cultural Centre Cairo website). In Hungary, it is possible to learn Arabic language at the Department of Semitic and Arabic Studies of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and at the Department of Arabic Studies of Pázmány Péter University. It can also be noted, that educational links between the two countries are developing dynamically. Hungary provides 115 scholarships per year for Egyptian students to study at Hungarian universities within the framework of the Stipendium Hungaricum programme (Magyarország Nagykövetsége Kairó (n. d.).

Altogether, the cultural, scientific and educational relations between Hungary and Egypt are not the most important aspects of the bilateral ties, but in general the cooperation in these areas is very fruitful and productive nowadays, as well. Several civil and non-governmental organisations are also actively involved in the course of strengthening the friendly relationship between the two countries, most notably the Hungarian–Egyptian Friendship Society (Magyar-Egyiptomi Baráti Társaság, 2009). The development of the bilateral cultural and diplomatic relations is also supported by the

graduated in Mining Engineering from the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University in 1974, and obtained a PhD in Earth Sciences in France in 1984. He has been Professor at the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University (1993) and also a President of Senghor University in Alexandria since 2016. He has also been cultural and scientific advisor to the Egyptian Embassy in France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland. He has served as an expert on earth science programmes at the UNESCO regional office in Cairo (1993) and as a UNESCO advisor and administrative director of the International Centre for Experimental Science and Applications of Synchrotron Light in the Middle East (SESAME) in Jordan (2002). In addition to his political activities, his scientific research has also contributed to the development of education policy in Egypt, for which he has received several awards and distinctions (YBSSD, 2022).



activities of several prominent scholars, such as the aforementioned Gyula Germanus. In the rest of this paper, I would like to present the diverse work of one of these well-known scholars, namely István Zimonyi's.

István Zimonyi, the Versatile Researcher and Professor

István Zimonyi was born on 28 June 1956 in Eger, where he studied until the end of his secondary school years. His studies thereafter led him to Szeged, where he began his academic career as a student of English History at the University of Szeged, that time known as József Attila University of Szeged (JATE), between 1976 and 1981. András Róna-Tas's Hungarian prehistory course had a great impact on him with its unique methodology already in his first semester. It made him attending further upper year courses, and as a second year student he officially took up the Altaistics major. The quality of education at the department was high thanks to the teaching staff, but mainly as a result of the work of Professor Róna-Tas, who managed to invite many of the best professors to Szeged. Accordingly, István Zimonyi had the opportunity to learn from renowned experts like Katalin U. Kőhalmi, István Vásáry, Géza Bethlenfalvy, István Mándoky Kongur and Lajos Tardy, as well as guest lecturers from foreign universities such as Dénes Sinor, Tibor Halasi Kun, or Kljastornij Sz. István Zimonyi's career was significantly influenced by these scholars and by what he learned from them during his university studies, which all contributed to his intention to stay in the academic field and become a researcher (Kincses–Nagy, 2017. p. 5).

In 1981, he graduated in Turkology and English language and literature, moreover, starting from the same year onwards he attended language classes at the Department of Semitic and Arabic Studies of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) for two years. Right after returning home from Cairo where he studied Arabic for a year with scholarship, he passed the intermediate Arabic language exam. His field of research is very diverse, and as his academic career has developed, it broadened even further. He defended his doctoral dissertation (*Volga Bulgars in the early 13th Century*) with summa cum laude in 1983 and obtained his Candidate of Science in Linguistics title (*The Origins of the Volga Bulgars*) in 1990 by defending his dissertation at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, as well. The book version of this dissertation (*Studia Uralo-Altaica* 32, 1990. Szeged.) is still considered as a basic work in Turkology and historiography, but it is also his best known and most cited paper. His scientific interest gradually turned to the medieval history of the Turkic speaking nomads living in Eastern Europe and the early history of Hungarians. The collection and translation with commentary of the available contemporary sources was also essential for these researches (Kincses–Nagy, 2017. p. 5). As part of the results of this work, he published three volumes from the legacy of Mihály Kmoskó (*Kmoskó Mihály, Mohammedan writers on the steppe peoples*), and between 1994 and 1996 he was involved in an international collaboration with Humboldt scholarship. In the framework of this collaboration he also published a joint study with

Professor Hansgerd Göckenjan in Göttingen in 2001 (*Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter: die Ğayhānī-Tradition* (Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam, al-Bakrī und al-Marwazī) – *Veröffentlichung der Societas Uralo-Altaica*, Band 54., 2001, Wiesbaden). He carried out his habilitation in the field of history in 2003, his academic lecture was entitled *Kazar–Hungarian relations* and his seminar lecture was entitled *Islam and the medieval Eastern Europe*. His habilitation thesis was published in 2005 as volume 22 of the Library of Ancient History (*Muslim Sources on the Magyars in the second half of the 9th century The Magyar chapter of the Ğayhānī Tradition*⁹), which was later published in English and German, as well (*Vámbéry Polgári Társulás*, 2009).

