



CULTURE COURSE

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

10 Chapters

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Generated with Claude

Contents

Chapter 1	Why So Many Inventors	2
Chapter 2	Rubik and the Cube	6
Chapter 3	Solving the Cube	10
Chapter 4	Bíró and the Ballpoint	14
Chapter 5	Everyday Inventions	18
Chapter 6	Von Neumann	22
Chapter 7	Szent-Györgyi and Nobel	26
Chapter 8	The Emigre Scientists	30
Chapter 9	Invention and Memory	34
Chapter 10	How Ideas Travel	38

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why So Many Inventors? Scope & Sources

Hungary has about ten million people, yet the list of Hungarian-born inventors, mathematicians and scientists who changed the modern world is long: a toy that sold hundreds of millions, a pen found in every drawer, the architecture of the modern computer, vitamin C. This opening chapter asks what that claim means, how far it is true, and how to read stories of "Hungarian inventions" without being carried away by them. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Claim

It is often said that Hungary has produced an unusual number of inventors and scientists for its size, and that many of them left the country and made their names elsewhere (check how this is measured and who makes the claim). The evidence usually offered is a list of names:

An object

Ernő Rubik's cube, shown in Hungary in the 1970s and sold worldwide in the 1980s (Chapters 2 and 3, check).

A product

László Bíró's ballpoint pen, whose name became a common word in Britain (Chapter 4, check).

An idea

John von Neumann's work on computer architecture and game theory (Chapter 6, check).

A discovery

Albert Szent-Györgyi's isolation of vitamin C, and the Nobel Prizes won by others (Chapter 7, check).

What Counts as an Invention?

The word covers several different kinds of achievement, and mixing them confuses the story:

- **An object or device.** A thing that did not exist before, such as the cube or the ballpoint pen. It can be patented.

- **A method or process.** A way of doing something, such as a manufacturing process or a solving method.
- **A discovery.** Finding something that already existed, such as a vitamin or a law of nature. This is not an invention in the patent sense, though it can lead to one.
- **A theory or design.** An abstract idea, such as a computer architecture, which is not a physical thing at all.

Another distinction matters: the *first* to have an idea, the first to *build* it, and the first to make it *succeed* are often three different people. Many "inventions" have several claimants (check examples, and see Chapter 5).

The "Martians" Legend

A well-known story says that a group of Hungarian-born scientists in the United States, among them von Neumann, Leo Szilárd, Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner and Theodore von Kármán, were so brilliant that some colleagues joked they must be Martians who had settled in Budapest, speaking a language no one understood (check the origin of the joke and who is credited with it). It is a good story, and a reminder that a legend can be more memorable than the facts. Chapter 8 looks at who these scientists were and why they left, without taking a side on the debates their work raised.

Why So Many? Some Suggested Explanations

Several explanations are offered. None is proven, and they should be treated as suggestions (check each):

- **Education.** A strong tradition of mathematics and science teaching in Budapest's secondary schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (check the schools named and the claim).
- **A cultured middle class.** A city with a large, educated, often Jewish professional class that valued learning (check, and treat the topic with care).
- **Political upheaval.** War, revolution and discrimination pushed many to emigrate, so that Hungarian talent appears abroad (see Chapter 8).
- **Selection by the telling.** A list of famous names is easy to build and hard to compare with other countries, which may have similar lists (check).

A caution about the claim

The idea that Hungary is unique should be held lightly. Many small countries have disproportionate achievements, and counting "Hungarian" achievements depends on how people born in the old kingdom, or who emigrated, are counted. The course follows the stories, but does not insist that they prove anything about a nation.

Sources and How to Check Them

- **Patents.** Patent records show who applied for what, and when. They are the best evidence for devices (check the databases).
- **Biographies and museum collections.** Rubik, Bíró and the Nobel laureates have biographies, and Hungarian museums hold material (check which, and see Chapter 9).
- **Prize records.** Nobel Prize records are public and exact.
- **Popular stories.** Web lists of "Hungarian inventions" are often exaggerated; treat them as leads to check, not as facts.

A British comparison

Britain has its own list of inventions that people repeat, and its own disputes over who deserves credit, such as the television and the steam engine. The same questions about first, builder and success apply to both (check the comparison).

Check the details

Dates, patent numbers, "first" claims and the origin of the Martians story are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the difference between an invention, a discovery and a theory, with one example of each from this chapter.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose one explanation for why Hungary produced so many scientists and inventors and give one reason to doubt it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Take a "Hungarian invention" you have heard of and list three things you would check before repeating the claim.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The claim:** a small country, many inventors and scientists (check)
- **Kinds:** object, method, discovery, theory
- **First, builder, success:** often different people
- **Martians:** a legend about emigre scientists (check)
- **Caution:** selection and counting affect the claim

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Ernő Rubik and the Cube

The Rubik's Cube is the best-selling puzzle in the world, with sales often put in the hundreds of millions (check the figure). It began as a teaching aid made by an architecture teacher in Budapest. This chapter covers who Ernő Rubik was, how the Magic Cube came about, how its mechanism works in plain terms, and how a product made behind the Iron Curtain became a worldwide craze. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Ernő Rubik

Ernő Rubik was born in Budapest in 1944 (check) into a family with an engineering background; his father designed gliders and his mother was a poet (check). He studied sculpture and then architecture, and in the early 1970s taught at the Academy of Applied Arts and Crafts in Budapest, teaching interior and design subjects (check the institution and the subject). His interest was in three-dimensional form and in how to teach students to think about it, which is the root of the invention. See Hungarian Architecture for the architectural setting of Budapest in these years.

