

**GLOOMY SUNDAY: DID THE “HUNGARIAN
SUICIDE SONG” REALLY CREATE A
SUICIDE EPIDEMIC?**

STEVEN STACK, PH.D.

Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan

KAROLINA KRYSINSKA, PH.D.,

*Australian Institute for Suicide Research & Prevention,
Griffith University, Brisbane*

DAVID LESTER, PH.D.

The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

ABSTRACT

The effect of art on suicide risk has been a neglected topic in suicidology. The present article focuses on what is probably the best known song concerning suicide, Gloomy Sunday, the “Hungarian suicide song.” An analysis of historical sources suggests that the song was believed to trigger suicides. It was, for example, banned by the BBC in England until 2002. The alleged increase in suicides in the 1930s associated with the playing of the song may be attributed to audience mood, especially the presence of a large number of depressed persons as a result of the Great Depression. The influence of music on suicide may be contingent on societal, social, and individual conditions, such as economic recessions, membership in musical subcultures, and psychiatric disturbance. Further research is needed on art forms, such as feature films, paintings, novels, and music that portray suicides in order to identify the conditions under which the triggering of suicides occurs.

Sunday is gloomy, my hours are slumberless.
 Dearest, the shadows I live with are numberless.
 Little white flowers will never awaken you,
 Not where the black coach of sorrow has taken you.
 Angels have no thought of ever returning you.
 Would they be angry if I thought of joining you?
 Gloomy Sunday.

“Gloomy Sunday” is a sad song. The lyrics tell the story of an individual whose lover has recently died. The singer thinks about committing suicide in order to be reunified with the lost lover. The song was written by a Hungarian composer in 1933, and there have been rumors ever since that the song induced people to commit suicide and that it was banned. It has been difficult to distinguish the myth from the facts, and the present article seeks to explore the rumors, and whether there are any facts or data to support them, and to place the suicide phenomena surrounding Gloomy Sunday in context. Gloomy Sunday is especially significant as a suicidal art form since it was recorded many times¹, played over many decades and aired in many nations. Most songs concerning suicide, such as Ozzie Osbourne’s “Suicide Solution,” have not achieved such status.

English translations of the song were written by both Sam M. Lewis and Desmond Carter. Hal Kemp, with Bob Allen on vocals, recorded Lewis’s version in 1936. The version by Billie Holiday appeared in 1941 and was reportedly banned from the airwaves in America and by the BBC in the United Kingdom. For Billie Holiday’s version, a third stanza was added giving the song a dreamy twist to mitigate its reputation as a suicide song. The origin of the song became the background of the German/Hungarian movie *Gloomy Sunday* directed by Rolf Schubel, in 1999, based on a novel by Nick Barkow.

THE SONG AND THE RUMOR

The Wikipedia entry on Gloomy Sunday asserts that codifying of the legend occurred during the Internet age but, of course, the story dates from long before then (see also www.phespirit.info/gloomysunday/). Gloomy Sunday was written in 1933 by two Hungarians: Rezso Seress (who wrote the music) and Laszlo Javor (who wrote the lyrics). (According to Wikipedia, the original lyrics were written by Seress, but they were replaced by Javor’s lyrics.) Seress was born in Hungary in 1899 and was a self-taught pianist and composer. A rumor is that the song was written for a former girlfriend of Laszlo Javor who killed herself shortly after the song’s release, and that Rezso Seress killed himself many years later.² The widespread knowledge of the rumor is illustrated by Winslow (1980) who, in her

¹ Wikipedia (accessed 10/26/2006) lists 39 recordings, mainly in English.

² This information was obtained from www.snopes.com, accessed November 14, 2006.

detective story *The Brandenburg Hotel* has a character say that many people in Germany killed themselves after hearing the song (p. 54).

The song did not have an immediate impact initially in 1933, but in 1936 there was a cluster of suicides in Hungary attributed to the song, as a result of which the song was banned. American musicians translated the song and recorded it, the most popular version of which was by Billie Holiday and released several years later. The rumor is that the record was also banned in America, France, and England.

As many as 17 suicides are reported to have occurred in Hungary by people after listening to the recorded or live performance of the song (and as many as 200 worldwide). There were references to the song or to the lyrics in their suicide notes, they had the sheet music nearby, or the song was playing on a record player.

The entry about Gloomy Sunday on www.phespirit.info (accessed October 26th, 2006) reports also that suicides associated with the song occurred in Germany (where a young shopkeeper hung herself leaving a copy of the sheet music under her feet). This source also reports two cases (an 80-year-old man who jumped from a 7th story window while the music was playing and a 14-year-old girl who drowned herself while clutching the music) without noting where or when these two suicides occurred. This report also described an errand boy in Rome (Italy) who gave a beggar who was humming the tune all his money and then drowned himself in the nearby river.

