

DAVID BAILEY

MAGICAL MAGYARS

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE
WORLD'S ONCE GREATEST FOOTBALL TEAM



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CHAPTER 1

When Hungary's football history is told, Jimmy Hogan's name should be written in gold.

Gusztáv Sebes

THE origins of the ancient Hungarians are much debated, but the accepted theory is that they stemmed 6,000 years ago from tribes who lived in Russia's Ural Mountains on Europe's border with Asia.

By AD 463, these proto-Hungarians had migrated south-west into the lands of the Turkic Empire (modern-day Ukraine), and, by interbreeding with Turks and the Mongol followers of Attila the Hun, burgeoned from a simple nomadic farming people into a 400,000-strong tribe. They were a formidable fighting force, renowned for their horsemanship and the accuracy of their arrows, and thus called the 'Onogurs': in ancient Turkish, 'on' meaning 'ten' and 'ogur' meaning 'arrow'.

In the ninth century, one of the Onogurs' largest sub-tribes, the Megyers, migrated further westwards, settling upon a fertile terrain they named 'Magyarország' – 'Magyarland'. The term 'Hungary' is derived from 'Hungaras', the Latin spelling of 'Onogurs'.

After five centuries of relative peace under the rule of a succession of Magyar kings, in the mid-16th century vast swathes of Hungary was conquered by Turkey, to become the western outpost of the Ottoman Empire. The Turks remained for almost 150 years until they were driven out by the armies of the Austrian-dominated Habsburg Monarchy. The Habsburgs had their own agenda for Hungary, and made the country one of their empire's principalities under direct rule

from Vienna. In 1848, the Hungarians revolted: a bid for independence that was ruthlessly quashed by the Habsburgs begging the military assistance of Russia. However, for the Hungarians, the defeat was not in vain. The revolution unsettled the Habsburgs, and – fearful that the Hungarians would rise again – they reached upon a compromise in which the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary combined as one to form the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The dual monarchy was one in that the Hungarians may have felt themselves to be the poor relation, but it was undeniable that the investment by the powerhouse that was the House of Habsburg was responsible for evolving Hungary from a rural backwater into one of the most powerful countries in Europe. And in 1873 a capital city befitting of Hungary's new status was established, made by the joining of two towns that stood on opposite sides of the River Danube: Buda to the west and Pest to the east. Budapest.

The sport of football was first brought to Hungary in the late 1870s by students returning from studying in Britain. But their lack of knowledge and regard for the rules meant their games of 'kick-ball' were bloody, chaotic and short-lived. Such mayhem was all rather distasteful for the gentlemen's athletic and gymnastic clubs that had sprung up across Hungary, catering for the country's new middle classes, and it wouldn't be until a decade later that they took the game up with any seriousness. The first official football match in Hungary took place in October of 1897 when the Budapest Torna Club (BTC), Hungary's most prestigious gymnastics club, faced the Vienna Cricket and Football Club in Budapest. 'The Cricketers' arrived with a team including seven Britons, two of whom were the sons of the match's referee. A well-heeled crowd of 2,000 dressed in their finest crammed Pest's Millennial Racetrack to watch the match professing much amusement at the referee's whistle-blowing antics. The 'Austrian' veterans (their team had been formed two years earlier) won 2–0, their goals met with warm applause from both the Hungarian spectators and players.

By the turn of the century, a further 17 clubs had followed BTC's suit and set up football teams, for not to have done so would have meant abstaining from what had fast become the nation's most popular sport. For the gentlemen participants clad in flannel shirts, knickerbockers and ankle-high boots, the emphasis was purely on attack and glory.

For the spectators, suppressed in their daily lives by the constraints of society, the joy was in being able to yell, swear and cheer at will. Football had come to Hungary, and the Hungarians loved it.

In 1901, a football association² and a Budapest league were established and the same year an English professional club³ visited Budapest for the first time – Southampton FC, soundly thrashing BTC 8–0 and the *next day* a select Hungarian team 13–0. Hereafter, British clubs began to make Budapest a regular pre-season destination, assured of a warm welcome and bolstered by the assurance that they wouldn't be beaten. For this reason, in 1908, the English national team chose Hungary (and Austria) for their first international matches outside of the British Isles.

