

CHAPTERS OF HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

I.

COUNT NICHOLAS ZRINYI

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Hungary has had a stormy past. Not the least stirring of the periods in that stormy past was the age in which she stood as the bulwark of Christianity and Western civilisation athwart the path of conquest of the Crescent and suffered a patient martyrdom in the cause of an apathetic Christendom.

One of the most glorious pages in the story of this martyrdom was the struggle of the hero of Szigetvár to stem the tide of Turkish conquest. Count *Nicholas Zrinyi* the Elder was a typical representative of that stalwart and uncompromising patriotism which has so often made non-Magyars the foremost champions of their Hungarian fatherland, — which has given Hungary her Zrinyis and her Petöfis.

The story of the dauntless heroism of the master of Szigetvár is indeed a fit subject for a national epic. Just as "Beowulf" sums up in the character of its hero those qualities which the ancient English regarded as the acme of manly prowess, — qualities which find a striking analogy in those of the hero of Arany János's great epic "*Toldi*" —, so in the Epic of Nicholas Zrinyi the Younger we find exemplified those characteristics of the Hungarian which have rendered his struggle in the cause of an ungrateful Europe so typical of the race, — characteristics which again find their analogy in those qualities of the British race that have given Great Britain her place in the van of the nations of the world, — that grit and dogged perseverance which know not how to yield even before overwhelming odds, that sense of honour which Wigláf expressed when he said that "death is preferable for all earls to a life of dishonour", that firm belief in the power of right to conquer might which has saved Britain's cause in many a perilous enterprise undertaken without regard for the risks involved.

In the sixteenth century the main obstacle to the assertion of Hungarian nationalism and national independence was the expansion of the German and Ottoman Empires. The nation was unfortunately divided against itself; the country acknowledged three masters, — the Sultan of Turkey, the

Habsburg King of Western and the national King of Eastern Hungary and Transylvania. The want of unity was a terrible handicap to those true patriots who, like Nicholas Zrinyi the Elder, fought for the ideal of an independent fatherland and for the triumph of their Christian faith. The marchmen of the district between the Danube and the Drave were a living breakwater to stem the tide of Osmanli invasion that threatened with destruction, not only the nationalism of the Magyar race, but the very existence of Christian civilisation. The one care that possessed their nights and converted their days into an incessant round of exertion, was the expulsion of the Turk and the recovery of their native land. These heroes were too few in number to meet the Osmanli hosts in open battle; but their guerilla warfare and their daring surprise attacks made them a terror to the infidel invaders, from their home in the South-West as far north as Buda itself.

The Zrinyis, like all other national heroes of their time, had to fight, not only against the inexhaustible resources of the pagan foe of their country and of Christianity, but against the equally inexhaustible intrigues and selfish indifference of the Court of Vienna, which subordinated the interests of Christendom and of mankind in general — as always — to the particular interests of an infatuated opportunism. It was jealousy of the fame and glory of Nicholas Zrinyi the Elder that made the Court and the Imperialist generals turn a deaf ear to the appeals for aid which went forth from the heroic defenders of Szigetvár. It was in vain that Zrinyi protested, with perfect sincerity, that he was fighting, not for personal exaltation, but for his God, his King (to whom he was ever loyal), his faith, and his down-trodden country; both King Maximilian and Archduke Ferdinand refused their assistance, though they had an army of 120,000 men — lying idle in the neighbouring county. This army was moved *north*, to Győr; Szigetvár was razed to the ground, and its heroic commander fell. The same fate was in store for his son George, who was — intentionally — misunderstood and underrated by Hardegg, and for

his grandson George, who was employed by Wallenstein for work quite unsuited to his genius and his temperament, so that the people attributed his death to an epidemic which they called „Wallenstein”.

The poet, Nicholas Zrinyi the Younger, inherited the great traditions of his family, and at the same time was himself the incarnation of the soul of his nation and of the grand ideas for which his generation lived and died. He had a national mission to perform; and he undertook the work sword and pen in hand. On the battlefield and in his cloistered study alike, he was the patriot embodying that unselfish love of country which had inspired his great ancestor as he rushed out to his death over the drawbridge of his fortress (then a mass of smoking ruins), with the sacred symbol of his faith on his breast and the fire of Hungarian courage in his heart, selling his life dearly and striking terror into the hosts of infidels, who scarce knew whether he were man or fiend. The poet personified further, in particular in his literary products, those ideas which permeated the national life of the Hungary of the seventeenth century; religious tolerance, political liberty for all alike, the consciousness of the common danger threatening the nation and Christianity from the expansion of the Turks, distrust in the sincerity of the goodwill of the Emperor and of the Vienna Court.