The Magic Cube

In 1974 Rubik built a prototype of a cube made of smaller blocks that could rotate in groups while the whole structure stayed together (check the year). The first model was made of wood and held together with rubber bands (check). It was meant as a way to show students how an object could be moved in space, and Rubik is said to have realised it was also a puzzle only after he scrambled it and found he could not put it right (check the story).

- **The patent.** Rubik applied for a Hungarian patent in 1975, and it was granted in 1977 (check the dates and the exact title; he was not the only person to have had a similar idea, see below).
- **The name.** In Hungary the object was called the Magic Cube (Bűvös kocka). The name Rubik's Cube was adopted for the international launch (check).
- **Production.** The first batches were made in Hungary in the late 1970s by a small state-owned toy and plastics company (check the firm) and sold through shops.

Was Rubik the only inventor?

A Japanese inventor, Terutoshi Ishigi, is said to have patented a similar mechanism in Japan in 1976 (check the name and the details). Whether the two worked independently is not in doubt in most accounts, but it shows that "first" claims for the cube are not simple. Rubik's cube became the famous one, and the patent in Hungary is his.

The Mechanism in Plain Terms

The cube looks like 27 small cubes (three by three by three) but is not built that way. Inside is a core, usually a cross-shaped piece, and the outer pieces are shaped to lock into one another and into the core so that each face can turn (check the construction).

Centre pieces

Six pieces, one on each face, that are fixed to the core and turn on their axes. They never move relative to each other, so they define the colour of each face.

Edge pieces

Twelve pieces with two coloured faces each, between the corners.

Corner pieces

Eight pieces with three coloured faces each, at the corners.

Turning a face moves its edge and corner pieces while the centres stay in place. The cleverness is that the pieces are held together by their shapes and not by glue or screws, so the whole thing can be turned thousands of times (check the lifetime of early cubes). Chapter 3 looks at how the colours are put back in order and the mathematics of the cube.

The Craze

The cube reached the West in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rubik's contacts at a Hungarian trade organisation and an international toy dealer helped it appear at toy fairs in Nuremberg

and elsewhere (check the people and the route). The American toy company Ideal Toy took up the licence and launched it widely in 1980 (check the date and the licence arrangements).

- **Sales.** Tens of millions of cubes sold in a few years, and the toy became a symbol of the early 1980s (check the figures).
- **Culture.** Books of solutions, competitions, television coverage and a place in popular memory (check the examples).
- **Decline and return.** Interest fell in the mid-1980s, then returned with the internet and speedcubing in the 2000s (see Chapter 3).

A Hungarian Product in the Cold War

That a puzzle made in a socialist country became a Western bestseller was unusual (check how unusual). The details of royalties, licensing and how much Rubik himself earned are less clear, and accounts differ (check). He became one of Hungary's best-known people abroad, and has kept a role as a designer, teacher and advocate of puzzle-based education (check his later projects, and see Chapter 9 for the political side).

A British comparison

The cube had a British craze of its own, with competitions and newspaper coverage in the early 1980s, and it sits in the same memory as home computers such as the ZX Spectrum, another early 1980s object that made its designer famous (check the comparison).

Check the details

Dates of the prototype, patent and launch, sales figures, the Japanese claim, and the arrangements behind the licence are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Rubik first built the cube, and how that differs from why it became famous.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe the three kinds of piece in a 3x3x3 cube and what each does.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Using the three-way distinction of Chapter 1 (idea, builder, success), say what Rubik, Ishigi and Ideal Toy each contributed.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Rubik:** Budapest architect and teacher, born 1944 (check)
- **Prototype:** 1974; patent applied 1975 (check)
- **Pieces:** 6 centres, 12 edges, 8 corners
- **Launch:** Ideal Toy, 1980 (check)
- **Caution:** Ishigi and the "first" question

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Solving the Cube

Rubik said he spent weeks working out how to restore his own scrambled cube (Rubik's Cube and Hungarian Inventors 2). This chapter explains what a solution is, gives the move notation, outlines a beginner method in stages, and then steps back to the mathematics: why the cube has so many positions, what "God's number" is, and how speedcubing grew. The method is described in outline, so you will want a diagram or video to follow the moves. Figures and names are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

What a Solution Is

A solved cube has each face showing a single colour. A scramble is a sequence of turns that mixes the colours, and a solution is a sequence of turns that undoes it. Because the six centre pieces never move relative to each other (see Chapter 2), a solution only has to put the twelve edges and eight corners in the right places and the right orientations.

Move Notation

Cubers use a standard notation, devised in the early days of the craze and now universal (check its origin; David Singmaster's notation is the one usually credited). Each letter is a face, turned a quarter-turn clockwise as seen when looking at that face:

Faces

U up, D down, L left, R right, F front, B back.

Anticlockwise

A prime mark: R' is a quarter-turn of the right face the other way.

Half-turn

A 2: R2 is two quarter-turns of the right face.

A Beginner Method in Outline

The most common beginner approach is the layer-by-layer method. Each stage builds on the last without undoing it (check the details against a diagram, since small differences in how stages are taught are common):

1. **The first-layer cross.** Place the four edge pieces that include one colour (say white) around the white centre, each matching the centre colour on its other face.
2. **The first-layer corners.** Insert the four white corners, using a short repeated sequence of moves such as $R\ U\ R'\ U'$ until each corner sits correctly (check).
3. **The middle layer.** Insert the four middle-layer edges, using a pair of mirrored sequences, one for the left and one for the right.
4. **The last-layer cross.** Make a cross on the opposite colour (say yellow), using a short sequence that turns edge pieces over without disturbing the first two layers.
5. **The last-layer corners and edges.** Position and orient the remaining corners and edges, each with a short sequence that changes only a few pieces and leaves the rest of the cube unchanged (check).