So one-sided was the match that the Hungarians, in losing 0–7, never left their own half for the entirety of the 90 minutes. 'I cannot possibly comment on something I have not witnessed in action,'⁴ was the reply of England captain Vivian Woodward when he was asked afterwards what he thought of Hungary's attack. Though, perhaps feeling he'd been a tad harsh towards his hosts, Woodward, a stickler for fair play and manners, did single out one Hungarian player for praise: Imre Schlosser, a 16-year-old debutant who Woodward, correctly, predicted would become 'Hungary's best player for the next decade'.⁵

The emergence of Schlosser as Hungary's star player was reflective of the direction that football in the country had taken. As the sport became the favourite spectator pastime of the masses, rowdier working-class crowds replaced the well-heeled ones that had treated matches as social events. Schlosser was a hero of the former and appalled the latter, though in fairness his habit of spitting into the opposition's goal after scoring was never going to endear him to the gentry.

Schlosser was everything that Hungarian athletes had hitherto not been. A street urchin with legs so bandy, due to childhood malnutrition, that they were a decisive advantage to 'Slozi' on the football field, as he hopped and lopped, leaving opponents unable to anticipate his next move. In addition, Schlosser wasn't even what the gentry considered a pure Hungarian; he was a Swab, a German-speaking Hungarian, at a time when Hungary was straining to retain its own identity in the shadow of the all-controlling Austria.

Swabs made up almost a quarter of Budapest's population. Their heartland was the Pest district of Ferencváros, and the local football club, Ferencvárosi Torna Club,⁶ provided them with an outlet through which they could voice pride in their ethnicity.

The only other club who could remotely match Ferencváros's support and finances was MTK,⁷ the club of Budapest's Jews, who likewise numbered roughly a quarter of the capital's population. The club was formed in 1888, by Jews but not solely for Jews. MTK's football team was formed over a decade later and was a success from the very start, winning the league title in only their second season.

Over the next 24 years, such was the domination of the two clubs that no other clubs would win the league title: MTK winning 13 titles to Ferencváros's 11. In 1911, Ferencváros constructed a brand new stadium boasting a grandstand and a clubhouse complete with restaurant. It was considered the finest stadium in Europe – at least until a year later, when, one kilometre up the road, MTK built an equally grand home stadium.⁸

The drive behind MTK was the club's colourful chairman, Alfréd Brüll. A former champion wrestler, Brüll had the ambition of making MTK the biggest and best football club in Europe by utilising the full support of Hungary's Jews, one of the largest populations of Jews in Europe. He was always on the lookout for ways to progress *his* club, regardless of feathers ruffled. Brüll decided that MTK's pristine new stadium was deserving of a star player, and thus seized upon an argument over money between Imre Schlosser and Ferencváros and brought Slozi to MTK, supposedly luring the player via his socially ambitious wife with kitchen furniture and a grand piano. Ferencváros were furious that their rivals had stolen their best player, a player so revered that the local council were in the process of naming a street after him. Ferencváros complained to the FA, who, never having faced such a predicament, dithered, then banned Schlosser for six months, hoping this would be long enough for him to 'change his mind'. He didn't.

Brüll then proceeded to disregard Hungarian football's amateur ethic by employing the services of a *professional* coach, and a foreigner to boot: Jacky Robertson, a former Scotland international. Brüll had purposely sought a Scotsman, and only a Scotsman, based on Scottish

footballers' new-found reputation as the best in Europe. Scots had won this accolade after their nation's footballers had invented 'passing', an acknowledgement that rolling the ball to a team-mate was not an act of cowardice. Scotland's footballers further recognised that once a player released the ball, it was productive for him to quickly move to an unmarked position to make himself available for a return pass. In hiring Robertson, MTK obtained one of the more credible, canny retired Scottish footballers venturing into Europe. The 34-year-old was a man of firsts: Chelsea's first signing, scorer of their first-ever league goal and the London club's first-ever manager. The 'Scottish Passing' that Robertson⁹ introduced would become MTK's signature over the next decade and beyond when they dominated Hungarian football. In all Robertson spent just over one season at MTK before returning home to Britain.

Robertson's departure was timely for just a year later Europe was enveloped in war, with Britain and Hungary on opposing sides. Events had been sparked by the assassination in July 1914 of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (next in line to the Habsburg throne) and his wife while on a visit to the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo. The assassin was a Serbian separatist, and, in retaliation, Austria–Hungary declared war on Serbia. To Serbia's aid came Russia, which declared war on Austria–Hungary. Germany allied with Austria–Hungary and declared war on Russia, and two days later France. Britain allied with France and declared war on Germany.

Without further ado, Hungary's mostly conscript armies were despatched to the Eastern Front to fight against the might of the Russian army, where, ill-supplied, outmanned and outgunned, they suffered one heavy defeat after another.