Starting from the beginning of his academic career, he carried out research and hold lectures at several universities. Between 1981 and 1993 he worked at the Department of Altaistics of the University of Szeged (called Attila József University at that time), and starting from 1993 he became an associate professor and the head of the Department of Medieval History. From 1994 he worked for 18 months as a Humboldt-fellow in Giessen, and from 2007 until 2011 he served as the Director of the Cultural Counsellor's Office of the Embassy of Hungary in Cairo, which will later be discussed in details. In 2011 he returned to Hungary, and continued working as an associate professor and head of the Department of Medieval History at the University of Szeged (SZTE). In 2014 he was awarded the title of Doctor of Sciences by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. His successfully defended monography titled as the *Key issues of the early Hungarian history. Theories in the light of recent literature* was published by Balassi Publishing House in the same year. In addition to the Department of Medieval History, he has also been appointed as the head of the Department of Altaistics in 2015. As a university professor he has courses related to his main fields of research, namely to the history of medieval Turkic speaking nomads, to the early Hungarian–Turkish relations, to Eastern Europe and also to the medieval history of the Turkic speaking peoples of the Muslim world. His students regularly participate in academic student conferences succesfully (Kincses–Nagy, 2017. p. 6).

He is also very active in terms of research organisation. In 1991, he launched the book series entitled Library of Hungarian Prehistory, 34 volumes of which have already been published by Balassi Publishing House. He also initiated a two-yearly conference series on the history of medieval nomads living in the Eurasian steppe, and also serves the role of the main organizer of it since the first event. Besides reknowned researchers, the conferences also provide opportunity for young professionals and students to present their researches, gain experience and at the same time to try their skills in an international environment (Kincses–Nagy, 2017. p. 6). The first three conferences (1997,

⁹ “The name al- Ğayhānī in the literature is mainly used to refer to a geographer who lived in the court of the 10th century Samanids. However, several members of the al- Ğayhānī family, attained high positions and had the educational background that enabled them to engage in serious literary activity.” (Zimonyi, 2015, p. 13.).



2000, 2002) were held in Szeged, and the lectures of them were published in the Library of Hungarian Prehistory book series. Slowly the conference has outgrown the framework of the Hungarian academic life and consequently since 2004, it is organised with an international scope and under a new title called “Medieval Nomads”. Accordingly, in 2004 it was held in Szeged, in 2007 in Jászberény, in 2009 in Miskolc, in 2011 in Cairo, in 2013 in Moscow, in 2016 in Szeged, in 2018 in Shanghai and in 2019 in Sofia (official website of the *8th International Conference on Medieval History of the Eurasian Steppe*). The written versions of the lectures have been published in the 2005 issue of *Acta Orientalia*, in the 2007-2008 and 2011 volumes of *Chronica*, and in the 53 volumes of *Studia Uralo-Altaica*. István Zimonyi also takes an active role in the scientific community life.

From 1993 to 2005 he was the member of the Committee on Oriental Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, from 2001 to 2004 of the Social Sciences College of the OTKA, and from 2001 to 2006 he was a member of the Committee on History, Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology, Art and Cultural History of the MAB. He is currently a member of the Silk Road Research Group of the MTA-ELTE-SZTE. He is also active as an education professional, for example he also served as a coordinator of the history courses branch of the Humanities Consortium established for the introduction of the Bologna system in Hungary. More precisely, he was responsible for organising the meeting sessions regarding BA and MA course requirements (2004–2007) and was also involved in the implementation of the Curriculum Development tender of the Humanities Consortium. His network of international academic connections is also noteworthy. He is the Vice President of the Göttingen-based Societa Uralo-Altaica, and since the end of 2013 he is also a member of the editorial board of the American Archivum Eurasia Medii Aevi. He also maintains good relationship with a significant number of Turkish, German, Egyptian, Kazakh and Russian institutions (*Vámbéry Polgári Társulás*, 2009).