The key idea is the *algorithm*: a fixed sequence of moves that does a small, known job and preserves what you have already solved. The beginner method is slow but it works, and with practice it can be done in a minute or two (check).

Why it is a good teaching tool

Solving the cube means breaking a huge problem into stages, finding sequences that do one job without undoing earlier work, and checking each stage before moving on. The same habits help in programming, which is why cubes appear in classrooms (check the evidence for this claim, which is more popular belief than study).

The Mathematics

The cube is a standard example in group theory, the branch of mathematics that studies sets of operations that can be combined and undone. Each sequence of turns is an operation, doing one after another is combining, and every turn can be reversed (check the formulation).

- **The number of positions.** A 3x3x3 cube has about 43 quintillion reachable positions, 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 (check the figure). If you tried one a second, it would take longer than the age of the universe.

- **Why not more.** The pieces cannot be rearranged freely: only some combinations can be reached by turning the faces. A cube taken apart and put back wrongly may be unsolvable (check, and treat the exact constraints as a topic for further reading).
- **God's number.** The fewest moves that can solve any scramble, counted in a standard way, is 20. This was proved in 2010 by a team using large computing resources donated by Google (check the details and the counting method).

Speedcubing

Solving for speed became a sport with the internet. The World Cube Association organises competitions and keeps records (check the organisation, its founding and the current records). Top solvers use methods with many more algorithms than the beginner approach, and recognise patterns almost instantly (check the best-known methods, such as CFOP, and the other cube types).

- **Times.** The fastest official 3x3x3 solves are now a few seconds (check the current record, which changes).
- **Variety.** Events cover larger cubes, one-handed solves, blindfold solves and other puzzles.
- **A community.** Online forums, videos and shared algorithm lists are a large part of the culture.

Hungary and the cube today

The cube remains a Hungarian symbol, and Rubik has continued to work on puzzles and education (check his later work). The cube's long life shows how a design can outlast the craze that made it famous (see Chapter 9 for Hungary's relationship with its inventors).

Check the details

The move sequences, the exact count of positions, the God's number proof, the rules of competitions and the current records are easy to misstate. Verify against a reliable guide, and follow a diagram when learning a method.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the notation $R \ U \ R' \ U'$ in words.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe the five stages of the layer-by-layer method and the idea that links them.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why having 43 quintillion positions and a God's number of 20 are not in conflict.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Notation:** U D L R F B; prime = anticlockwise; 2 = half-turn
- **Method:** cross, corners, middle layer, last-layer cross, last-layer finish
- **Algorithm:** a fixed sequence that does one job and keeps the rest
- **Positions:** about 43 quintillion (check)
- **God's number:** 20 (check)

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · László Bíró and the Ballpoint

In Britain the ballpoint pen is simply a biro, with a lower-case b, after its Hungarian inventor. The story of how a Budapest journalist's irritation with fountain pens became one of the most widely used objects in the world is a good test of the distinctions in Chapter 1: who had the idea, who built it, and who made it a success. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

A Journalist and a Problem

László József Bíró was born in Budapest in 1899 (check) and worked at various times as a journalist, editor and hypnotist among other occupations (check the list, since accounts differ). He is said to have noticed that the ink used in newspaper printing dried almost at once and left the paper smooth, whereas the ink in fountain pens was slow to dry, smudged, and often blotted (check the story, which is the usual one). The thought was to put a quick-drying ink in a pen.

- **The problem.** Thick, quick-drying ink does not flow through the narrow nib of a fountain pen.
- **The idea.** A tiny ball held in a socket at the tip, rolling against the paper and picking up ink from a reservoir behind it as it turns (check the origin of the idea, which is traditionally linked to children's marbles rolling through a puddle).
- **The help.** His brother György, a chemist, is said to have worked on the ink (check).

Not the First Ballpoint

Bíró was not the first to think of a rolling-ball pen. An American, John J. Loud, patented a ballpoint pen for marking leather in 1888, and other patents followed (check the names and dates). They were not practical for writing, because the ink and the ball mechanism did not work well enough. The Bíró pen was the first to succeed as a writing instrument, which is exactly the "success" in Chapter 1's three-way distinction.

Idea, builder, success

Loud had an early idea. Bíró made a working pen with a suitable ink. Later firms made it a mass-market product. The credit goes differently depending on which of the three matters to the person telling the story (check, and see Chapter 5 for other disputed claims).

Patent and Emigration

Bíró took out a patent in Hungary in the 1930s, with a British patent in 1938 (check the dates and the countries). As political conditions in Europe worsened, he left Hungary around 1940 and settled in Argentina, where he continued the work and took out a patent in 1943 (check the dates and route; accounts say he was Jewish or had Jewish connections and left because of the war, check and treat with care). In Argentina a company was formed to make the pens under the Bíró name (check the company and its partners).

The RAF and the British Biro

The British connection began in the Second World War. The Royal Air Force is said to have wanted pens that would not leak at high altitude, which fountain pens did, and the ballpoint pen suited aircrew (check the story and its details). A British businessman, Henry George Martin, acquired the rights, and pens were made in Britain from the mid-1940s under the name Biro (check the names, the firm and the dates). The first British pens were expensive novelties before prices fell sharply in the following years.

Why it won

It did not need refilling from an inkwell, did not leak as easily, and wrote on many kinds of paper (check).