In 1916, the elderly Emperor Franz Joseph died, and the Habsburg throne was passed down to his nephew Karl. The new Emperor was a leader more aware of the Hungarians' grievances, and as public dissatisfaction over the war mounted, he surrendered his powers as King of Hungary to one of the Habsburgs' most vocal opponents – a radical nobleman called Count Mihály Károlyi, nicknamed the 'Red Count'. Károlyi's party had won the public's favour through an anti-Habsburg and, more importantly, an anti-war stance. And as thousands of Hungarians took to Budapest's streets to cheer the new government,

the irony wasn't lost on Hungary's now precarious aristocracy that one of their own had ended 350 years of Habsburg rule in Hungary.

For the first two years of the war, football in Hungary was suspended; but such was the public demand for the sport that the first division was resumed, albeit with fewer clubs and under the name 'War League'. It was a league dominated by MTK, again due to the chutzpah of their chairman, Alfréd Brüll. Throughout the league's suspension, Brüll had continually searched for a replacement for Jacky Robertson. Alas, Scottish football coaches in wartime Hungary were thin on the ground, so Brüll settled for second best and an English one.

Jimmy Hogan was well known in English football as a master of ball control, but whether he was well liked was a different matter. He was odd. A non-swearing fitness fanatic, he was sarcastically nicknamed 'The Parson' by his team-mates for his preference for attending church over joining them at the pub. Coaches distrusted him; he was pushy, meddlesome and annoyingly inquisitive – offering unsolicited advice, questioning instructions and (perhaps most annoyingly of all) scrutinising contracts. He'd arrive for training sessions first, leave last, and in between constantly harangue for practice with a ball instead of just being satisfied, like everyone else was, with the traditional training of laps, sprints and star jumps. It was a reputation for meddling that meant that he spent the bulk of his playing days a level beneath his abilities¹⁰ in the English lower divisions, and when he retired (with a knee injury aged 30) put club chairmen off from taking a chance on him.

However, not *everyone* in English football was dismissive of 'The Parson'. James Howcroft was England's leading referee, and after officiating a 1912 match in which Austria drew at home to Hungary, was approached by Hugo Meisl, the young and ambitious president of the Austrian FA. Meisl¹¹ asked Howcroft's opinion as to how the Austrian team could improve, to which Howcroft recommended that Meisl employ an assistant from outside Austro-Hungarian football, one who could offer a new way of thinking, and it so happened he knew just the man ...

Hogan recalled that moving to Vienna was 'like stepping into paradise'.¹² His wife, their children and he lived in a luxury apartment, and his evenings were spent being feted in Vienna's sporting coffee houses, where football was famously discussed and dissected with

a high-brow intellectualism. Work too was a labour of love. The Catholic Hogan, son of a Lancashire mill worker, and the Jewish Meisl, son of a rich banker, clicked from the start, finding common ground in a shared obsession with a belief that intelligence in football would always triumph over stealth.

But, for Hogan, the good times in Vienna did not last. On the outbreak of the First World War, he was interned in a camp for foreign aliens, while his pregnant wife and two children were left to fend for themselves, only managing to flee Austria with the help of the neutral American counsel. Meisl was powerless to help, and Hogan never really forgave him: 'Thrown into prison with thieves and murderers, the Austrian FA broke my contract and left us to starve.'¹³ Although in his own way Meisl did help, by letting it be known that Hogan was in internment. The news reached the ears of Alfréd Brüll, who in turn had Baron Distay, the Cambridge-educated vice-president of MTK, use his contacts with the Red Cross to have Hogan released and brought to Hungary. Hogan, not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, immediately accepted the Baron's offer, and a week later arrived in Budapest to be greeted warmly by a large delegation and introduced to all as a Scotsman.

If Hogan had liked Vienna, then he was positively enraptured by Budapest – 'Europe's most beautiful city'¹⁴ – and the Hungarians: 'I can never forget their kindness or their hatred of the Austrians and Germans.'¹⁵ And it was no wonder. The new office and the facilities that awaited Hogan at the MTK stadium were superior to anything else in Europe, and the only restriction placed upon him as an enemy alien was to promise not to speak about the war. MTK also supplied him with an interpreter, a recently retired team captain called Dori Kürschner. The two quickly became firm friends – similar minds, fascinated with the tactics of football – and Kürschner's interpreter role soon merged into that of an invaluable coaching assistant.

