

## Lajos Kossuth remembered in Cleveland and connections to Cleveland Hungarian organizations

*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 Commemoration held at the West Side Hungarian Reformed Church, 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. Here, and at the statue where I and others came from after laying a wreath, they join with us when we remember Lajos Kossuth and when 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 the 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. Though WWI didn't start until 1914, still many years away when this statue was erected, the war against Hungary had already been raging.

The Kossuth statue is the creation of András Tóth, a well-known Hungarian sculptor. This statue came to us from across the sea. It came about through the efforts of the United Hungarian Societies, already a force in Cleveland, and key leaders. In 1902, this statue was supposed to have been raised in downtown Cleveland, on Public Square, but was vehemently opposed by another nationality group, after which the Hungarians of the time, with persistence and dedication, and very quickly, succeeded in gaining support for the statue being installed well out of town at the University Circle location, surrounded then, as now, with institutions of higher learning.

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.

The friendship between Hungary and America was renewed. The connection with Hungary that came out of the Cleveland statue and Hungary's interest in American democracy, directly led in 1906 to a statue of George Washington in Budapest, created by the Hungarian sculptor Gyula Bezerédi.

An effort to erect a statue in New York preceded the Cleveland effort, but failed to progress, though the brave and righteous Hungarians in great NYC worked hard to accomplish it. They

devoted more of their efforts to provide Kossuth the man with financial assistance in his old age, helping to sustain him through his poor and by then destitute end of life. The NYC statue effort sputtered out and a Kossuth statue didn't rise in New York until decades later, in 1928.

The threads running through time were already spun, and the connection back to Cleveland was there in 1928. Dr. John B. Nádas, who we know in Cleveland from after WWII as the long time leader of the Hungarian Association and activist for the liberation of Hungary from communism, was there in New York in 1928 as an official student representative sent by the Hungarian government, with the backing of the great Pál Teleki. Dr. Nádas was part of a global tour which also included locations such as London. The spirit that he represented then would end up in Cleveland after WW2, where as the head of Hungarian Association he would guide hundreds of most patriotic Hungarian souls in the diaspora to acclaim the greatness of ideals that Kossuth stood for and that guided Hungarian Americans to triumphantly fight against communism, to see ultimate victory in the fall of communism in 1989-1990. In 1985, Dr. Nádas was part of around 40 organizations in Cleveland that worked together in the early 1980 to advance the cause of freedom, to stand for freedom in the face of virtually universal distain, to keep alive the spirit of 1848 and Kossuth, and never give up.

The organizations of Cleveland, though their individual agendas varied, were tied together by the threads of the same ideals, and worked as a group to get the Kossuth statue rebuild by artist Csaba Kur, and then joined together to rededicate the Kossuth statue for the future, for us, in the hope that Kossuth, the prophet of world freedom, with hand held high, would again lead Hungarians, and especially Hungarian Americans. We honor his memory today, and vow to pass on the respect we have for him and his ideas to our children and theirs.

In 1902, the Cleveland Kossuth statue was a success of cooperation, of the force of powerful ideas sustained over many decades, driven by the desire to remember a man who many then, and again increasingly today, regard as a prophet of truth, a muse of compelling ideas greater than any one nation, and the embodiment of freedom of speech.

Hungarians rightly regard him as a great communicator, for his eloquence and influence in Hungary in the latter part of the first half of the 1800s was considerable. He was a writer, a reporter of the human condition, a leader, a compelling motivational speaker who rode through historical events and played the many crisis situations around him with the assured confidence of one who knows that the right talk and attention given to a crisis is the way to influence the world.

As great as he was in the Hungarian language, it was after failure in leading Hungary in revolution that Kossuth's eloquence emerged in the English language through his study of Shakespeare and the Bible, which he pursued single-mindedly while confined in an Austrian prison for daring to claim the right of a free press in the face of the Austrian Empire.

"His orations are a tropical forest, full of strength and majesty, tangled in luxuriance, a wilderness of self-repetition. ...they contain materials adapted equally for immediate political service and for permanence as a work of wisdom and genius." said Francis W. Newman, who helped bring Kossuth's greatest American speeches to a vast English-speaking audience through the publication of a book of Kossuth's speeches in 1853.

The book was published by Newman in London, and came into existence very soon after Kossuth achieved huge worldwide acclaim for his speeches outside of Hungary, given in the

English language. The book is preserved on archive.org, and lists 51 of his speeches, including a speech on the concept of Hungarian Loan (which was an early version what today is called crowd-funding), which he gave while in Cleveland. Seven other speeches in the volume are from other cities around Ohio.

Kossuth gave over 500 speeches, great and small, in his half year in America. Some of the topics covered include monarchy, communism, the declaration of independence of the Hungarian nation, nationalities, military institutions, religions contrasted, Russia and its ascendancy, the interest of America in Hungarian liberty, despotism, democracy as the defining spirit of the age, the sad miseries and amazing strengths of Hungary, George Washington's policy, the brotherhood of nations, and commerce policy, among many others.

If all of this sounds like it could be out of today's news, it is. In fact, much of what he said is eerily accurate and foretold the future. Kossuth spoke in his Russia Triumphant oration about how it could be expected that Russia would absorb Europe, and would then go after the interests of the United States, in many ways and over long periods of time. We can learn from Kossuth to understand the news around us today.

So much of what he said, as recorded by hand by reporters and scribes of the time, is a mirror reflection of the same concerns we have today.

He defended free-speech, the rights of newspapers and other publications, and the importance of freedom for reporters and writers to be unrestricted in making known ideas that ran counter to the interests of entrenched governments, politicians, and business leaders.

His ideas were strong. They sent a powerful message at the time, in the mid-1800s, then again after his death, a crescendo of recognition and respect from the turn of the century through the 1940s, fading to a benign shadow through the communist years, returning to prominence with the liberation from communism in Hungary, and in more recent years enjoying honor restored in our new more traditionally patriotic Hungary.

The great generation of Hungarian Americans, here in America because they had no choice to stay in Hungary after World War II, and the '56-ers, forced to flee after the failed 1956 Uprising known as the Hungarian Revolution, shared a view and understanding of Kossuth that I envied at the time, and deeply respect.

Today, we live in changing times. We have never had so much information at our fingertips as we have in browsers, or available to us for the asking in our smart phones and smart assistants, as we do today. Yet, it is troubling.

I asked my Alexa Echo "Who was Louis Kossuth." After a pause that seems longer than usual, the device came back with, "Hmmm. I don't know that one."

I asked my Windows Cortana the same question. Cortana completely misunderstood, thinking I asked "Who was Louis score shoot" and started giving me sports related articles.

Google was no better. Google heard "Who was Louis could shoot" and I got some even more off the mark results.

Using the browser is much more productive and turns up a wealth of useful information, references and even actual images of Kossuth. We can get to know him if we want. I encourage

our younger generation, our scouts and students here today, to do that – go search for Kossuth and see what you can find.

The booklet that was published in 1985, when the Kossuth statue was restored, is especially meaningful to me. I knew all those organizations and their leaders. I shared their world view and rejoiced when many of them lived to see the day that communism collapsed in Hungary. Rather than tell you the details in the booklet, I scanned it and made it available on the Hungarian Cultural Garden website. You can visit the site and find the link to the Kossuth statue page. This page with the QR code will take you directly to the book. I recommend it.

Before I finish, 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.