

# DANUBIAN REVIEW

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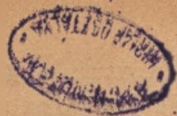
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STEPHEN SZÉCHENYI REDIVIVUS  
(ON THE HUNDREDANDFIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF  
HIS BIRTH)

BY

ANDREW BAJCSY-ZSILINSZKY

On September 21st. we shall be celebrating the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Count Stephen Széchenyi, whom his great antagonist, Louis Kossuth, in the heat of passionate intellectual combats, called "the greatest Magyar". This designation is characteristic above all of Stephen Széchenyi, for he was so comprehensively and so profoundly Magyar in the fire and so characteristically Magyar in the brilliance of his genius — so pre-eminent a personality and hero of our Magyar history of a thousand years —, that the name thus given him can never be dimmed or overshadowed by anything in the long vista of the ten centuries of Hungarian history. Even today no one — not even the most reserved or severest critics of our intellectual life — feels or is entitled to feel that there is any exaggeration in it. But the designation is characteristic also of the man who invented it — of Louis Kossuth —, showing that even Stephen Széchenyi's bitter and often unjust attacks failed to silence in Kossuth the voice of appreciation and admiration or to colour the correctness of his judgment when speaking of his most ruthless antagonist. Finally, this designation and the true Magyar spirit of patriotism reflected in it — the spirit capable of reciprocal esteem — is characteristic of that great age of construction which perhaps stimulated the Hungarian genius to higher flights than in any other period during the ten centuries of Hungarian history. We Hungarians of today — a generation of dwarfs — are quite unable to understand to the full either the unbending and glowing intellectual duel fought by Széchenyi and Kossuth in the fifties of last century or that ineradicable ancient Magyar spirit of chivalry which was reflected in

Louis Kossuth's gesture of profound esteem and homage towards his passionate, great antagonist.

It was a wonderfully Magyar age — this period which produced simultaneously six veritable *demiurges*, — three in the world of politics (Stephen Széchenyi, Louis Kossuth and Francis Deák), and three in the field of literature (Michael Vörösmarty, Alexander Petöfi and John Arany). With all their divergences and antagonisms there was a touching harmony — as seen with the eyes of today — between the six giants reflected ultimately in their historical activity and in their works.

Stephen Széchenyi the new century and the decades that have followed have endeavoured unconsciously and involuntarily to temper down. He was a fervent revolutionary in the classical and noblest sense of the term. But the periods following the age of his activity have proved more and more incapable of carrying the mighty heritage of this intellectual revolutionary programme and its eternally insistent demands for explanations. The natural egotism of every age and of all ages is continually remoulding the really great men of history after its or their own image. These great men are made into planets dovetailed into the true or false solar system of each several age; and usually the fact is lost sight of that the really great men are — fixed stars. They are immovable in their own spheres in the wonderful stellar system of the intellectual world, and their light is permanent: only perhaps the eyes observing them from below change and deteriorate and at times see what seems to them to be a dimming of the brilliance of true genius.

Stephen Széchenyi was an exceptional personality, not only in his own age, but also when placed within the general framework of his own Magyar nation. The other two Members of the great political Triad had spiritual forebears to whom they show an unmistakable resemblance. Kossuth's spiritual forebears were Francis Rákóczi and the great champions of Transylvanian liberty — Bocskai and Bethlen. Francis Deák's genius dovetails into the century-old (and what may be spoken of as the strict) system of Hungarian political and legal culture. Stephen Széchenyi's intellect was not subjected to the influence of the same systematic legal