The Website report says that the song was written after the breakup of Seress's own romance. He had difficulty getting the song published at first, but it became a best-seller. Seress had arranged to meet his ex-lover but she killed herself with poison leaving a piece of paper with the words "Gloomy Sunday" written on it. (Other reports say that it was Javor's girlfriend who killed herself.) The report goes on to say that, after a woman killed herself in London in 1941 with barbiturates while the song was playing, the BBC banned it, and this ban still persists. The report notes that Seress himself used to play the song himself at the Kis Pipa restaurant in Budapest (where it is still played).

The Website www.qsl.net reports that Seress was living in Paris and failing to make a living as a songwriter. His girlfriend urged him to get a regular job and left him. The next day, he sat down in his Parisian apartment, on a rainy, gloomy Sunday, and wrote the tune in 30 minutes. It was rejected by the first publisher he sent it to but was accepted by the next publisher. (Other reports have the second potential publisher committing suicide after seeing the music, leaving a third publisher to accept it.) This Website reports that the suicide epidemic occurred immediately after it was printed, but the most reliable reports place the epidemic three years later (in 1936).

In addition to the Berlin suicides, this Website reports cases of a young secretary in New York City who gassed herself and requested that Gloomy Sunday be played at her funeral, and an 82-year-old man who jumped to his death

from the 7th floor of his apartment building in Manhattan after playing the song on his piano.

Morgan and Tucker (1984) in their book *Rumor* evaluated the rumor regarding the “Gloomy Sunday” suicides as “partly true” (p. 15). They state, however, that the song was never banned in America.

EARLY REPORTS

The rumors about Gloomy Sunday are not based merely on recent speculation. There are several published reports from 1936 and 1937 that mentioned the impact of the song.

Time Magazine

Time Magazine, in a posting on Time Archives that dates the posting as March 30th, 1936, said that the suicides began in Hungary in the previous month. A shoemaker named Joseph Keller left a suicide note quoting the lyrics. Seventeen suicides were linked to the song: two who shot themselves while listening to gypsy bands playing it, the others after listening to a recording. Several are reported to have drowned in the Danube while clutching the sheet music. The Budapest police then banned the song. Several American versions appeared in March 1936. *Time* noted that the melody and lyrics have a depressing effect, and that those recording the version by Bob Allen and the Hal Kemp band were noticeably affected by it when recording it. The spate of suicides in Hungary was also reported by *The Los Angeles Times* on February 24, 1936.

Did the Song Accompany Suicides?

Time Magazine, on January 25th, 1937, reported that Jerry Flanders, aged 24 in Indianapolis, hired a soloist to sing Gloomy Sunday but was arrested in a saloon just as he was about to drink a glass of poisoned beer. *The New York Times*, April 6, 1936, on page 9 reported the suicide of a 13-year-old boy in Michigan (Floyd Hamilton, Jr.) who hung himself in the living room of the house in which he lived with his divorced father and had a copy of the lyrics of the song in his pocket. Evidently some suicides or potential suicides were attracted by the song.

Was the Song Banned by the BBC?

Steve Woodhall (personal communication November 29, 2006) did confirm that the song was banned until 2002. A search of the BBC Website (November 26, 2006) found that the Billie Holiday version was played on BBC radio on October 23, 2003, and June 12, 2004, and the Branford Marsalis version on December 3, 2004. No broadcasts of the song were found prior to 2002. Also on the Website, listeners voted (on a date not specified) for the five saddest songs,

and Gloomy Sunday ranked 4th in the nominations. It is clear, therefore, that the song was banned by the BBC as rumored.

The New York Times

Rezso Seress (or Seres) did commit suicide. *The New York Times* on January 14, 1968, page 84, reported his suicide with a dateline of January 13th, Budapest (Hungary). He jumped from a window of his small apartment, shortly after his 69th birthday. The obituary reported that the success of Gloomy Sunday depressed Seress because he was never able to write another hit song. The obituary also reported that some radio stations and nightclubs in the United States banned the song, and the obituary specifically mentions a version by Paul Robeson.

