



The American Hungarian Federation

FOUNDED 1906

THE WORLD VIEW OF KOSSUTH LAJOS

By Louis S. Segesvary, Ph.D.

Commemoration of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848

American Hungarian Federation

American University, Washington, D.C.

March 14, 2004



When we consider the life of Kossuth Lajos, we are tempted to think that its apex was reached when he was at the helm of the Revolution of 1848, 46 years after his birth in 1802 in the town of Monok in the County of Zemplén. It was in September of 1848 that he became head of Hungary's Committee of National Defense after the incursion of the Croatian army into Hungary at the instigation of the Habsburg monarchy. Premier Lajos Batthyány had resigned, and Kossuth was appointed head of the National Committee by the Hungarian Parliament as Hungary's ruling provisional authority.

With this appointment, Kossuth was in the position to guide Hungary for better or worse in its struggle for independence. Now was the moment in time when all the cultural, political, and historical forces driving that liberal, romantic period meshed with his ideals and passionate nature to fuel Hungary's drive for independence from its Habsburg rulers.

He had a ready and willing audience in the Hungarian people. As Hungarians ourselves, this is a people that we know well. We know that they are possessed of a longing for independence beyond the average, even under desperate odds, as the revolution of 1956

would demonstrate once again. Furthermore, this is a people not easily given to compromise on matters of national destiny.

Kossuth exemplified these traits in abundance as he enlisted his formidable political and oratorical skills in the struggle for freedom, with Parliament formally declaring Hungary's independence in April 1849 and electing him as the governor of the nation, which he led until its short-lived quest for independence was ended by the arrival of the invading Russian armies and he resigned his position in August of 1849.

The debate still continues among Hungarians to this day as to whether he was too inflexible in not making accommodation to the Hapsburg dynasty and not working for independence in more measured steps. But no one questions Kossuth's brilliance, courage, or dedication in attempting to lead the revolution to a victory that he and many Hungarians thought was almost within their grasp. Ironically, in the revolution of 1956, Prime Minister Imre Nagy also believed that Hungary was on the verge of achieving independence until Russian troops crushed those hopes as surely as they had crushed the hopes of the Hungarians in 1849.

We are less accustomed to thinking of Kossuth's life as reaching a high point in the difficult years following his exile from his native land. While he was celebrated as an inspired orator and champion of freedom during his tour of the United States from 1851-1852, he had no army to command, no defined political or social position, and no wealth. Nor did he have any allies ready to reinstall him in power, not even the freedom-loving Americans, as sympathetic as they were to his cause. Furthermore, he was to remain in exile for the rest of his life, no stranger to poverty or loneliness, with his wife, Terézia Meszlényi,

having died in 1863. It was only in 1894 that his body was returned to Hungary from Turin, Italy, where he died.

It is not easy to contemplate Kossuth's final years without feeling sadness over his estrangement, both involuntary and voluntary, from the country that he loved so much. Those Hungarians who fled the encroachment of the Nazis or the Communists know what this kind of sadness is like. I saw it in my own father's eyes more than once.

But if we feel admiration for Kossuth's boldness in his revolutionary years and empathy for the weight of his exile, we also need to consider the moral code that he lived by in both of these stages of his life. For Kossuth's life, as he lived it, has as much to teach us with regard to the values of an exemplary man as it does about the struggle for freedom and democracy.

The foundation of Kossuth's worldview was clearly anchored in his faith in the worth of the individual. In his formulation, national independence could not exclude the full enfranchisement of civic rights for every member of Hungarian society. He was no defender of any status quo that disenfranchised the lower tiers of society, and he believed that eliminating serfdom was an essential component to social transformation and would preclude civil war in Hungary, with its class driven dynamics. His conception of democracy meant that all would have a voice, as he famously declared to the Ohio State legislature during his visit to America. "All for the people and all by the people; nothing about the people without the people," he declared. "That is democracy." He spoke these inspiring words well before Abraham Lincoln used words very much like them in his Gettysburg address 11 years later.

