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St. Stephen's Year

ANDREW BAJCSY-ZSILINSZKY

Czecho-Slovakia's Nationality Problems

Dr. ANDREW FALL

The Autonomy of Ruthenia and the Czecho-Slovak Minority
Questions

JOSEPH ILLÉS-ILLYASEVICS

The Poles of Czecho-Slovakia

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ST. STEPHEN'S YEAR*

BY

ANDREW BAJCSY-ZSILINSZKY

St. Stephen, the first King of Hungary, is one of the most interesting, arresting, powerful and spiritually creative figures in the history, not only of Hungary, but also of Europe, even of the world. The Hungarian racial psyche does not lend itself to mysticism; there is much that is rationalistic in many of its characteristics, and even today the Hungarian peasant is the most critically minded of all peasants in the world. Like the French, the Hungarians are prone to a certain good-humoured sarcasm; they are quick to detect the weaknesses of their fellow-men, of the powers in authority over them and of situations, and are fond of examining the official "gods" to see whether they are not made of tin. The man who for wellnigh a millennium has been recognized as the spiritual leader of such a folk must have been a gigantic figure indeed.

It is now nine hundred years since St. Stephen was laid to rest in Székesfehérvár amidst all the outward manifestations of the nation's mourning. A study of his life and work

* On August 15th. 1938, it will be nine hundred years since St. Stephen breathed his last. This year the Hungarian nation is doing homage to the memory of the first canonised King of Hungary by brilliant church and secular celebrations. It was also in memory of St. Stephen that Pope Pius XI. convened this year's Eucharistic Congress to meet in Budapest. The sainted King's Hold Right Hand — that precious relic of Hungarian Catholicism — has been carried in triumphal procession through practically the length and breadth of the country. On August 18th. the Hungarian Parliament is to hold a solemn session at Székesfehérvár, the ancient residential city of St. Stephen; the only agendum will be the incorporation in law of the Act recording the memory of the first Apostolic King of Hungary. It was in connection with these celebrations that the above articles was written. (Ed.)

must lead us Hungarians to conclude, with awe and reverence, that what St. Stephen determined, ordained, prescribed and marked out for the Hungarian nation, included all that was necessary, not only for the past nine hundred years, but also — in my opinion — for centuries to come. Even in the present it proves impossible to accomplish anything in Hungary that would have been vetoed by our first great King, dead now nine hundred years.

In what respect did St. Stephen's conceptions show such a degree of originality as to make his portrait stand out so distinctly even in the picture-gallery of the extremely gifted Hungarian Kings of the House of Árpád? Really great things are usually very simple; and nothing is farther removed from genuine originality than an affectation of eccentricity. St. Stephen was the leader of a great Christian revolution; relentlessly he stamped out the religion and traditions of the pagan Hungarians for ever, and effected a conciliation between the Christian peoples of Europe and the newly converted Hungarians, who, not so long before, had been laying Europe waste, and secured for this nation a place in the deeply Christian spiritual and intellectual unity of the age. At the same time this great statesman preserved intact what was of eternal value among the ancient Hungarian traditions. The devout follower of the Cluny reform movement, the personal friend of St. Odilo, Abbot of Cluny, never deviated one jot from the line of foreign policy pursued by the pagan conqueror, Árpád, and far from surrendering a tittle of the foreign political independence of Hungary, he safeguarded it with means more effective and permanent than those employed by his predecessors, even extending the frontiers of the country towards the West.

Nothing better characterizes St. Stephen's work than the fact that he, the brother-in-law of Henry II, who with great insight had adopted the Roman Catholic faith in preference to the religion of Byzantium, probably under the conviction that politically he and his people would be less bound by the former, did not hesitate to engage in a bitter war with Henry II's successor, Conrad II, Emperor of the German Roman Empire. From this war the latter, in the words of a contemporary German chronicler, returned home "without

success and without an army", having lost a battle of which Albin Gombos, one of our best authorities on the history of that period, says that it was the greatest defeat inflicted by the Hungarians on Germany during the whole 400 years of the Arpád era.