Since defending his doctoral dissertation, he has published ten books and edited six other volumes. Furthermore, he has published more than 120 papers and lexicon articles, as well as attended 50 national and international conferences (*Vámbéry Polgári Társulás*, 2009). In 2016, the professor celebrated his 60th birthday and for this occasion his students, colleagues and friends greeted him with a conference and with a published book of the conference lectures (Vér, 2017).

István Zimonyi and the Arab World

István Zimonyi's career is in many ways connected to the Arab world, and especially to Egypt. The interest in Hungarian prehistory and in the Muslim contemporary sources

from the period of the 'conquest of the homeland' (Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin) increased domestically at the turn of the century. At that time, a collection of largely bilingual texts was published (*The sources of the conquest of the homeland*), in which the works of Muslim authors were published with translations and notes by Géza Kuun, but which was also severely criticised. After the appearance of this book, several other researchers of Hungarian prehistory, including György Györffy, Károly Czeglédy and Gyula Kristó, have also included Muslim sources in their works. Mihály Kmoskó (1876–1931) was an important Hungarian orientalist of the period of dualism and post-World War I era, who was also invited by Bálint Hóman¹⁰ to prepare a modern translation of Muslim sources on pre-conquest of the homeland' Hungarian history. Although Kmoskó completed the work, it was never published partly because of his death, and partly due to his anti-Semitic articles as in the post-World War II Hungarian political situation it was impossible to find a publisher for his works as a consequence of these articles.

However thanks to István Zimonyi's work, Kmoskó's manuscript, which is an essential paper from a scientific point of view, was finally published, setting aside the author's political views. The new scientific results of the more than half a century that has passed since Mihály Kmoskó's death, made it necessary for Zimonyi as an editor to indicate these new findings in notes. Moreover, the manuscript was not yet ready for printing at the time of Kmoskó's death, thus Zimonyi was also responsible for the renumbering of the chapters, the correction of the old language forms in the text and also for the transcription of the informations based on current international standards in use (Balogh, 2000, pp. 324–327).

Zimonyi also has an in-depth knowledge of the Ġayhānī tradition and especially about its Hungarian chapter. Thanks to the international cooperation that was carried

¹⁰ Bálint Hóman (1885–1951): Historian, university professor, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and a leading cultural politician. He was a prominent researcher of Hungarian prehistory and medieval history, his best-known works include the *Hungarian History*, commonly known as "Hóman–Szekfű", and the *Hungarian Money History 1000–1325*. He also held high ranking positions in the cultural administration of the state, being the head of the Library of the Hungarian National Museum from 1922 to 1923 and the director general of the museum from 1923 to 1932. His academic career ended in 1932 when he entered politics: from 1932 to 1938 he was the Minister of Religion and Public Education in the Gömbös- and Darányi- governments, between 1939 and 1942 he was the Minister of Education in the Teleki-, Bárdossy- and Kállay-governments, and for a short period of time he was the Minister without portfolio for National Education in the Imrédy-government. He was also one of the main advisers to Kuno Klebelsberg, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, regarding cultural policy issues. He rationalised the ministerial administration, public education and higher education, he was open to modern trends in his art policy and achieved significant results in the field of cultural diplomacy, as well. After his resignation in 1942, he was no longer involved in politics, rather focused primarily on scientific organisation works and served as a member of parliament for his constituency, Székesfehérvár, from 1932 to 1945. Due to his political activities, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences expelled him from its members in July 1945, and in 1946 the People's Tribunal sentenced him to life imprisonment as a war criminal, from which he was only released by the Metropolitan Court of Budapest on 6 March 2015 for lack of criminal offence. He was accused of taking part in the government meeting of 26 July 1941, which approved the state of war between Hungary and the Soviet Union. He died in Vác in 1951, but his remains were not identified until 2000 (Ujváry, 2020).



out in the framework of Humboldt scholarship, in Göttingen he has also published a work on the Ġayhānī tradition¹¹, but his habilitation thesis published in 2005 has also discussed the Hungarian chapter of the Ġayhānī tradition, which is the most important Muslim source of early Hungarian history. The German version of this work was published in 2006 and the English version in 2015 by Brill Publishers.