Competitors

Other firms, including Parker and Reynolds in the United States, brought out ballpoints at the same time (check the details and the disputes).

The French rival

The Bic company, founded by Marcel Bich, made a cheap, disposable ballpoint in the 1950s that became the best seller (check the date and the figures).

A Household Word

In Britain, Ireland and several other countries the ballpoint pen is called a biro, and the word is used without a capital, an example of a brand or inventor's name becoming an ordinary noun (check that the capitalisation is the common usage, and the legal status of the name). In Argentina the day of the inventor (Día del Inventor) is celebrated on Bíró's birthday, 29 September (check). He died in Buenos Aires in 1985 (check).

A British comparison

The biro belongs with other British words that began as names, such as hoover and sellotape, though Bíró was neither British nor the founder of the firm that made his pen famous in Britain (check the comparison and the legal position).

Check the details

The patent dates, the brother's role, the RAF story, the firms and the Argentine details are easy to misstate, and several are told as legend. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the problem Bíró set out to solve and how the rolling ball addresses it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Apply the "idea, builder, success" distinction to Loud, Bíró and the later manufacturers.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe the route by which the ballpoint went from Budapest to Britain, and say which parts of the story you would want to verify.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Bíró:** Budapest journalist, born 1899 (check)
- **Idea:** quick-drying ink and a rolling ball
- **Earlier patent:** Loud, 1888 (check)
- **Route:** Hungary, Argentina, Britain via the RAF (check)
- **Word:** "biro" in British English

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Other Everyday Inventions

Beyond the cube and the pen, a long list of Hungarian names is attached to inventions in electricity, engines, optics and communication. Some of these claims are solid, some are partial and some are disputed. This chapter goes through the main ones and rates each by how secure the claim is, using the distinctions of Chapter 1: idea, builder, success. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking, and the ratings are my own judgement, not a settled verdict.

How to Read the List

A simple rating helps (check each, as the ratings are a judgement):

- **Secure.** A well-documented contribution that most accounts agree on.
- **Partial.** A real contribution, but one of several, or only part of the finished invention.
- **Disputed.** A claim of "first" or "invented" that other sources contest.

The Claims

The safety match, János Irinyi

A chemistry student, said in the 1830s to have developed a match that lit quietly and reliably by using lead dioxide in place of potassium chlorate (check the details).
Rating: partial to secure, since other chemists worked on matches at the same time.

The electric motor and dynamo, Ányos Jedlik

A Benedictine monk and physicist who built an early electromagnetic rotating device around 1827 to 1828, and the principle of the self-excited dynamo in the 1850s and 1860s (check the dates; he is also linked to a soda-water process). Rating: partial, since similar work was done elsewhere in the same years, and Jedlik published little.

The carburettor, Donát Bánki and János Csonka

The transformer, Zipernowsky, Déri and Bláthy

Two engineers at Budapest who patented a carburettor design in 1893 (check). Rating: partial, since other designers, notably Wilhelm Maybach, are also credited (check).

Three engineers at the Ganz works in Budapest who developed a practical closed-core transformer in 1885 (check) and the name "transformer" is often attributed to them. Rating: secure for a practical commercial design, partial for the idea.

Holography, Dennis Gábor

Born Gábor Dénes in Budapest, he devised the principle of holography in 1947 while working in Britain, and won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1971 (check). Rating: secure, though the lasers that made holograms practical came later.

Electronic television, Kálmán Tihanyi

An engineer who filed patents in the 1920s for an electronic camera tube (check), which is cited in disputes over the origins of television. Rating: disputed or partial, since Zworykin, Farnsworth and others also have claims.

The telephone exchange, Tivadar Puskás

A Hungarian entrepreneur linked with Edison, credited with early telephone exchange work and with the Telefon Hírmondó news service in Budapest in the 1890s (check). Rating: partial.

The Pattern

- **Ganz works.** Several names are linked to the Ganz factory in Budapest, a major electrical and engineering firm of the later nineteenth century (check). This suggests that the achievement came from an institution as well as from individuals.
- **Simultaneous invention.** For matches, motors, carburettors and television, similar ideas appeared in different places around the same time. That is common in the history of technology, and it complicates national claims.
- **Abroad.** Gábor's holography and the work of the emigre scientists in later chapters were done outside Hungary (see Chapter 8).

- **Success.** The names that people remember are often those whose products spread, which is not always the same as the first inventors.

Why the ratings matter

A list that says "Hungarians invented all of these" mixes secure and doubtful claims, and does the achievements no favours. A careful list is more persuasive, because a reader who finds one error stops trusting the rest.

A British comparison

Britain has the same disputes over who invented the television (John Logie Baird, a Scot, is the usual British claim), the steam engine and the telephone (Alexander Graham Bell, born in Edinburgh). Compare how national pride shapes which claims get repeated (check the comparison).