This war with the German Empire was not of St. Stephen's seeking. Its cause was two-fold: on the one hand the political interests of the Hungarian King had clashed with those of the German Emperor in Venice and, on the other, St. Stephen wished to make Conrad II. realize that the interest of Hungary was not compatible with an alliance between the Empires of the West and the East which might easily result in their crushing the State founded by the House of Arpád. In 1030 the Emperor Conrad sent Cardinal Werner, Bishop of Strassburg, to Byzantium through Hungary, the frontiers of which had been opened by St. Stephen to pilgrims to the Holy Land, who preferred to travel through a country affording them a perfectly safe passage rather than face the danger of meeting with pirates on the Mediterranean route to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. But the King of Hungary learned for a certainty that under the pretext of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land Cardinal Werner was carrying an offer of marriage and alliance to the Greek Emperor; whereupon St. Stephen, pious Christian though he was, closed the frontier and would not allow the Cardinal to enter Hungary — in modern terms, refused him a visa. This, coming as it did from a newly baptized king who had only just succeeded in disarming pagan opposition in his own country, was considered by Conrad such a great insult that, mobilizing all the peoples of his Empire, he set out at the head of a mighty army against the "presumptuous" King of Hungary. The war, as I have said, was not of St. Stephen's seeking; in fact the Emperor's Court Chaplain, Wipo, admits in his chronicle that King Stephen was the innocent party. But though he did not seek war, he accepted it and fought it to a successful conclusion, annihilating the armies of the Emperor Conrad. Peace negotiations lasted a year. St. Stephen, namely, had occupied Vienna and probably by way of that city had encircled the Imperial army, attacking it in the rear according to ancient Hungarian tactics, and now,

after gaining a decisive victory, was evidently reluctant to lose possession of Vienna. The circumstance that peace negotiations lasted a whole year seems proof that grave diplomatic difficulties had to be overcome. In the end St. Stephen surrendered Vienna, but all the more firmly insisted that the Hungarian frontier, which had been pushed back to the Leitha in the days of his father, Géza, should be extended to reach the Wienerwald.

This war and the subsequent peace negotiations clearly show that St. Stephen, though he made his association with Western Christianity the spiritual and moral foundation of the life of his people, did so purely and solely in matters pertaining to religion and Church policy; he certainly did not identify himself with the expansive trend of the new Western Roman Empire in the East, and he resisted the endeavour, based on Carolingian traditions, to undermine the independence of Hungary. On this point he was more of a "pagan" than the most pagan of his forbears. Even in the sphere of religion he guarded the country's independence, for he it was who definitively put an end to the influence of the so-called missionary bishopric of Salzburg and Regensburg on the new Hungarian Catholic Church and for a thousand years to come broke the bonds by means of which German Catholicism sought to win laurels, ensure expansion, and secure hegemony in the East. St. Stephen himself was the chief apostle of Christian expansion; he had no need of the support of foreign States and — rigorously and relentlessly — not only resisted but actually eliminated all ecclesiastical interference from the West.

In his excellent work on the war waged between Germany and Hungary in 1030 Albin Gombos, who has subjected all contemporary or practically contemporary chronicles to a painstaking, almost too critical, examination, expresses surprise at the taciturnity with which Western chroniclers, who are irrepressibly loquacious when they have a Hungarian defeat to record, make but the barest mention of Hungary's victory over the armies of the Western Roman Empire. The defeat of the Hungarians at Augsburg (955) has a copious literature of its own. This is not to be wondered at, particularly since the victory won by Otto the

Great over the Hungarian army supplied the self-confidence and international prestige required for the restoration of the Roman Empire of the West, or rather of the Empire of the Carolingians. In fact, however, the historical defeat of the Hungarians at Augsburg was obviously no greater rout than that suffered somewhere near the Hungarian frontier by Conrad II; the only difference being that the Hungarian commander, Bulcsu, fell at Augsburg, whereas the Emperor Conrad managed to make good his escape.

This statement is not inspired by national pride, merely by the wish to show — through the medium of the figure and personality of St. Stephen — the mighty dimensions assumed by Hungarian state-building, as portrayed in these facts. Conrad was one of the most powerful and gifted Emperors of the medieval German Roman military Empire. St. Stephen, who had with ruthless energy only just crushed the pagan risings in his own country, was nevertheless able to enlist all the forces of the nation under Christian banners in defence of Hungarian independence and of the European rôle undertaken then and played ever since by Hungary.