and political education and subtilisation as Louis Kossuth, and Francis Deák. His inner revolutionary inclinations also worked against his becoming the apex of a development or being able to dovetail spiritually into the Hungarian traditions. His work was to raise the soul of the best sons of the nation in rebellion against the excessively political and legal one-sidednesses of Hungarian intellectual life, to teach the political spirit of the Hungarians, which had become stereotyped and cast into legal moulds, to recognise facts, to awaken his nation to a consciousness of the need for radical reforms, and to point to the living power of the great popular forces as against the one-sidedly privileged-class political, legal and military views and to the enormous, decisive importance of economic progress. He was born to move the forces of action, not so much against traditions, perhaps, but rather against the excesses and the stiffening and impeding restrictions of those traditions. And he started a particularly fierce struggle against national illusions, against the legal fictions, the weapons of which he distrusted manifold obsolescences of the world of privileged classes. As against the legal fictions the weapons of which he distrusted as means of fighting Austria, he appealed to the unexploited primitive force of the Hungarian people. What we had been unable to achieve with political and constitutional weapons in the struggle against Austria, he desired to achieve with the aid of the living energy of the Magyar peasantry and bourgeoisie then advancing both culturally and economically. He was often guilty of injustice to the past; he often betrayed an unwarranted disparagement of the great political efforts of the nation in the past and undoubtedly misjudged the importance of the historical Constitution of Hungary, the meaning of Kossuth's career and even the War of Independance of 1848—49 itself. But this does not ultimately detract either from the colourful splendour of his personality or from the permanence of his creations, or even from the profundity and undying character of many of his perceptions. His genius was undoubtedly an unpolished diamond; it was also irregular: but its fire was nevertheless unprecedented and in its manysided brilliance it is without a parallel in Hungarian history. And while engaged in

discussing the driest economic subjects, he proposed the arrangement of horse-races, founded a Casino, built a bridge, regulated the Tisza and introduced river navigation, offered encouragement for the establishment of economic undertakings and explained the importance of credit; he kept continually rising to intellectual heights never since — and perhaps never before — reached by any Hungarian genius. His political satires are without a parallel in world literature. His masterpiece — the "Blick" —, written when he was already in the Döbling asylum, is an attack on the silly anti-Magyar policy of retaliation of the Bach period and of Vienna which ensued after the overthrow of the struggle for independence; and his Journals published posthumously are still some of the most stirring political and human documents in world literature. *They are the lion's groans of pain of a fervent Magyar soul against the fate of the Magyars*, and ultimately did "indirect" justice to Louis Kossuth and the Hungarian War of Independence too without such having been the intention of their author. It was indeed in the Döbling asylum and only after the disaster which overtook his fatherland on the field of Világos that Stephen Széchenyi returned really to follow the footsteps of his ancestors; it was as an invalid sunk into despair at the fate of his country and with a brain fighting against insanity that Széchenyi took his place as the author of these terrible writings in the ranks of the great champions of Hungarian liberty. His "Blick" was read with feelings of horror and self-accusation, in the decades following the overthrow of the Hungarian struggle for independence, by the political circles of London and Paris, which had failed to find means of assisting the Hungary that fought for a whole year against two Great Powers and of furthering and preserving Hungarian independence — for the sake and for the benefit of Europe generally. We might add that Széchenyi was the first and mightiest of Hungarian revisionists, the Széchenyi who in that dark and hopeless period of his nation's history, when even Deák kept silence, cried out in agony from his confinement in the Döbling asylum and uttered the saying which is today also a slogan — "*Justice for Hungary!*"

Even in its bitter lot and amid the grave ordeals through which it is passing today, the Hungarian nation will certainly feel elation in celebrating the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the birth of "the greatest Magyar". This jubilee is almost as symbolical in our eyes as was the nine-hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Stephen celebrated three years ago; for Széchenyi too is the embodiment of the eternal Magyar spirit, — having indeed set a stirring example of the working of that spirit. *The synthesis and natural harmony of East and West is found shining in his stately figure and on his arched, gloomy brow.* And the great problems of the nation's existence are today what they were of old. And of these problems that which is today also the most burning one is that which fired Széchenyi too most of all, — *how to preserve for mankind all the beauty and colour and originality, all the profound and genuine humanity and nobility, all the deeply-rooted political discernment, all the organising force, all the love of liberty and heroic steadfastness which Europe and the world knows to be the Magyar people's contribution to history.*

Országos Széchenyi Könyvtár