Check the details

Dates, patent details, the attribution of the word "transformer" and the ratings are easy to misstate, and the ratings are a judgement. Verify against patent records and a reliable history before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose two inventions from the chapter and rate each as secure, partial or disputed, with a reason.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why simultaneous invention complicates a claim that a nation "invented" something.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe the role of an institution such as the Ganz works in a list of individual inventors.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Irinyi:** match (check)
- **Jedlik:** motor and dynamo (check)
- **Bánki and Csonka:** carburettor, 1893 (check)
- **Ganz engineers:** transformer, 1885 (check)
- **Gábor:** holography, Nobel 1971 (check)
- **Tihanyi, Puskás:** television and telephone claims (check)
- **Ratings:** secure, partial, disputed

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · John von Neumann and the Computer Age

Von Neumann is the clearest case in this course of a Hungarian-born mind whose ideas shape everyday life, since the computer on which you are reading this is built on a design that still bears his name. He is also a case where "who invented it?" has no single answer. This chapter follows his path from Budapest to Princeton, describes his main ideas in plain terms, and treats the credit dispute and the controversies around his later career with care. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

A Budapest Prodigy

He was born Neumann János Lajos in Budapest in 1903 into a wealthy Jewish banking family (check the details), and became known in his youth for extraordinary memory and quickness with numbers (check the stories, many of which are anecdotes). He attended the Lutheran gymnasium in Budapest, the same school as Eugene Wigner (check), and studied mathematics at Budapest while also taking a chemical engineering degree in Zürich (check). He took a doctorate in mathematics in Budapest in 1926 (check). His family had been ennobled and the name became "von Neumann" in German-speaking academia (check).

Mathematics and Physics

In the 1920s he worked in Göttingen, then a centre of mathematics, and in Berlin and Hamburg (check). His early work included:

- **Set theory.** A rigorous way to define the foundations of mathematics (check the details).
- **Quantum mechanics.** A mathematical framework for the theory in terms of operators on a space of states, set out in a book of 1932 (check).
- **Game theory.** A proof in 1928 that in a certain kind of two-player contest there is a best strategy (the minimax theorem), later developed in a book with Oskar Morgenstern in 1944 (check). It is the basis of much of modern economics.

He moved to the United States in the early 1930s, joining the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where Einstein was also based (check the dates). As in Chapter 8, the move came as political conditions in central Europe worsened.

The Computer Design

In the 1940s von Neumann became involved with early electronic computers. The earliest machines were programmed by changing wiring and switches by hand. In 1945 he wrote a draft report on a proposed machine (the EDVAC) in which the instructions, like the data, were stored in the computer's memory (check the title and details). This is the *stored-program* idea, and the arrangement of a processing unit, a memory and input and output is called the *von Neumann architecture*.

Stored program

Instructions are held in memory like data, so a computer can be reprogrammed without rewiring and can even modify its own instructions.

Processor and memory

A central processing unit works through instructions in memory one after another, which is still the basic model of most computers (check the simplification).

The bottleneck

Because instructions and data share a path to memory, speed is limited. This is called the "von Neumann bottleneck" (check the term and its use).

A dispute over credit

The 1945 report carried only von Neumann's name, though it summarised ideas developed by a team at the University of Pennsylvania, including J. Presper Eckert and John Mauchly, the builders of ENIAC (check). Many historians argue that the architecture should not be credited to one person, and that the name hides the team's contribution. Others stress that von Neumann gave the ideas a clear logical form and spread them widely. In Chapter 1's terms, he is strongest on clarity and influence, and shares the credit for the idea and the build (check, and note that accounts differ).

War and Weapons

During the Second World War von Neumann worked as a consultant on military and scientific projects, including the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos, where he contributed to the design of the implosion method for the plutonium bomb (check the details of his role) and used early computers for calculations. After the war he advised on nuclear weapons and defence policy, and served on the Atomic Energy Commission from 1955 (check). The ethics of this work are debated, and some remarks attributed to him about the Cold War are reported second-hand (check). The course describes the work and does not take a side.

Other Ideas

- **Monte Carlo methods.** Using random sampling to solve problems, developed with others at Los Alamos (check).
- **Self-reproducing machines.** A theoretical study of automata that can copy themselves, which anticipated ideas in biology and computing (check).
- **Weather and numerical forecasting.** Early computer work on weather prediction (check).

He died in Washington in 1957 at the age of 53 (check), of cancer. His later years are remembered for the range of his work and for the number of fields that took ideas from him.

A British comparison

Britain's own computing pioneers, Alan Turing and the Manchester and Cambridge teams, built early stored-program machines in the same years, and Turing's 1936 paper on computation is a parallel foundation. The comparison shows how several people reached related ideas, and why "the inventor of the computer" is a poor question (check the comparison and the dates).

Check the details

Dates, the report's history, his role at Los Alamos, the name "von Neumann architecture", and remarks attributed to him are easy to misstate, and several rest on anecdote. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the stored-program idea in plain terms and why it mattered.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Summarise the dispute over crediting the computer architecture to von Neumann alone, giving both views.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose one of von Neumann's other ideas and explain why it counts as a contribution even though it is not a device.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Born:** Budapest, 1903; died Washington, 1957 (check)
- **Mathematics:** set theory, quantum mechanics, game theory
- **Computing:** stored program, 1945 report (check)
- **Credit:** shared with the Penn team (check)
- **War:** Los Alamos, defence advice (check)

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Szent-Györgyi, Vitamin C and the Nobel Prizes

Not every great Hungarian achievement is an invention. Albert Szent-Györgyi's isolation of vitamin C is a discovery, and the best known of a group of science Nobel Prizes connected with Hungary. This chapter describes his work, the role of paprika in it, and the other laureates, and it asks how a country counts "its" Nobel winners. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking. Nothing here is medical advice.

Albert Szent-Györgyi

He was born in Budapest in 1893 into an educated family (check the family details) and studied medicine there, with service in the First World War (check). He then worked in several European laboratories, including Cambridge under Frederick Gowland Hopkins, before returning to Hungary in the early 1930s as professor at the University of Szeged (check the dates and posts).

Vitamin C and Paprika

Scurvy, a disease of sailors and others deprived of fresh food, had long been known to be prevented by certain fruits and vegetables. The active substance had not been isolated. Szent-Györgyi had earlier extracted a sugar-like acid from the adrenal glands and other sources, which he called hexuronic acid (check the details). He came to believe it was the anti-scurvy factor but lacked enough of it to prove it.