Another aspect of Zimonyi's work directly related to the Arab world and Egypt in particular, is his researches regarding the Magarab tribe. The actual discovery of the Magarab tribe is associated with László Almásy, who in 1935, while buying petrol in Wadi Halfa, unexpectedly encountered a man called 'Ibrahim al-Majar'. It was soon cleared, that he was named after a tribe, living on a nearby island, who believed themselves to have been brought there from Europe 400 years ago by Sultan Suleiman I (1520–1566). Subsequently, Almásy visited the tribe, where he found nearly 400 Magarabs. He was also informed about the existence of a similar-sized group of people living near Aswan. According to the tribe's knowledge, their first sheikh was Senjer. Their ancestors married Berber women, from whom they learned the Berber language, but they were aware of the fact that there are Hungarians living in Europe whom they considered their brothers and sisters. Two months later, Salih Osman Basir al-Majar, the sheikh of the Magar village, wrote a letter to Almásy in order to let him know that they had been living in their village, Tarím, for 400 years and that they had always wanted to hear news from Hungary.

The origins of the Magarabs are still disputed, but several studies support Almásy's information (Al-Naggar, 2015, p. 90–91). The name is a compound of the ethnonym 'magar' and the Nubian word 'ab', meaning 'tribe', rather than a merge of Hungarian and Arabic words. During a two month long trip in 1965, István Fodor also visited the Magarabs, who were then being forced to abandon their homes because of the construction of large dams. According to his report, the community consisted of about 7,000 people and their two larger groups were the Nubian-speaking ones in Kom Ombo and Wadi Halfa, most of whom were farmers, and the other Arabic-speaking group lived in the Aswan area, who were mostly merchants (Zimonyi, 2013a, p. 86).

In early 2011, Zimonyi found new data regarding the origin of Magarabs in the sources of Nubian history from the Ottoman period. The discovery led him to visit Ineiba and Qatta with photographer Ágnes Balázs, where he had the opportunity to meet the Magarabs. Most of their families had moved to Cairo and Alexandria by then, and only 300-400 were found in Ineiba. Based on the Magarabs' opinion and those of Almásy and István Fodor, their ancestor was Ibrahim Magar, who arrived to Nubia under the reign of the Ottoman Selim and Suleiman, where he established a family and from whom the rest of the tribe descended. Based on historical data, Zimonyi

¹¹ Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter: die Ġayhānī-Tradition (Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, Ḥudūd al-'Ālam, al-Bakrī und al-Marwazī) – *Veröffentlichung der Societas Uralo-Altaica*, Band 54., 2001, Wiesbaden.

found that Hungarians appeared in Egypt as early as the 15th century and during the reign of Mátyás Hunyadi there were diplomatic relations with the Mameluk ruler.¹²

Although in the 16th century Franciscan priest Gábor Pécsváradi and György Huszti Raszinyai stayed in Egypt as prisoners and not by their own will, they wrote the first detailed Hungarian description of the Giza pyramids. Zimonyi did detailed research on the history of the island of Qasr Ibrim and its fortress, and also examined Arabic and Turkish documents (dated between 1620 and 1759) found in a buried clay pot, of which 8 Turkish and 8 Arabic sources mention a total of 31 men named as Magar. According to Zimonyi, it actually means 22 people, due to the repetitions, and he was even able to sort them into a genealogical order. On the basis of these findings, he concluded that Magar Ibrahim, the forefather of the Magarab legends, is a historical person who may have come to Nubia in the late 16th century. “Four generations of his descendants have been revealed from the material published up to 1759. All these have provided historical evidence for the Hungarian origin of the Magarab community, the Magar tribe. The Magarab community may have lost the knowledge of Hungarian language and may have took up local customs in its culture within one or two generations, but at the same time it preserved its ethnic consciousness, the main element of which is their Hungarian origin.” (Zimonyi, 2013a, pp. 86–89).

In 2015, Zimonyi also presented his research and findings on the Magarabs in Egypt at a symposium organised by the Office of the Hungarian Cultural Counsellor in Cairo (KTH), which was covered by the Egyptian press, as well. The title of his presentation was *The Magarabs and Qasr Ibrim - Hungarian tribe in Nubia (Watani Copt Newspaper, 18 March 2015)*. In general, István Zimonyi is a frequent speaker of academic conferences in Egypt. On 10 March 2015, he presented a lecture on his research about Eastern European nomads at the seminar titled as *Hungarian–Egyptian relations and Eastern European nomads in the Middle Ages* at Mansoura University. The conference was attended by renowned Egyptian scholars, as well as history students from Mansoura University (*Official website of the University of Mansoura, 10 March 2015*). According to another Egyptian press report, Professor Zimonyi also visited the Library of Alexandria in 2015, where he gave a lecture with the title of *Islam and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (Al-Masry Al-Youm Egyptian Independent daily, 2015)*.

