



The American Hungarian Federation

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KOSSUTH: THE CONTINUING LEGACY

Frank Koszorus, Jr.

On the occasion of the American Hungarian Federation of Metropolitan Washington, D.C.'s commemoration of March 15, 1848

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends!

We come to the part of the program when we switch to English so that those of you whose primary language is English can participate with us in our commemoration of Hungary's democratic Revolution and War of Independence of 1848 - 1849.

Our theme for this year's commemoration of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848 – 1849, focuses on the image of Hungarians and Hungary. As the March 15, 1990 Proceedings relating to the dedication by the United States Congress of a bust of Lajos Kossuth states:

“Although Kossuth did not achieve his goal of winning official United States support and recognition for his struggle for Hungarian independence, his visit did leave a permanent legacy in America.”

Parenthetically I would note that to celebrate and commemorate the friendship and shared values between the people of the United States and those of Hungarian descent, the American Hungarian Federation commissioned the bust of Kossuth and offered it to the U.S. Congress twenty years ago.

But to return to the legacy – the permanent legacy -- Kossuth's trip left in America, one just needs to recall the respect and admiration toward Hungary on these shores. For example, Rev. B.F. Tefft, who wrote a book, *Hungary and Kossuth or, an American Exposition of the Late Hungarian Revolution*, published in 1852, noted:

“The liberty which, in all things, he [Magyars] demands for himself, he freely acknowledges in all others. Freedom, indeed, is the word which concentrates in itself the whole life and being a Magyar.”

And as late as 1910, a mere ten years before Trianon, Theodore Roosevelt eloquently observed on April 2 in the Hungarian parliament:

"There is no more illustrious history than the history of the Magyar nation... The whole civilized world is indebted to Magyarland for its historic deeds."

Of course negative views about Hungarians were not absent either. Indeed, we just need to recall the devastating impact two influential Magyarphobes, Wickham Steed, correspondent for the London Times, and Robert Seton-Watson, founder of the journal *The New Europe*, had on Hungary.

And today, although Hungary is a democracy, a member of NATO and an important U.S. ally, it recently has been harshly, repeatedly and often unfairly criticized by some in the United States and international community. Unfortunately, we have our Steeds and Seton-Watsons today.

This is not to say that no steps could be taken to strengthen democracy or that no mistakes have been made. It is self-evident, however, that an institutional pretext, *i.e.*, that Hungary's center-right government is allegedly undermining democracy, is actually being used by some to wage a political campaign to negate the voting public's clear and overwhelming choice of this government in the 2010 internationally recognized free and fair elections.

In other words, much of the criticism is either politically motivated or not evenhanded or based on facts but on generalizations and speculation, *i.e.*, what might happen as a result of the new laws as opposed to what has happened.

Most telling is a recent Op Ed article calling for the reinstatement of Radio Free Europe's Hungarian-language broadcasts. The article avers, among other things, that Hungary attacks Western media outlets and that CNN is no longer being offered by one of Hungary's cable providers, implying that Hungary has silenced CNN.

The facts tell a far different story. T-Home is owned by Deutsche Telekom. According to CNN, the unavailability of CNN and other Turner channels on T-Home in Hungary is due to commercial considerations. CNN added that it hopes to resolve these commercial issues. Importantly, Hungarians are able to view CNN on the other channel provider, and they also have other media available to them that are critical of the government.

The state of Hungary's democracy should be judged on facts. Urging Radio Free Europe broadcasts to Hungary based on inaccurate information is not objective analysis. Moreover, such broadcasts would be wasteful, play into the hands of the far-right and alienate democratic Hungarians who support both their government as well as America and NATO. The broadcasts would hardly promote democracy in Hungary or United States interests in the region.

Regardless of our individual political preferences or perspectives on Hungary, we can all agree, I believe, that we should call for objectivity and evenhandedness bereft of partisan politics when judgments are made about Hungary. This should not be a liberal or conservative issue – it is a question of accuracy and fundamental fairness.

Hungary has a revered history of standing up for freedom and liberty against great odds, including in 1848 – 1849, and it is not to be defamed through political expediency. It is this history that we commemorate today and wish to preserve as part of the permanent legacy left in the wake of Kossuth's trip to the United States.