

## AMERICA IN THE LAST CENTURY — THROUGH HUNGARIAN EYES

(GEDEON ÁCS'S DIARY)

by

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After the defeat of the Revolution in 1848—49, a lot of Hungarians left the country to escape from the revenge of the Habsburgs. They went to Turkey with Kossuth; but the Hungarian refugees<sup>†</sup> stay there created an uneasy situation even the Turks because of diplomatic actions of the Imperial Court of Vienna. Neither were the Hungarians content with their situation being restricted in their movements and political activity. It led to their emigration to America.

This is the first important Hungarian wave of emigration, which includes such outstanding characters as János Xantus, the excellent scientist-discoverer; János Czetzy who organised the modernisation of the Argentine Army and Gyula Stáhel Szamwald (Julius H. Stahel) who became an American national hero.

Gedeon Ács's destiny was much more modest. He was born in 1819, completed his theological studies, then worked in Laskó (Low—Baranya County) as a clergyman with his father who was a Presbyterian minister. He was very much interested in the life of the people, in folk customs and in history. He greeted the Revolution of March 1848 joyfully and during the War of Independence he inspired and recruited soldiers for the Hungarian Army with his speeches. Because of this he was imprisoned by the Austrians for some months, but even after being released from prison, he continued to deliver rousing speeches. This was why he had to leave the country in the summer of 1849. During the exile in Bulgaria and Turkey he belonged to the immediate entourage of Kossuth. In the autumn of 1851 he arrived in the United States of America with many of his companions by a steamer called Mississippi.

Throughout the years (1851—1861) he spent in America, he lived on the East—Atlantic Coast. This region was the centre of American capitalism, which was rapidly developing. New York, Boston, Philadelphia and other cities were constantly growing in consequence of the industrialization. Gedeon Ács gives a perfect picture of this country and its society in his diary. He made 13 volumes of notes altogether, which contain about 4000 pages amply supplemented by contemporary pictures and articles. Gedeon Ács recognized very clearly the most important problem of American society, that is the inconsistency between Northern capitalism and Southern slave-plantations. He could have obtained his American citizenship after spending five years in America, but he did not do so. He wrote the following lines: „I could become an American citizen now if I wanted to, but I feel ashamed of becoming one... I am marking time because I have decided to become an American citizen only when I have some prospect of being able to help the liberation of the suffering slaves by my vote.”

It is not accidental that the question of slavery occurs in his diary more and more often after 1858. Also American society arrived at a critical point at that time which, after the presidential election of 1860, produced an open split, that is the great American Civil War. Gedeon Ács gives an account of the destiny of John Brown, who revolted against slave-holders and was executed. He speaks about the democratic American Constitution and the free elections with the joy of a man coming from an underdeveloped, feudal country. But when he got to know American conditions better, he understood immediately the electioneering tricks so characteristic of the electoral campaigns and also the fact that the party machinery had a great influence over the electors. He was disgusted in advance about the autumn, when there were local and national elections, because they involved blustering and extreme abuse with the competing candidates calling their rivals everything. He gives an account of the slums in New York and of the frequent fires which claimed so many victims because the owners packed the houses so that they could have greater profits.

The reader of the diary is very much amused by the good humour and the pleasant anecdotes of the author. He uses sarcastic style to write about some topics. He went to libraries very often, where he read a lot of books and periodical reviews. He also found there a lot of newspapers — especially daily papers — and he gained from them his knowledge about all of the USA and his political awareness as well. He had a lot of American friends and we can find among them a great number of well-known writers and poets, such as: R. W. Emerson, G. L. Stearns, T. Parker, H. Beecher Stowe, etc.

In 1861 he came back to Hungary, to his homeland, Low-Baranya. He lived in a small village, Csúza until his death (1887) and worked as a Presbyterian minister. His notes keep his memory alive, the sincere thoughts of a highly cultivated humanist and the easily read, very often humorous but always true description of the America of his age. Today, ten volumes out of the thirteen can be found in the Archive of manuscripts of the National Széchenyi Library and three volumes are in the collection of the Museum of Szeged.