István Zimonyi as the Director of the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Cairo (2007–2011)

István Zimonyi is also associated with Egypt and the Arab world by his former position as the Director of the Cultural Counsellor’s Office of the Embassy of the Republic of

¹² ‘In 1483, after his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, János Lázói visited the Sinai Peninsula and Cairo. During his journey he met many Hungarians who were in the service of the Egyptian Mameluk Sultan. In 1488, two of King Matthias's envoys visited Sultan Kaitbai in Cairo, the second of whom was even mentioned by the famous Egyptian historian Ibn Iyas. King Matthias saw in the Egyptian Mameluk court an ally against the Ottoman Turkish Empire.’ (Zimonyi, 2013a, p. 87).



Hungary in Cairo (commonly known as the Hungarian Cultural Institute or as KTH) from October 2007 to the summer of 2011. The duties of the Director of the Cultural Institute include the preparation of programmes for university, academic and government delegations visiting the region, the organisation and implementation of cultural plans, liaising with the relevant cultural and educational offices, supporting the Hungarian archaeological mission, and also other activities that can be freely determined by the Ambassador of Hungary (Ladányi, N. Rózsa, 2012, pp. 131–133). In Zimonyi's own words, his work as a cultural counsellor means "from the diplomatic point of view, the management of the Hungarian–Egyptian cultural agreements. Besides, his cultural mission is to introduce Hungarian culture to Egypt, which on the other side, also means the promotion of Egyptian culture in Hungary. There is an academic side of the work. Developing Hungarian–Egyptian educational and scientific relations is a top priority." (Kovács, 2013, p. 91). Among these diverse tasks, he highlighted the assistance of Arab students wishing to study in Hungary, the promotion of research in Arab studies and Egyptology, and the support of the Hungarian archaeological mission in Egypt as core tasks of the institute.

Zimonyi served as a diplomat in Egypt during the last three and a half years of the Mubarak era, which coincided with the Egyptian revolution. At that time, Egypt was a military dictatorship in practice, alongside formal democratic institutions. It was beneficial from the point of stability and security that are important for such areas of Hungarian interest as tourism, but the revolution caused a very significant downturn affecting the whole Egyptian economy, including this sector, as well. Before Zimonyi actually took his office, the programme of the Hungarian–Egyptian Cultural Exchange Agreement, usually renewed every 3 to 4 years, had already been prepared by him in advance, but due to changes in the Hungarian Ministry's practice of administration at the end of his mission, finally it could not be renewed due to administrative difficulties. In his assessment Zimonyi refers to the successful Hungarian–Egyptian Cultural Week as one of the greatest achievements of his term. The most important programme of this event was the more than 2 months long exhibition at the Egyptian Museum presenting the results of the already hundred years old Hungarian scientific field of Egyptology (*Múlt-kor*, 2009b). The Institute also achieved good results in the areas of music and film, which have traditionally been strong in Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations. There were Hungarian participants at the Cairo Film Festival and at the Documentary Film Festival, but in the field of music, the good relations of the Hungarian State Opera House with Egypt can also be highlighted. There have also been joint events organised with other EU countries, for example the Euro–Arab jazz festival, a circus festival and a film festival. The Szeged Contemporary Dance Company, the Sebő Ensemble and the Nádor Quartet also performed successfully in Egypt as part of the cultural programme of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency. The overall success of the programme was not even affected by the outbreak of the revolution, which resulted in a gap of only one and a half to two months (Kovács, 2013, p. 92). In 2011, during the EU Presidency of

Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also had an official visit to Egypt, talked with the Secretary General of the Arab League and participated in the Hungarian–Egyptian Business Forum (*MTI*, 2011).