SUICIDE IN HUNGARY

For most of the 20th century, Hungary had the highest suicide rate in the world. For example, in 1980, the overall Hungarian suicide rate was 45 per 100,000 per year, and the suicide rate was 202 in Hungarian men over the age of 75 (Lester & Yang, 1998). In 2001, the Hungarian suicide rate was 47. The high Hungarian suicide rate was not simply a result of the socio-political situation in Hungary at the time because the Hungarian suicide rate was the highest in the world between the First and Second World Wars, and the suicide rate is very high in Hungarian immigrants to the United States and to Australia as compared to immigrants from other nations (Lester, 1980). For example, the suicide rate in Hungary in 1933 was 32 per 100,000 per year and 31 in 1936 (personal communication from Tamas Zonda, November 11, 2006). According to data from the World Values Survey (Stack, 1999), Hungary ranked in the top 11 nations out of 35 in the level of suicide acceptability (4.37 on a scale from 1 to 10). Persons in other nations such as China (6.82), Finland (6.14), and the Netherlands (5.98) were even more approving of suicide. It is possible that the strong cultural support for suicide in other nations might interact with popular songs about suicide to precipitate suicides, a topic worth future investigation.

Hungarians are well known for having elevated rates of depression, and the high incidence of depression suggests that a relatively high proportion of Hungarian families have a suicide among its members. Suicide has perhaps come to be seen as an acceptable solution to life's problems. Many famous Hungarian leaders have committed suicide, among them Istvan Szechenyi (1791-1860), the "Greatest Hungarian",³ the Prime Minister during the Second World War Pal Teleki (1879-1941), the poet Attila Jozsef (1905-1937), and the actor Zoltan Latinovits (1931-1976) (at the very same train station where Attila Jozsef committed suicide

³ He fought in the wars against Napoleon and, later, against Austrian domination of Hungary (Lester, 1996).

and where people still go to die). Although some Hungarians attribute the high rate of suicide to Hungarian culture, there is the possibility that the Finno-Ugrian gene (which is found in Hungarians and the Finns) increases the predisposition to suicide (Kondrichin & Lester, 1997).

If we assume that there was an increase in suicide after the song, it is important to note that at the time of its release in Hungary in 1933, it was the height of the Great Depression. There was probably a relatively high proportion of Hungarians at risk of suicide given widespread unemployment and the political turmoil of the times. The Great Depression marked the peak in many nations' suicide rates in the 20th century (Stack, 2000a), and so it is likely that the political and economic turmoil of the times interacted with the song, contributing to a resonance between the song and the audience. Pre-existing suicidal conditions may have triggered any copycat suicides.

During this period, also, the rise of Hitler's Nazi regime in Germany led to a time of political turmoil all over Europe, including Hungary. Hungary was led from 1932-1936 by Gyula Gömbös as minister-president, an anti-semitic fascist. He died in 1936, and the regent appointed the more conciliatory Kálmán Darányi, but Hungary continued to feel threatened by Germany. The threat of war in Europe and the unstable political situation in Hungary may have combined with the economic stress to create feelings of anxiety and hopelessness in Hungarians and the citizens of other European nations.

MUSICAL SUBCULTURES AND SUICIDE

Musical and, more generally, artistic subcultures are an understudied phenomenon both in suicidology and related disciplines such as sociology and psychology (for an exception see Weinstein's [1991] study of the heavy metal subculture). From a sociological perspective, some musical subcultures may attract persons who are at risk of suicide. Through the promotion of cultural symbols and artifacts including concerts, clothing, distinctive hairstyles, and albums, musical subcultures pull like-minded persons together. They provide institutional supports for interaction and the reinforcement of subcultural values and behaviors.

Lester (1987) described what he called a subculture of suicide in a group of three teenagers who committed suicide, actions which precipitated an epidemic of non-fatal suicidal behavior among their peers in the high school that they were attending. The group members used drugs extensively, had poor relationships with their parents, and had poor self-images. Interestingly, the preferred music of the group was heavy metal, and they also liked the visual art that accompanied this music—rocket ships, crashing cars, muscular hulks fighting with flaming torches, and crazed rock guitarists in contortions.

The notion of musical subculture has been used to explain association between several specific musical forms and suicidality at the aggregate/regional level. Links between suicidality and the following musical forms have been established:

heavy metal (Stack, 1998; Stack, Gundlach, & Reeves, 1994), country music (Stack & Gundlach, 1992, 1995), opera (Stack, 2002), and blues (Stack, 2000b). In this perspective music does not in itself drive people to suicide. For example, in the case of country music subculture, pre-existing factors probably account for a macro-level association between country music radio market share and white suicide rates in 49 cities (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). Country music fans are already at somewhat higher risk given their higher incidence of divorce and gun ownership, two noted risk factors for suicide (Lester 2000; Stack & Gundlach, 1992, 1995).

CAN A SONG PRECIPITATE SUICIDE?

From a psychological perspective on art, exposure to suicidal art forms might drive some persons to suicide. For example, there was a spate of suicides after the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774, and in the early 1700s in Japan as a result of the suicides depicted in the popular kabuki plays (Krysinska & Lester, 2006). The psychological perspective neglects, however, the notion of how the relationships between people in a subculture can also promote suicidality. However, an interaction effect is more likely. One would expect that already depressed or otherwise suicidogenic individuals would be at the greatest risk from exposure to suicidogenic art.