Away from his family and with time on his hands, Hogan dived into his new job, a blank canvas at his disposal upon which to place his long-thought ideas. He'd long calculated that in an average game a player is, at best, in contact with the ball for just two minutes. Therefore the standard Hungarian training of two practice matches a week meant that the players were in contact with the ball for only

four minutes a week. For Hogan this was utterly insufficient, though better than in England, where ruled the belief that players in training should be starved of the ball so that come matchday they would be 'ball hungry'. Hogan was glad he'd left such nonsense behind, and in doubling MTK's weekly training sessions, he had his new charges repetitively working with a ball and nothing but a ball. With self-demonstration, Hogan drilled the players in his 11, self-taught, ways of trapping the ball. He had them learn tricks and feints, and sharpened their dribbling by having them run around sticks at full speed with the ball at their feet, first controlling it with the outside of the foot, then afterwards with only the inside. He further handed the players a long list of stretching exercises designed to keep them supple, exercises that he expected them to do in their own time outside of training – just as he had done as a player.

The team's elder players, led by Imre Schlosser, were taken aback by the intensity of their new coach, especially when Hogan ran his critical eye over their lifestyles, and then, much to their astonishment, ordered them to cut down on cigarettes, beer and goulash, and replace them with early nights, water and steamed vegetables. How was a man supposed to compete on cabbage? Mr Robertson had never been this picknickety.

The young players, however, were far more responsive – showing an eagerness to learn that was one of the main reasons why Hogan warmed so much to Hungary. With most of the adult first team conscripted into the army, Hogan had to assemble a team made up of schoolboys, veterans and players on war leave. The pick of the bunch was a 16-year-old by the name of György Orth, who Hogan had spotted playing for the Budapest club Vasas, urging Brüll to do whatever it took to get the lanky full-back to MTK: 'A player like this only comes about every hundred years.' Hogan placed Orth in the centre-half position to act as a 'playmaker' pulling strings in a team that used skill and guile, rather than brute force, to break down defences. Hogan's players, drilled in the art of ball control, were instructed to attack as one tight-knit unit with Orth as the pivot, keeping the ball on the ground, working up the field with short, incisive passes, retaining possession, remaining onside and pushing back the opposition defence. 'Scottish passing' evolved into 'Danubian passing'.

In November 1918, the Austro-Hungarian armies surrendered. Alfréd Brüll begged Hogan to stay, to bring his wife and children over to live in Budapest. But Hogan couldn't – he hadn't seen his family or country for four long years, and furthermore he was convinced that his time in Hungary would land him a job at an English club. It was Hogan's dream to become a success in English football, to silence the sniggers that dogged his name. If he had been able to win the league (twice) in a country with an impregnable language and with a rag-tag team of veterans and schoolboys, what heights could he achieve in English football with full-time professional footballers?

For Hungary, the Great War was nothing but an unmitigated disaster. An estimated one million of their troops were killed, and an almost equal number were injured or captured.

At home, people's blaming the aristocracy for leading them to slaughter led to a host of protests and crippling strikes. The foremost agitators were the Hungarian communists, their numbers considerably boosted by the return of thousands of prisoners of war, who, while in the captivity of the Russians, had been converted to Bolsheviks. The beleaguered government of Count Mihály Károlyi was impotent to prevent the chaos enveloping Hungary, and eventually the 'Red Count', now seemingly not red enough, relented and conceded power to the communists' leader, Béla Kun – 'The Hungarian Lenin'.

The *idea* of communism had initially greatly appealed to Hungary's downtrodden masses, but the reality of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was wholly different. The workers and peasants quickly saw that they would be even worse off under the communists' radical reforms, which were intended to place all industry and land under government ownership. Their dim view was darkened further by the communists' wont to despatch thugs to quell and arrest dissenters.

Hungary's communist government was no more popular with other European governments, including that of France. The French, wary of the threat that Bolshevism posed in their own country, backed the Romanians in invading Hungary, forcing Béla Kun and his government to flee after just 133 days in power. But while Kun may have fled (to Russia), the Romanian army remained, plundering and laying claim to Hungarian territories which they believed were rightfully Romanian. It was only when a group of military-backed nationalists filled the

power vacuum left by Kun that Romania withdrew its troops. The leader of the nationalists was the highest-ranked military man among them: Admiral Miklós Horthy, a former commander-in-chief of the Austrian-Hungarian navy; and his being of minor nobility allowed Hungary's parliament to elect him as regent.¹⁶

Horthy was a dignified and sober man, until confronted with a Bolshevik – then he would turn a shade of murderous. Indeed, his first move in government was to begin reprisals against those involved or associated in any small way with the communists. In terms of people murdered, imprisoned and exiled, the 'White Terror' far outdid the 'Red Terror'. It was an ominous beginning to what was to be more than two decades of Horthy rule.