One of the most exciting events of Zimonyi’s diplomatic mission was the “Medieval Nomads” international conference on steppe history and Hungarian prehistory, which was first organised in Szeged and has already been discussed in previous chapters. Besides the interesting lectures, the excitement was also caused by the fact that the starting date of the conference, 25 January 2011, coincided with the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution. Despite of it, the event, which attracted a large number of international researchers, went on smoothly for two days, but after the end of the conference programme, things outside on the streets became serious during the attendants’ visit to the pyramids (Zimonyi, 2012). The professor recalls the events as follows: “Reaching to the city centre was no longer completely safe, and one of us from the group was unable to get into his hotel. Travelling back to Hungary was not easy either, but after all, a history conference is exciting when you feel the breath of history on the back of your neck.” Overall, the conference was a success and the lectures of it have already been published in Issue 9 of *Chronica*. The professor also recalls the research he carried out in Egypt on the Magarab tribe as a very exciting experience, that also happened during his time as a cultural counsellor, and was discussed in details in the previous chapter (Kovács, 2013, p. 94).

Besides the above mentioned, in order to achieve the important goal of establishing a Hungarian Department at the Ain Shams University in Cairo, the professor managed to invite several PhD students, graduated with Hungarian as a major, from Egypt to Szeged. In his view, in order to achieve a widerange presence for Hungarian culture in the Arab region, the best pieces of Hungarian literature should be translated into Arabic, and Egypt is the most suitable country in the region to start the wideranging promotion of Hungarian literature (Őszi, 2014, pp. 11–12). To achieve this goal, the development of international academic relations among universities is a strategic priority, in which the University of Szeged can play a key role. Furthermore, Zimonyi also believes that the target audience for Hungarian culture should be the Egyptian intellectuals and the middle class, given the fact that reaching out to the masses is not a realistic goal due to the scarcity of available financial resources (Kovács, 2013, pp. 91–94). Before Zimonyi took his office, translation among Arabic and Hungarian language literature had been halted for a long time. However, with his support, translation projects were relaunched, for example, Sherifa Kamel translated Dezső Kosztolányi’s works, while Abdallah Abdel-Ati Al-Naggar wrote the first guide book about Hungary in Arabic. These works have been published in Cairo and became available in the capitals of other Arab countries, as well, which is a significant achievement (*Ektab.com*, n. d.).

In his application documents for the post of director of the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Cairo, the professor wrote, “First of all, it is important to define the cultural



values that a Hungarian cultural institute can represent in Egypt.” On the one hand, this culture is obviously part of European culture, the general features of which are easy to recognize in the Egyptian context. On the other hand, it is a specific manifestation of European culture, with many unique features that link Hungarian culture to the East. I believe that the communication of the elements that highlight this particular “bridge role” of Hungarian culture, can be one of the specificities of the process of introducing Hungarian culture to Egypt. At the same time, and especially in this context, it is natural that the presentation of Hungarian culture in Egypt should be understood as the presentation of the universal Hungarian culture, including not only the culture of Hungarians living outside Hungary in the Carpathian Basin, but also the presentation of values (I am thinking of Hungarian artists and scholars living in different parts of the world) being important and outstanding in international terms (Zimonyi, 20 June 2007, p. 3). Looking through the above mentioned goals and ideas for developing cultural relations between the two countries, the professor has indeed led the institute based on these principles during his diplomatic mission and, as far as it was possible, managed to achieve many of the specific objectives (Zimonyi, 20 June 2007).

Summary

Overall, it can be stated that Arab–Hungarian, and especially Egyptian–Hungarian diplomatic and cultural relations have a long tradition, but they only began to take on an institutional framework in the 20th century, and their intensity increased mainly from the 1950s onwards. Recently, relations between the two countries can be considered good in all areas, and even though the economic, trade and political fields are the priority, significant progress has been made in the cultural and scientific sectors, as well, particularly with regard to film, music and education. By looking through the events of diplomatic history, it is a well-established statement that the success of the bilateral relations have been supported by the contribution of a number of prominent Hungarian people. One of them is Professor István Zimonyi, an outstanding scholar and researcher of the Arab world, language and culture, who, as the Director of the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Cairo, has also directly contributed to the development of Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations. Continuing his productive work in the future, as well, he will certainly contribute to even more achievements with the results of his research, and to the establishment of even more developed links between the two countries, but also between the whole Arab region and Hungary.

To conclude, I would like to quote a funny story from Professor Zimonyi’s experiences as a cultural counsellor, in order to illustrate how difficult the work of developing relations between two countries with such different cultural backgrounds can be, and at the same time, how beautiful a mission it is for this same reason: ‘Once we asked an Arab theatre company to perform Örkény’s drama, the Cats’ Play. The

local actors did perform it, but they put two cats on stage and compared their love story to those of humans.’ (Autumn, 2014, pp. 11–12).

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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