Nicholas Zrinyi the Younger, son of George Zrinyi and Elizabeth Széchy (thus, great-grandson of the hero of Szigetvár), was born on May 1, 1620. His education was practical and in accordance with the customs and manners of the time. He was brought up in the family castle at Csáktornya to a knowledge of books and of the art of war. His training in the latter began early with the sight of his father's warriors entering the castle gates after successful „Turk-baiting”, bearing the horse-tails captured from the pagan foe, leading their crest-fallen captives and carrying the heads of the fallen enemies on the points of their lances. Thus in his tenderest childhood the future poet grew accustomed to the glory of victory and the sight of blood, and imbibed the conviction that the greatest service to his country and his faith was that rendered on the field of battle. In this conviction he was strengthened by the traditions and the memorials of the past, which formed no unimportant part of the child's education. From Komárom in the North to the coast of Dalmatia in the South, there was hardly any region that did not echo the memory of some engagement in which a Zrinyi had played a leading part or done deeds of heroism; the name of Zrinyi was on the lips of every minstrel and bard, Magyar and Croatian alike; and there must have been many an old servant in the castle who remembered the glorious days of Nicholas Zrinyi the Elder and fed the imagination of the poet — as Walter Scott's veterans of the Forty-Five did nearly two centuries later — with stirring stories of the grand struggle of the great champion of his country and his faith to hold the formidable foe of Christianity in check. The castle of Csáktornya

itself was a veritable museum of trophies; the walls of the corridors were covered with Turkish flags and banners of all the colours of the rainbow, with valuable Spahi sabres, curious muskets and flints captured from Janissaries, and wondrous Tartar bows: while the rooms were adorned with portraits of renowned ancestors or pictures of battle-scenes in which they had distinguished themselves, and on the ramparts Turkish cannon told the child of his forefathers' glorious victories and spoke to him in silent eloquence of the mission and career awaiting the scion of a fighting house of invincible warriors.

But the death of his father, carried off by an insidious epidemic, as he wasted his youthful energy in his capacity as Wallenstein's sentinel on the banks of the river Vág, compelled the orphan, at the age of seven, to leave his ancestral home, taking with him only the inspiring memories of a stirring infancy. He was entrusted to the care of the Bishop of Zagreb, who himself provided for the education of the young Zrinyi, being encouraged to do so, not only by the interest taken in the boy by the King, but by the sincere esteem and affection he felt for the family that had enhanced the glory of his own — the Croatian — nation and had symbolised the natural unity of interests and sentiments between that nation and the Magyars, — a unity which no forced disunion has ever been able to annul. Nor was the Cardinal-Bishop averse to the thought of binding closer to the Catholic Church which he served the son of that Zrinyi whom he had converted to the Roman faith: thus young Zrinyi was ensured an education far superior to that usually afforded the nobility of the day. Zrinyi himself tells us that he „*jeunesse dorée*” of his time learned but little, being taught how to dress, drink, display their pomp and the splendour of their costumes, ride well — as befitted the members of a nation of horsemen —, and spend their days in idleness.

Zrinyi dabbled in the sciences; from 1630 to 1634 he and his younger brother Peter studied under the Jesuits, being initiated into the secrets of grammar, while from 1634 to 1636 they were at Nagyszombat, where they were trained in rhetoric, under the supervision of the Bishop himself. Zrinyi could not have been a student at Cardinal Pázmány's University, which did not open its courses of lectures till January, 1636, while in May of the same year he went on a pilgrimage to Italy. The finishing touches of his education were received under the immediate influence of the great Cardinal Pázmány, the patriotic prelate who founded the mother university from which that of Budapest takes its origin. Pázmány trained Nicholas Zrinyi to a knowledge of the Magyar tongue, to admiration for the Magyar traditions; the Magyar Cicero took the place of the Latin Cicero of the Jesuits. Pázmány's court was far more fertile in kindling the imagination of the young noble than the classical atmosphere of the grammar-school at Nagyszombat; the practical instruction of the great master of Magyar proved more efficacious than the formal rhetoric of the Jesuits in inspiring the mind of

Zrinyi, who was then at the most susceptible age. The Cardinal's uncompromising patriotism proved an invaluable aid in deepening the impressions of the poet's childhood; his „*Spiritual Guide*” — the Magyar „*Cura Pastoralis*” of this Hungarian Gregory — acted as the lodestar of the poet's religious devotion.