Albin Gombos has collected about five hundred foreign records relating to St. Stephen made in various parts of Europe during his reign or a little later. From them it is indubitably evident how warmly St. Stephen, the first Christian king of a non-Aryan, Turanian, nation from the East, a nation but recently converted to the Catholic faith, was taken to the heart of a Europe which for a century had suffered cruelly from the depredations of Hungarian raids. Among those five hundred records there is not one that contains anything disparaging about St. Stephen, or that speaks of him otherwise than with respect, appreciation and admiration.

His spiritual buildings are more lasting than his edifices in stone. But the latter serve to reveal the magnitude of the former. The bishoprics he established in Hungary, the churches, monasteries and abbeys built, are proofs of his activity as an ecclesiastical organizer and a state-builder. The buildings erected abroad by St. Stephen are perhaps an even better gauge and symbol of his importance and weight in Europe. It seems scarcely credible that the ruler of a newly baptized folk should erect a church and a pilgrims' home in Rome, in Ra-

venna, in the old diocese of Pope Sylvester II, who sent King Stephen the crown of Hungary, and in Byzantium and Jerusalem.

Only quite recently did St. Stephen's letters to the Abbot Odilo of Cluny, one of the leading spirits of the great Christian reform movement of the age, come to light. Albin Gombos, writing of the foreign contacts of the first King of Hungary, says: — "It may be stated that the network of his foreign contacts embraced the whole of Europe. In Rome, Monte-Cassino, Venice, Cluny, Chartres, Lüttich, Namur, St. Gallen, Fulda, Salzburg, Regensburg, Passau, Ober-Altaich, Nieder-Altaich, Tegernsee, Bohemia, Poland, Constantinople and Russia, we find traces of a foreign activity unparalleled in that era. And that many other relevant matters have passed into oblivion may be taken for granted, — is in fact proved by the case of the two English Princes who found a home at the Court of St. Stephen.

The prestige of St. Stephen in Europe was so great that he was generally credited by contemporary rumour and by the Europe of subsequent times with a host of legendary relatives, non-existing brothers, sisters and children and fabulous ancestors. His unprecedented fame cast its glamour back into the past as far as Charlemagne, one record stating that the mother of the latter had been a Hungarian and a relation of St. Stephen's. On his own race the suggestive influence of their first King, to whom the respect of the Christian peoples of Europe attributed so large a number of legendary relatives, may easily be understood. For we must not forget that no single drop of Aryan blood flowed in his veins. His father was Prince Géza, his mother Charlotte, the daughter of the *Gyula* of Transylvania, so that in blood and instincts he was a pure and genuine representative of the racial genius of his folk, an unalloyed, unadulterated artery of the ancient basic stream of Hungarian blood. And with this pure Hungarian blood in his veins, he proved himself capable of becoming a great European monarch, was able to capture the imagination of the peoples of Europe, ruled as a Christian king in the most noble sense of the word, and understood, intellectually and instinctively, the great Christian reform movement of his time, the Cluny reform.

There was no need for him to deny his race, his blood or the genuine traditions and foreign policy of his forbears: with matchless genius he preserved all the fineness, abilities and originality of the Hungarian folk by securing a place for the nation in the Christian Europe of his age.

Two gigantic achievements perpetuate his memory: the existence for nine hundred years of the Hungarian nation, and the respect and admiration of contemporary Europe, where the appreciation of his greatness was so universal as to be practically unparalleled in history.

The mechanical age in which we live likes to believe in the infallibility of the laws of numbers. But had numbers ever been a decisive factor in the history of mankind, Rome would never have become master of the world, French *esprit* would never have become the salt of intellectual life, and the British Empire would never have existed. Hellas was but a narrow corner of Europe, yet at one time the ideas and schools of thought originating in that little patch of earth were the shining beacons of Europe's intellectual life. Rome was only one single town. The British nation has ever been merely a small fraction of the peoples of Europe, let alone the world, nevertheless it has played a rôle in the history of mankind the importance of which is a triumph over crude numbers. It needs gross ignorance and a lack of historical perspective to think of confining the Hungarian nation within narrow ethnic borders. To Europe for a thousand years we represented rational and humane order in the Danube Valley. And we may also safely say that no people on this continent has sacrificed more for the sake of its Christianity than have the Hungarians.

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