Kossuth's affirmation of popular rights was accompanied by his strong opposition to discrimination in all its forms. He stated that "I have never had and never will differentiate

between man and man, based on race, language or religion; as a man of the nineteenth century I am ashamed by the anti-Semitic agitation...I consider the principle of discrimination based on race, language or religion not only a moral but a political impossibility."

Freedom of worship was a major component of the basic rights affirmed by Kossuth, a believing Christian who confessed his faith openly. "Tell (it) to the oppressors and their tools, and not only to the oppressed, that there is a God in heaven who rules the universe by eternal laws," he told an audience in St. Louis during his American tour. "The Almighty Father of humanity, omnipotent in wisdom, bountiful in His omnipotence, just in His judgment, and eternal in His love ... His will, against which neither the proud ambition of despots, nor the skill of their obsequious tools can prevail--in Him I put my trust and go cheerfully on in my duties."

But Kossuth left no doubt that religion was not something to be imposed upon others. "I indeed am a Protestant, not only by birth, but also by conviction; and warmly penetrated by this conviction," elaborated Kossuth further in St. Louis. "I would delight to see the same shared by the whole world. But (above) all, I am mortally opposed to intolerance and to sectarianism. I consider religion to be a matter of conscience, which every man has to arrange between God and himself. And therefore I respect the religious conviction of every man. I claim religious liberty for myself and my nation and must, of course, respect in others the right I claim for myself."

If the significance of individual lives, from all walks, was a conviction informing his view of man's place in the world, it underlay his own belief in himself as well. For if there is one trait above all others that we see emerging from Kossuth's own life, it is the belief that

he, one individual, had the power to change the world in which he lived. We see this belief animating his life at every stage, whether as a journalist, political leader, or advocate in exile. As a result, Kossuth never gave up championing his democratic ideals, even when it appeared that his political influence had waned in his home country. He was not tied to the fiction that one had to see immediate results to make a struggle meaningful. Like a mother praying for the religious conversion of her son through a lifetime, believing to the end that it would happen if only she didn't give up, Kossuth continuously acted as though his efforts would make a difference, believing that his ideals had a life of their own that would transcend his own limitations.

Kossuth also believed in the power of communication to effect social and political change. While trained as a lawyer, it was first as a journalist and practitioner of the written word that he fanned the winds of independence in Hungary. While substituting for a member of parliament in 1832, he devised the idea of a series of hand-written letters, copied by hand by young enthusiasts, to describe the activities of parliament, which up to that time were not published for the people to read. Drawing national attention, these vivid writings provided a broad platform for Kossuth's political views and helped establish him as a national figure. After being arrested for subversion in 1837 and then imprisoned, he became editor of the *Pesti Hirlap* following his release in 1840 by the Metternich regime in response to popular demand. The articles that he wrote further broadened his appeal while advancing the Hungarian cause. A fiery orator, when he earned election to Parliament in his own right in 1847, he used that platform to advocate political and social change through his speeches.

While communicating in his own Hungarian tongue propelled him to political leadership, Kossuth also understood the important role of foreign languages in advancing his

ideals. Having learned Latin, German, and French, it was English that was to serve him especially well, a language that he mastered by steeping himself in the Bible and Shakespeare while imprisoned. His acclaimed tour of the United States, in which he addressed a joint session of Congress and delivered some 500 speeches, was conducted in English.

Not only did he deliver his speeches in English, he did it with eloquence. Those of us who have had to learn a foreign language later in life as he did English, can appreciate the measure of such an achievement. Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of America's grand men of letters, said at the time that Americans were eager to see a man "whose extraordinary eloquence is seconded by...the solidity of his actions."

In Faith and Fate, Ferenc Somogyi and Lél Somogyi describe the reception Kossuth received in the United States. For months after he landed on American soil on December 4, 1851, "the United States was in the grips of 'Kossuth fever.' Parades and demonstrations were arranged on his behalf, banquets were held in his honor, odes were written about his deeds, countless streets and numerous counties and villages were named after him, as were newborn children by the score...Across America, Louis Kossuth became a phenomenon praised in newspaper editorials and called to mind by speakers everywhere...He was introduced to both houses of Congress and spoke before a joint session of Congress... President Millard Fillmore welcomed Kossuth and held a dinner in his honor on January 3, 1852..."