It was a stirring age. Zrinyi found himself face to face with the motives underlying the movements of the time, — the religious reaction, the desire of the Vienna Court to enthral the nationalism of a struggling people, the motive forces behind the Thirty Years' War, the endeavours of the princes of Transylvania — in particular of Gabriel Bethlen — to counteract the Germanising and Catholicising tendencies of the House of Habsburg, the diplomatic game of chess being played by the Emperor, the Sultan and the national sovereigns of Transylvania, with Hungary as pawn, the need for the consolidation of Hungarian national literature, sciences and education. And the ambitious soul of Nicholas Zrinyi drank deeply of the sublime problems that awaited solution. Pázmány's home was the meeting-place of the leading statesmen of the day, of the bannerets and magnates, of the most eminent prelates of the Church; Zrinyi listened eagerly to their discussions, which were of far-reaching effect on the destinies of the country and must have exercised a profound influence on the moulding of his intellect. He witnessed the frequent passages of arms between the Palatine, Nicholas Eszterházy, and the Cardinal, who, though Primate of the country and a devout Catholic, advocated the cause of the Protestant principality of Transylvania, for, as the first diplomat of his time, he regarded as essential — from the point of view alike of the State and of his nation — the maintenance of the full independence of this last refuge of Magyardom; and what he heard set the poet thinking and made him reflect the more deeply on the problem of the national existence of the people with whose fate that of his own particular race was inseparably united. He too was destined to play a leading rôle in deciding the fate of that people; that was part of the inheritance bequeathed him by his ancestors, the Bans of Croatia.

As quite a young boy, Zrinyi had become hereditary high sheriff of the county of Zala and a banneret of the kingdom; as such, his name and presence were essential to the ratification of the resolutions of Parliament: and in 1630, as Master of the Horse, he signed his name to all Acts passed by the Estates.

As the pupil of Pázmány, he betrayed a special sympathy for Transylvania, and later became the intimate friend of George Rákóczy II. and an ardent partisan of the Hungarians of the principality which was then, as always, the principal bulwark of Magyar national individuality.

Another peculiarity of Zrinyi's political conviction must be traced to the influence of the Hungarian Primate: he believed implicitly that the salvation of his country depended upon its return to the bosom of the Catholic Church. Catholicism triumphed, as a result of the efforts of Pázmány;

but Hungary failed to rise to her former greatness, for the Habsburgs, who — according to Pázmány — should have given the Catholic nation full liberty and restored its privileges, were but little concerned in the welfare of what they regarded as a province of minor significance compared with the imperial interests of their house. Zrinyi did not cease to believe in the dynasty as the natural stay of the self-defence of his country; and his visit to Italy in 1636 confirmed his belief in the efficacy of the Catholic reaction.

But that was not all — or even the most valuable part — of the education he received from the great Cardinal. „The latter taught him the importance of learning, — taught him that writing was not merely a delightful pastime, but an invincible weapon to ensure the triumph of the ideas which he had imbibed. For each work of Pázmány's had been a decisive engagement in the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism; and he taught Zrinyi to understand that all State and constitutional questions must be judged and solved with due consideration for national interests and for the conditions prevailing generally in Europe...”

„Italy was still the Holy Land of Religion, Art and Poetry; the Renaissance was still shedding its brilliance and pouring forth the wealth of its intellectual treasures. Under the ever-changing and captivating influences of his surroundings, Nicholas Zrinyi dived deep into Italian literature, and became an ardent and devoted student of *Tasso* and *Macchiavelli*. When he returned home, he was saturated with new ideas and inspired with fresh sentiments.”

“By birth a warrior, by education a politician, by calling a poet, Nicholas Zrinyi was, in all he did and wrote, the living expression, the true personification, of his nation.”

On his return home, the first thing he did was to fortify his ancestral seat at Csáktornya and to make due provision for the defence of the district under his special charge as Lord Lieutenant of the counties of Zala and Somogy and Captain of Légrad and the Muraköz region. He became a terror to the Turks, whom he punished severely on several occasions; he obtained distinction in the Thirty Years' War, in 1644 as commander of a Croatian brigade, in 1646 as commander-in-chief of the Croatian army. But in his absence the Turks had harried and wasted the Muraköz; and it required all his skill as a general and all the steady discipline and intrepid bravery of the Hungarian army to cope with the superior odds fighting against him under the leadership of the Pasha of Nagy-Kanizsa. However, Zrinyi succeeded in driving the intruder back to his own territory; and he was rewarded by the King appointing him Ban of Croatia (December 27, 1647). Thus the young poet became the third dignitary of the realm.