- **The paprika.** At Szeged, in the Hungarian paprika-growing region, he found that paprika peppers were an unusually rich source (check the story, which is often told with an anecdote of a dinner table). Large amounts could be extracted cheaply.
- **The proof.** With his collaborators, including the American biochemist Joseph Svrbely (check the name and role), he showed that the substance cured scurvy in guinea pigs (check).
- **The name.** It was renamed ascorbic acid, "anti-scurvy acid" (check the credit for the name, and the chemical structure work of Norman Haworth, who shared a Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1937).

This is a discovery in the sense of Chapter 1: finding something that existed, with a practical outcome in nutrition and in the later manufacture of the vitamin (check).

Paprika and the Szeged connection

The link between a national spice and a vitamin is a neat story, and it is largely true as far as it goes, but the credit was shared and the details are more complex. The reader should treat the dinner-table anecdote as a legend (check) and the shared credit as part of the record.

The 1937 Prize and After

Szent-Györgyi won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1937 for work on biological oxidation with special reference to vitamin C and the catalysis of fumaric acid (check the wording). He went on to research muscle contraction, where he and his team studied the proteins actin and myosin (check). After the Second World War he left Hungary in 1947 for the United States, where he worked at Woods Hole in Massachusetts and later on cancer research (check the dates and the circumstances), and died in 1986 (check).

Other Hungarian-Born Nobel Laureates

A selection of scientists and others connected with Hungary who won Nobel Prizes (check each, since the list depends on the definition of "Hungarian"):

George de Hevesy

Chemistry, 1943: radioactive tracers in research (check).

Georg von Békésy

Physiology or Medicine, 1961: how the inner ear senses sound (check).

Eugene Wigner

Physics, 1963: symmetries in atomic and particle physics (check).

Dennis Gábor

Physics, 1971: holography (Chapter 5, check).

John Harsanyi and George Olah

Economics and Chemistry, 1994 (check the details).

Katalin Karikó and Ferenc Krausz

Medicine and Physics, 2023: mRNA technology and attosecond physics (check).

Imre Kertész's Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002 is outside the science list (see Hungarian Literature). Several of the others did their prize work abroad (see Chapter 8).

Who Counts as Hungarian?

Lists of Hungarian Nobel winners vary in length, depending on whether they include people born in the old Kingdom of Hungary but in territories now elsewhere, people of Hungarian descent born abroad, and emigres who took other citizenships (check how various sources count). This is a sensitive question of identity and borders. The course notes the problem and does not take a side: it uses "Hungarian-born" or "connected with Hungary" as a working description, and reports where people did their work.

A British comparison

Scotland faces the same counting question, where a list of "Scottish" discoveries and Nobel prizes can include those born in Scotland, those educated there, and those who worked elsewhere (Alexander Fleming, born in Ayrshire, who worked in London, is an example, check the comparison).

Check the details

Dates, the collaborators, the paprika story, the wording of prizes and each laureate's place of birth and work are easy to misstate. Verify against the Nobel Prize records before quoting. Nothing here is medical or dietary advice.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why vitamin C counts as a discovery and not an invention, and why paprika mattered.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose one other laureate from the list and describe what the prize was for, and where the work was done.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the number of "Hungarian" Nobel Prizes depends on how the question is asked.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Szent-Györgyi:** vitamin C from paprika at Szeged; Nobel 1937 (check)
- **Kind:** a discovery, with shared credit
- **Other laureates:** Hevesy, Békésy, Wigner, Gábor, Harsanyi, Olah, Karikó, Krausz (check)
- **Counting:** depends on the definition of "Hungarian"

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Emigre Scientists

A large part of the story of Hungarian science happened outside Hungary. Between the First World War and the Second, a group of Hungarian-born scientists, many of them Jewish, left for Germany, Britain and above all the United States, where they did work that shaped the century. This chapter describes why they left, introduces four of them, and looks at how their story, including the nuclear weapons programmes, is told. The nuclear and military questions are debated, and the course describes the facts and the disputes without taking a side. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Why They Left

There was no single cause. Several pressures acted together (check each, and see Hungarian history courses for the wider context):

- **1919 and after.** The revolutions of 1919 and the violent reaction that followed (the "White Terror") drove some intellectuals to leave (check the events and the scale).
- **The 1920 law.** A law limiting university admission by group, the *numerus clausus*, was aimed in practice at Jewish students, and pushed some to study abroad, especially in Germany (check the law and its effects).
- **The 1930s.** The rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, where several had settled, forced them out again, and many moved on to Britain and the United States (check).
- **Opportunity.** Universities and laboratories abroad offered posts, resources and colleagues that were hard to find at home.

Four Scientists

Leo Szilárd

Physicist, born in Budapest in 1898 (check). In 1933 he conceived the idea of a nuclear chain reaction (check), helped to bring the Einstein letter of 1939 to President Roosevelt (check), and worked on the first nuclear

Edward Teller

Physicist, born in Budapest in 1908 (check). He worked on the Manhattan Project and became the best-known advocate of the hydrogen bomb. His testimony at the 1954 security hearing of J. Robert Oppenheimer

reactor in Chicago. Later he opposed the use of the bomb and campaigned for arms control (check).

divided colleagues (check). His reputation remains disputed.

Eugene Wigner

Physicist, born in Budapest in 1902 (check). He worked on the first reactors and on the theory of atomic structure, and won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1963 (Chapter 7, check).