The Somogyis conclude that "his impact on the development of American society and his contribution in setting the course of American social and political history may never

be realized.” It would be hard to imagine that Kossuth would have had the same reception if he had to have a translator at his side at all times

If Kossuth basked in fame in America and elsewhere in the first years of his exile, it did not mean that he would develop a swollen head and try to return to power in Hungary. He understood the importance of self-sacrifice for the sake of a higher ideal. As Zoltán Fejös noted in *Three Faces of the National Hero*, “The final deed that established (Kossuth) as a true national hero was his staying out of the country; his willingness to live in exile for the sake of his patriotic ideals and his decision never to set foot again in Hungarian soil after the surrender at Világos in 1849.”

Kossuth surely realized that his return to Hungary would have been polarizing and would risk plunging the country into turmoil. Some years later, with *Ausgleich*, the compromise that created an Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1867, Kossuth continued to live in exile rather than accept something less than full Hungarian independence. It is possible to disagree with Kossuth’s absolute vision of Hungarian independence in those years while still admiring his stand. His principled dissatisfaction with the *Ausgleich* led him to refuse an offer of amnesty in 1890, further underscoring his capacity for self-sacrifice.

Kossuth himself placed great worth on placing ideals above self-advancement, responding to a toast during a dinner given in his honor by the American Congress in Washington, D.C. in 1852 with the following words: “Sir, you were pleased to mention in your toast that I am unconquered by misfortune, and unsecluded by ambition.”

While Kossuth passionately believed in national independence, he also believed in the importance of cooperation, even interdependence, among nations, as exemplified in his call for a confederation of nations along the Danube. He knew that there was strength in union

and that the small nations of Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, and the Romanian principalities would multiply their strength if they joined together their defense as well as their foreign and financial affairs. In his vision, which was never to come to pass, the capital of the federation would have alternated among Budapest, Zagreb, Bucharest, and Belgrade.

Finally, it is worth noting that Kossuth was no one-dimensional man and pursued the study of the sciences, in particular botany. In this he was very much like that great American Renaissance man, Thomas Jefferson, who pursued a variety of interests in addition to politics. Kossuth sustained his interest in the sciences, and between 1867 and 1884 he went on botanical expeditions in the Italian Alps and the Appenines.

The life of Kossuth has much to teach us, therefore, about the principled pursuit of ideals and the kind of character that can grow in the face of seeming defeat. Even so, we have to remember that Kossuth was not without his faults and critics. Chief among them was the great Széchenyi, István, who disliked Kossuth's confrontational tactics. Furthermore, while championing Hungarian nationalism, Kossuth was not sympathetic to the nationalistic aspirations of the Slavic and Romanian minorities living within the borders of Hungary. Finally, there were some in the Hungarian emigrant community abroad who considered him arrogant in his dealings with them.

Kossuth certainly had his flaws, as do all of us. But in the end, what is remarkable is how little power or fame was able to seduce or corrupt him. He is a man, a person, more than worthy of our admiration, as much for the way he lived his life as for his powerful orations and calls to stand at the barricades of freedom. We can believe that he was sincere when he wrote in his first year of exile that "I strove not for power. The brilliancy of a crown would

not seduce me. The final aim of my life, after having liberated my dear Hungary, was to end my days as a private citizen and humble farmer.”

The French writer Albert Camus was one of the few noted European intellectuals moved by Hungary’s 1956 revolution, declaring “Hungary conquered and in chains has done more for freedom and justice than any people for twenty years.” Camus is also the author of the Plague, a novel about the moral choices imposed on us by isolation and suffering.

Towards its the end, the selfless, devoted protagonist, Dr. Rieux, modestly concludes he would not deliberately strive to be a saint or hero because “what interests me is being a man.”

To be man, nothing but a man. That summed it all up for Camus. And it is such a man as Kossuth that Camus must have had in mind when he wrote those words. Thank you.