His work as a poet began in the forties, when he played with the passion of love in the „*Viola Idylls*”, probably the record of a personal experience. These verses betray beyond a doubt the influence of the Italian poets, particularly of Tasso, whose „*Aminta*” served as the model for his matter and manner, but not for his form. The object of the poet's love, Countess Eusebia Dras-

kovics, became his wife — after a long and persistent wooing — in 1646. But the happiness was a short-lived one; for the lovely rose of Zrinyi's idylls faded and died in 1651. The poet was crushed by his loss; and he lamented his bereavement in „*The Sorrows of Orpheus*”. He apostrophises the Drave, which he had so often fed with his tears, to weep with him for the faithlessness of his Eurydice, who has left him to pine in despair alone in the world. He descends to the dark depths of the Acheron and implores Pluto in tones of meekest supplication to be merciful to her. The classicism saturating the poem reminds us forcibly of „*Lycidas*”; while the „*Elegy*” written by the sorrowing father of a young boy, — the „tiny nightingale” torn prematurely from his breast — recalls the spirit and manner of the Middle English „*Pearl*”.

The „*Idylls*” and other minor poems, despite their occasional scrappiness and even heaviness, are worthy of the author of „*The Fate of Sziget*”. They are full of bold and telling conceits, pictures, similes, both borrowed and original; and we feel everywhere the sincerity of the poet's passion, even where the object of his song is fictitious. The

descriptions of Nature serve merely to decorate and illustrate the lyrical feelings, to which they are at all times subordinate. The poet makes no secret of the genuineness of his love and the suffering which that love involves; but that passion is not inconsistent with the calling of a warrior. Yet the poet would seem to prefer the character of warrior to that of lover; he makes far more use of historical detail than is usual in love-poetry. He takes his similes and pictures most frequently from the figures of ancient religion and past history; and of his minor poems the one that captivates the imagination most and penetrates to the soul is his „*Hymn to the Crucifix*”, a powerful expression of Christian devotion, resignation and penitence, to exercise which he exhorts all his readers, „for our merits are like the track of ants on the rock, while our sins are like leaves on the trees, like whirlpools in the ocean, like the sand on the sea-shore and like birds in the air. But the Lord's mercy is greater still, His grace infinite; thus we may have trust in Him, not for ourselves, but for His Holy Son, Christ who died on the Cross, who is worthy to have the Muse shed torrents of tears for Him!!!”

(To be continued.)

P O L I T I C A L M O S A I C

THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN SITUATION AFTER THE ITALO-YUGOSLAV AGREEMENT

We believe that when the Little Entente has long been no more than a historical memory, certain circles in Prague and Bucharest will still continue to assert that it is the most perfect of political and military constructions, with a serious mission in the Danube Valley, where mighty tasks lie before it.

It is no longer doubtful that the Italo-Yugoslav treaty of friendship ratified in Belgrade on 27th March is a deviation from the line of traditional Little Entente policy and that it was concluded without the assent or support of the other two States of the Little Entente. And yet, after Count Ciano's departure from Belgrade, we witnessed demonstrations on the part of Rumania and Czecho-Slovakia, in which, however, there was much more of stage-managing than of real sincerity. It would seem that those countries felt impelled to save appearances before the rest of Europe. But the bitter, disappointed tone of the French press, the press of their own ally, shows clearly that that effort was a failure.

The official Italian commentary on the exchange of the ratifying documents in Belgrade is completely reassuring from a Hungarian point of view. One circumstance of special importance for us is that the first stage in Yugoslavia's new foreign policy — for it cannot be questioned that it has struck out in an entirely new direction — was not an agreement with Italy but with Bulgaria. The possibility that Italian influence contributed to this step merely supports our opinion. Rome was bound to follow after Sofia, and it is very probable that, conditions being favourable, this network of friendly treaties will sooner or later

extend to the other two signatory States of the Rome Pact. These treaties were conceived in a spirit of constructive reorganization and signify advantages to all Parties concerned. Italy is desirous to ensure order and co-operation in all the sectors where Central European, Mediterranean, Levantine, and more particularly Danubian and Balkan interests intersect.

This is what the other two States of the Little Entente refuse to understand, and this was the reason why in order to counteract the effects of Count Ciano's visit, they, in hot haste, convened the official Conference of the Little Entente, also in Belgrade. On April 1st and 2nd the three Foreign Ministers, MM. Stoyadinovitch, Krofta and Antonescu, conferred, and the results of their conversations were published in lengthy communiqués containing mention of everything but the most important point of all, namely that Yugoslavia had rejected the plan of mutual assistance offered by France. The situation is that the official communiqué contains a wealth of outer amenities: it is friendly and understanding in tone, formal etiquette has been rigidly observed; but somehow or other the substance has been omitted. For an insistence on the fact that the treaties concluded by Italy, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria do not prejudice the commitments previously given by their signatories does not, we think, affect the main issues. More important by far than the letter of a treaty is its spirit, and in our opinion neither Prague nor Bucharest has any reason to flatter itself with the illusion that the spirit of those treaties is favourable to the Little Entente.

The other day the „*Echo de Paris*” declared that