Gloomy Sunday is a noted example of a suicidogenic song, which could conceivably contribute to suicide among persons already at risk. The lyrics in the original version of the song certainly are sad and suggestive of suicide. There are two stanzas, and the second contains an important explicit suicide-oriented line: "My heart and I have decided to end it all."

American and other post 1930s versions of the song have often watered down the suicidogenic mood of the song. While the line about ending it all in the second stanza is often maintained, as in the Billie Holiday and Sarah McLachlan's renditions, a third stanza is often added in which the problems of the narrator are likened to a dream as in Sarah McLaughlin's version: "Dreaming, I was only dreaming, I wake and find you." Nevertheless, the mood of the song remains sad and could conceivably promote suicidality in those who are already at risk.

The significance of this particular song is manifest in the fact that it has been recorded 79 times, unlike most songs in popular music. The singers that have recorded it include many famous Americans such as Billie Holiday, Paul Robeson, and Ricky Nelson. Further, the song is significant since, unlike most popular songs, Gloomy Sunday was recently made into a movie. While the movie received mixed reviews (Ebert, 2003; Holden, 2003; LaSalle, 2003), it holds the record for the longest run time (over 70 weeks) of any movie ever shown in Boston (<http://www.imdb.com>).

Other Suicide Songs

Gloomy Sunday is another example of the link that is often found between art and suicide. Web-based lists of songs often contain over 1,000 songs that deal directly with suicide. There are many anecdotal accounts linking such songs to specific suicides of individuals. For example, persons have been found dead next to a recording of Blink 182's *Adam's Song* (Dettmar, 2000). Other suicide songs that have been associated with actual suicides include *Fade to Black* by Metallica and Ozzy Osbourne's noted *Suicide Solution* (Stack, 1998). These recordings have resulted in lawsuits by angry parents of teenage suicide victims.

Cameron, Yang, and Lester (2005), in an examination of celebrity suicide from an economic perspective, discussed the suicide of the lead singer of Nirvana, Kurt Cobain, in 1994 and the possible emulation effects resulting from his suicide, since his music and life style probably appealed to those with a suicidal disposition. In Seattle, after Cobain's suicide, there was one copycat suicide and an increase in calls to the Seattle Crisis Clinic (Jobes, Berman, O'Carroll, Eastgard, & Knickmeyer, 1996).

Since there are many examples of suicide songs, it is possible that there may be an aggregate level association between suicide rates and the incidence of suicide songs on the radio. Future research is needed to assess the macro-level association between the frequency of popular suicide songs and the national suicide rate. Cross-sectional research is also needed. Perhaps in regions that play a relatively high number of suicide songs the suicide rate is higher than in their counterparts.

Research on Music Preferences and Suicidality

Martin, Clarke, and Pearce (1993) found that suicidal ideation was more common in high school students who preferred rock and heavy metal music. Those who preferred rock/heavy metal more often were delinquent, risk-takers, and drug users, came from broken homes, and had less close family relationships. Lester and Whipple (1996) found that preference for alternative rock and heavy metal music was associated with past, but not current, suicidal ideation in college students. Stack (1998) found that approval of suicide was associated with being a heavy metal music fan, but not after controls for marital status, age, sex, education, conservatism, and church attendance, and Stack (2000b) found the same result for liking blues music.

DISCUSSION

While Gloomy Sunday is one of the most noted suicide songs of the 20th century, there are other artistic expressions of suicide that warrant scholarly attention. For example, while there have been over 2,000 feature films shown in the United States that contain one or more suicides, there is very little scholarly research on more than a handful (Stack, 2005). One exception is an unpublished

doctoral dissertation (Jamieson, 2002). Jamieson found that the rise in youth suicide rates between 1950-2000 is predicted, in part, by a corresponding rise in the number of American feature films that contain a depiction of suicide. Future research is needed on the nature of the portrayal of suicide—the motives, the demographics of the victim, the reaction of survivors, and other characteristics of the films. Future research is also needed to assess to what extent, if any, artistic depictions of suicide reflect those of the print and electronic news media.

Gloomy Sunday stands out as an icon of the artistic expression of suicide in popular song. Cultural icons of suicide in art (for example, the suicides in *Romeo and Juliet*) may have an especially strong effect on cultural definitions of suicide. The long-term effect of artistic cultural icons can shape public definitions of suicide. By shaping opinion on the causes of suicide, they can also help define public strategies for suicide prevention.

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Direct reprint requests to:

David Lester, Ph.D.
Psychology Program
The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey
Pomona, NJ 08240-0195
e-mail: david@stockton.edu