Theodore von Kármán

Engineer and aerodynamicist, born in Budapest in 1881 (check). He worked in Germany and then in California, where he helped to found the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (check), and advised on military aviation.

Others in the same circle include John von Neumann (Chapter 6) and Dennis Gábor (Chapter 5). Several attended the same Budapest schools (check, and see Chapter 1 on the explanations offered).

The Manhattan Project

Several of these men worked on the wartime effort to build a nuclear weapon (check the roles of each). Szilárd pressed for the project in 1939 out of fear that Germany would build the bomb first. Later, before the weapon was used on Japan in 1945, Szilárd and others signed petitions asking that it be demonstrated first or not used without warning (check the petition and its history). Their views after the war varied: some campaigned for arms control, others for a stronger deterrent.

A debate, not a verdict

Historians and the scientists themselves disagreed on whether the weapons should have been built and used, and about the part individuals played. The course records that debate. It does not say who was right, and it avoids simple labels such as hero or villain.

How Their Story Is Told

- **The Martians.** The joke from Chapter 1 appears in many popular accounts, and is itself part of the story (check its origin).
- **In Hungary.** After 1945, and particularly in the communist period, the emigres were treated with ambivalence, as national heroes in some accounts and as people who left in others (check how this changed and when).
- **Abroad.** In the United States and Britain they are often described by their later nationality, so that a Hungarian-born scientist becomes an "American physicist" (check).
- **Memory.** Recent decades have seen exhibitions, books and plaques in Budapest recalling them (check the examples; see Chapter 9).

A British comparison

Britain also received refugee scientists in the 1930s (the Kindertransport is the best-known child refugee scheme, and the Academic Assistance Council helped scholars, check), and also lost scientists to the United States later (the so-called brain drain, check). Dennis Gábor's British career is an example of the first (Chapter 5).

Check the details

Dates, the history of the 1920 law, roles in the Manhattan Project, the Oppenheimer hearing, petitions and post-war views are easy to misstate and politically sensitive. Verify against reliable histories before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give three reasons why Hungarian-born scientists left Hungary in the early twentieth century.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare Szilárd and Teller: what did they have in common, and how did their later views differ?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the course describes the nuclear debate without choosing a side, and how you would write a fair paragraph on it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Reasons:** 1919 upheaval, the 1920 law, the 1930s, opportunity abroad (check)
- **Szilárd:** chain reaction idea, later arms control (check)
- **Teller:** hydrogen bomb, Oppenheimer hearing (check)
- **Wigner:** reactors, Nobel 1963 (check)
- **Von Kármán:** aerodynamics, JPL (check)
- **Stance:** describe the debate, no verdict

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Invention, Politics and Memory

An invention is made in a particular place and political system, and it is later remembered, or not, by a particular country. This chapter looks at the conditions under which Hungarian inventors worked, especially in the communist period; how the cube fits into that picture; how inventors are commemorated today; and why credit and nationality are still argued over. It touches politics and national identity, and the course describes the facts and the disputes without taking a side. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Invention Under the State

From the late 1940s until 1989 Hungary had a state-run economy. For an inventor this had several consequences (check each, since the detailed rules changed over the decades):

- **Employment.** Most research and development took place in state institutes, universities and state-owned firms, so inventions were often made by employees and belonged to the institution (check how ownership and credit were handled).
- **Patents and rewards.** There was a patent system and a system of rewards for inventors and "innovators" at firms, with payments and awards (check the details and how generous they were).
- **Trade.** Foreign trade was handled by state trading organisations, so an inventor with a product for export needed to work through them (check which organisations).
- **Travel and contact.** Travel, publication abroad and contact with Western firms were limited and controlled, though not wholly closed, and varied over time (check).

The Cube as a Cold War Success

The Magic Cube passed through this system (Chapter 2). It was made by a Hungarian firm, sold abroad through a state trading organisation, and licensed to Western firms (check the organisations, and the sums involved, which accounts disagree on). It became a rare example of a consumer product from a socialist country that was a worldwide bestseller. Rubik himself became a public figure, and later a champion of creativity and education, and was allowed some freedom to travel (check).

Success despite or because of the system?

Writers differ. Some say the cube succeeded in spite of the system, through the initiative of Rubik and a few people who recognised its value. Others say a system that supported teaching and design institutions gave him the setting to develop it. Both views have something in them, and the evidence on the finances is partial (check).

Museums and Heritage

Inventors are remembered in several ways (check what exists and what is currently open):

Museums

Technology and science museums in Budapest, including material on early electrical engineering, the Ganz works and everyday objects (check the names and holdings).

Hands-on science centres

Interactive science centres in Budapest for children and families (check).

Plaques and statues

Memorial plaques on birthplaces and workplaces, and statues in squares and universities (check).

Prizes and lists

National awards for science and technology, and lists of national treasures such as the "Hungarikum" collection (check whether any inventors or inventions are on it).

How Hungary Remembers Its Inventors

- **Pride.** The idea of a clever small nation is a strong part of Hungarian popular self-image, and appears in school books, television and tourism (check).
- **Selectivity.** The names remembered are often those with international fame. Others who worked quietly at home may be less known (check).
- **The emigres.** Their place in memory changed over the decades, from silence or ambivalence in the communist period to open celebration later (Chapter 8, check).

- **Commerce.** Inventors' names are used on products, streets and companies, and the cube appears in souvenir shops and tourist material (check).

Disputes over Credit and Nationality

Three kinds of dispute recur (check examples of each):

1. **Who did it first?** The questions of Chapters 1, 4, 5 and 6: priority, shared work and simultaneous invention.
2. **Whose is it?** People born in the old Kingdom of Hungary in territories now in other countries, or who took other citizenship, are claimed by more than one country (Chapter 7).
3. **Who profited?** Inventors and states, firms and licensees, shared the money unevenly, and some inventors received little (check cases).

