

## Lajos Kossuth remembered at his statue in Cleveland

*Thoughts on the spirit of Kossuth on the occasion of the 116<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dedication of the Kossuth statue in Cleveland*

By Lél F. Somogyi (*given at the Kossuth statue in University Circle, Cleveland, OH on 9/29/2018*)

We stand on sacred ground, made so by the efforts of those Hungarians in America who came before us.

Their spirits are here with us, floating around us and standing next to us in the folds of time and space, together with us as we gaze at Lajos Kossuth in the form of a statue with hand held high, face stern and resolute, high above us on a multitiered pedestal.

Over the many years since the Kossuth statue came to be in 1902, it is thanks to the efforts of the Hungarian American organizations, many of which are strong and still exist today, that the memory of Kossuth and what he stood for are not forgotten, and continue to inspire action and individual greatness through the manifestation of the Hungarian spirit by generation after generation.

Under this statue there is Hungarian soil, brought here from historic Hungary, from a time when it was still whole but already fraught with strife in a changing world already rushing headlong toward a global war.

This statue rose on this site 116 years ago, dedicated on September 22, 1902, as the first Kossuth statue in America, nearly to the day of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Kossuth on September 19, 1802.

I want to share a personal recollection with all of you. I recall the first time I visited the Kossuth statue on my own. I had just started at Case Western Reserve University in 1972, so I walked over to visit the statue one fall day. Isolated between roads, the park where the statue stands is inviting, but back then it was on the edge of an area that was still dangerous and had been going down hill for decades. At East 106, an old row of buildings stood, yet it was a busy area, with some bars and adult dance clubs, but with the homeless and down-and-out spending time in the nearby area where the Kossuth statue stood guard on the past.

I looked up in awe at Kossuth, as I had in the past when I joined with others from the Hungarian community to commemorate 1848 and lay a wreath to Kossuth, his memory, and his ideals.

What I saw was disconcerting. In Kossuth's high raised hand, someone had somehow put a beer can. Up high, somehow, someone put it in his grasp.

The scene hit me. Unexpectedly, it inspired rage and anger in me to see the bothersome desecration of such a profound symbol of what I so strongly believed to be important as a Hungarian American.

Then I realized that Kossuth was alone and forgotten. The world had changed around him, as around his statue, and his ideas were in doubt and less valued in the 1970s, since communism was de facto accepted as a peer form of governance by much of the West. I felt helpless, like being a Hungarian American was not worth it.

Yet, then and there, I resolved to do what I could to make a difference and continue to work for the freedom of Hungary. To not let the memory, or the meaning, fade.

Kossuth continued to stand his ground and the Cleveland statue stood strong, revitalized in 1985 so he could be there for us, and here we are another 33 years in the future. We can be proud it has weathered the decades and still instills wonder in the students, and citizens, who occasionally pass by and encounter this figure out of time, but still relevant to our time. Kossuth continues to give us courage and hope.