The course does not try to settle these. A useful habit is to state which sense of "Hungarian" a claim uses, and what exactly was contributed.

A British comparison

Britain has its own memory politics around invention, from museums of science and industry to arguments about whether Baird, Turing or others get enough credit, and Scotland has its own list of notable inventors (check the comparison and examples). The patterns of pride, selection and dispute are similar.

Check the details

The rules of invention and reward under the communist state, the trade arrangements for the cube, the museums and their holdings, and the lists and prizes are easy to misstate and change over time. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe two ways the communist state shaped how an inventor worked, and one way it did not prevent success.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Give the two views on whether the cube succeeded "despite" or "because of" the system, in your own words.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose an inventor from the course and write a two-sentence claim about them that states clearly what "Hungarian" means and what they contributed.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **State system:** institution-owned research, patents and rewards, state trade (check)
- **Cube:** a rare socialist-country bestseller
- **Memory:** museums, plaques, prizes, popular pride
- **Disputes:** priority, nationality, money
- **Habit:** define "Hungarian" and the contribution

Rubik's Cube & Hungarian Inventors

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: How Ideas Travel

The course began with a puzzle made in Budapest and a claim that a small country had produced many inventors. This capstone draws together what the chapters showed: that ideas travel, that people travel with them or are forced to, and that credit follows an uneven path. It gives a timeline, compares the cube, the biro and the computer, and ends with a method for judging any claim of a "Hungarian invention". Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Thread

Across the chapters one pattern recurs: the idea starts in Hungary or with someone from Hungary, travels abroad through a person, a patent or a product, and succeeds somewhere else. The route and the reasons differ:

The cube

Made in Budapest, carried abroad by a trade organisation and licensed to Western toy firms (Chapter 2, check).

The biro

Patented in Hungary, carried by its inventor to Argentina, and made a success in Britain (Chapter 4, check).

The computer

Von Neumann's design was shaped in the United States, from a Budapest education (Chapter 6, check).

The discovery

Vitamin C was found at Szeged with a local spice, and recognised by a Nobel Prize (Chapter 7, check).

A Short Timeline

- **Nineteenth century.** Early electrical and engineering work in Budapest, including the Ganz works and individual claims such as the match and the motor (Chapter 5, check).
- **1919 to the 1930s.** Political upheaval and the admissions law push scientists abroad (Chapter 8, check).

- **1930s and 1940s.** Bíró's pen, Szent-Györgyi's Nobel Prize, and the wartime work of the emigres (Chapters 4, 6, 7 and 8, check).
- **1970s and 1980s.** Rubik's cube is made, patented and launched worldwide (Chapter 2, check).
- **Since 1989.** New recognition at home, new Nobel Prizes, speedcubing and a revived pride in inventors (Chapters 3, 7 and 9, check).

What the Cube, the Biro and the Computer Share

1. **A problem first.** Rubik wanted to teach three-dimensional thinking, Bíró wanted a pen that did not smudge, von Neumann wanted a general-purpose calculating machine. None began with the famous result.
2. **Several people.** Ishigi, Loud, Eckert and Mauchly each stand beside the Hungarian name (Chapters 2, 4 and 6).
3. **A person who carried it.** The idea needed someone to take it to the place where it could grow.
4. **A name that stuck.** The cube, the biro and the architecture bear the names of Rubik, Bíró and von Neumann, even where the credit was shared.

The lesson of the course

Inventions rarely have one author, one country or one moment. The honest summary of the Hungarian story is that a small country produced, and lost, many talented people, that some became famous abroad, and that the name attached to each invention records a mix of contribution, luck and influence.

A Method for Judging a Claim

When you meet a statement such as "Hungarians invented X", work through these questions:

1. **What kind of achievement?** Object, method, discovery or theory (Chapter 1).
2. **Who had the idea, who built it, who made it succeed?** The three-way distinction.
3. **Is there a patent or a record?** Dates, applicants and countries.
4. **Were there other claimants or parallel work?** Simultaneous invention (Chapter 5).
5. **What does "Hungarian" mean here?** Born, educated, working, or of descent (Chapter 7).

6. **Who is telling it, and why?** Pride, tourism, commerce, politics (Chapter 9).

What to See and Read

- **Play.** Try solving a cube, using a guide with diagrams (Chapter 3).
- **See.** Technology and science museums in Budapest, and the Aquincum and Ganz-related displays where they exist (check what is open).
- **Read.** Biographies of Rubik, von Neumann and Szent-Györgyi, and histories of the computer and of the emigre scientists (check titles before relying on them).
- **Check.** Patent records and the Nobel Prize archive for primary evidence.

A British comparison

Apply the same method to a British claim, such as the television, the World Wide Web or the steam engine, and compare how much depends on who did what, and on where the idea succeeded (check the comparison).

Check the details

Dates, names and claims throughout the course are from general knowledge and flagged individually. The summary here inherits those cautions. Verify against primary sources before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one invention or discovery from the course and trace its route from idea to success, naming the people and places.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Apply the six-question method to the claim "Hungarians invented the computer".

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Apply the same method to a claim from your own country and say what you conclude.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Thread:** idea at home, success abroad, carried by a person or product
- **Shared features:** a problem first, several people, a carrier, a name that stuck
- **Method:** kind, idea/builder/success, record, parallel work, "Hungarian", who tells it
- **Caution:** check dates and claims