

FERENC RÁKÓCZI II

by

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Who was this prince the anniversary of whose birth will be commemorated in Hungary on March 27th 1976? Was he a backward feudal lord fighting against centralized power in the Danube Valley, against a power that stood for progress? Was he a nationalist trying to secure the supremacy of the Hungarian ruling class over other nations living in this land?

Was he the "Saint of the Country", a "Champion of Liberty" trying to create the political conditions necessary for social progress, the friend of the people who placed himself at the head of the peasant host in revolt fighting for their rights?

Or was he a political day-dreamer thinking as a Jansenist who was a stranger to this world might?

All this can be asked, has been asked about Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II.

Basing myself on recent research I shall try to give as true a description as possible of this much debated man.

The youth of a Hungarian aristocrat

Ferenc Rákóczi II, the son of Prince Ferenc Rákóczi I. and Ilona Zrínyi was born on March 27th, 1676 in a country whose central part was still occupied by the Turks while the west and north were ruled by a Habsburg prince, crowned Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary as well.

Transylvania, to the East, still flourishing in the early 17th century had fallen prey to Turk and Tartar following the fateful Polish campaign by György Rákóczi II. Growing much weaker it just managed to retain its semi-independence in the shadow of the Ottoman Empire.

Vienna and the Porte had signed the Peace of Vasvár twelve years

earlier, an agreement highly disadvantageous for Hungary, under which two important fortified towns, Várad and Érsekújvár, were relinquished, following a war in which the armies of the Holy Roman Empire supported by French volunteers gained the day.

This was after Vienna gave top priority to its West-European interests and not to driving the Turks out of Hungary. The aristocratic plot named after the Palatine Ferenc Wesselényi by historians, an ill-prepared conspiracy which ended so sadly, followed logically. That treaty ran counter to both justified national and obsolete feudal interests, this bathing the defence of the latter in the shining light of moral glory as well.

Prince Ferenc Rákóczi I was among the plotters, and if it had not been for the intervention by his mother, Zsófia Báthory and the Jesuits, it is almost certain that he would have shared the fate of his father-in-law Péter Zrínyi whom the Vienna Court had executed together with his fellow-conspirators. He had little enough time to suffer his ignominious survival, and died shortly afterwards, leaving his mother Zsófia Báthory, notoriously under the influence of the Jesuits, to look after his wife Ilona Zrínyi his son young Ferenc Rákóczi and daughter Julianna. After the death of her mother-in-law Ilona Zrínyi abandoned the retired life she had led and married Imre Thököly, a love match which was also politically inspired. Thököly emerged in the late 1670's as the head of those who took to arms being dissatisfied with the policies pursued by Vienna. He wished to establish an independent principality in northern Hungary, counting on the support of the Turks, France and Transylvania. The idea was to create a force that would compel the Court in Vienna to respect the privileges of the Hungarian nobility and to allow Hungarian protestants to practise their religion without let or hindrance.

Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II had got to know what war meant as a boy, in particular during the siege of Munkács, successfully defended by his mother for two years against the forces of the Emperor winning admiration from the whole of "gallant Europe". In 1688, after the surrender Ilona Zrínyi and her two children were taken to Vienna. Young Ferenc was placed under the guardianship of Leopold Cardinal Kollonich. He was separated from his mother and sent to Neuhaus, a small town in Southern Bohemia (Jindřichův Hradec in Czech) where, in a Jesuit College the Cardinal's nephews were being educated as well. To quote an 18th century historian of the school the young prince was sent there to "learn to respect Divine and human authority in the company of loyal subjects of the Emperor." One of his teachers described the boy shortly after his arrival at Neuhaus: "He turned 12 on March 27th, but he is so tall and has such a well-

developed body that he looks three to four years older. He speaks Hungarian and has an almost perfect command of Latin. He has a ruddy dark complexion and dark hair, which is far from short. His long locks fall on his shoulders. There is nothing mediocre about him. The way he speaks, behaves and moves is dignified as befits a prince, but without the slightest presumption; he is as human as he is noble though he always preserves dignity."

In 1690, following the completion of his secondary school studies, Ferenc Rákóczi was sent to Prague where he read philosophy. He attended lectures on logic, metaphysics and mathematics, later ethics and physics, and he was also allowed to study architecture, especially military architecture. He spent his summers visiting Jesuit houses in Bohemia and he established contact with some of the Bohemian aristocrats who supported the Habsburgs but were fostering local culture as well.

In 1692 his sister who had married Count Ferdinand Gobert Aspremont-Reckheim was granted permission by the Emperor to invite Ferenc to Vienna in connection with legal proceedings over his father's estate. His guardian Kollonich encouraged him to oppose his sister, but Ferenc chose the alternative proposed by Julianna instead. He put an end to his studies, stayed on in Vienna leading the hedonist life of the court aristocracy. He agreed to his brother-in-law's suggestion that he marry Princess Magdalena of Hessen-Darmstadt whose family had ties with the French Court. The Emperor and his aides, however, were not particularly happy about the match and in an attempt to intervene they sent Rákóczi to Italy on a Grand Tour. In much later confessions he deplored both the moral laxity in Italian cities and the absence of his own religious zeal. At the time, however, he was most keen on seeing the world and learning. In Florence he took lessons in dancing and etiquette and went the round of museums and galleries. In Rome, he studied history, geography, geometry, architecture, and warfare and looked at palaces and churches. It was also there where the false news of the death of his wife-to-be reached him. This was spread by the Vienna Court in an effort to abort the marriage. Rákóczi hastened back to Vienna.

The Emperor declared him of age and allowed him to visit his estates in Hungary. This was done to win his support, since even if the attempt to turn him into a high church dignitary through education had failed, he was still thought to have the makings of a good courtier. That was exactly what he was considered to be in Hungary. At his inauguration as Lord Lieutenant (Comes) of County Sáros, the main speaker wished him further new offices "under the protective wings of the royal Austrian eagle".

After his return to Vienna his marriage plans occupied him again. A match

with Charlotte-Amalia, daughter of Prince Hessen-Rheinfels, whose family was also believed to be pro-French was suggested. Accompanied by his brother-in-law, Ferenc Rákóczi joined the campaign against France, but this was only a pretext. On September 26th, 1694 he married Charlotte-Amalia without first obtaining the Emperor's permission. On his return to Vienna he was placed under house arrest. Following the intervention of a number of prominent persons the newly-weds were eventually allowed to leave for Hungary. In any case the behaviour displayed by Rákóczi attracted the attention of influential people at the Court and they suspected rebelliousness. Rákóczi was well aware of this and he avoided political activities. When the revolt led by the supporters of Thököly broke out in the area of Tokay in 1697 he left immediately in the obvious effort to escape possible charges that he had something to do with the uprising.

The Preparation of the Uprising

When the situation calmed down he returned home but he found it increasingly difficult to deal with the affairs of the country. Being a morally sensitive person, he protested against unlawful oppression and exploitation by the Emperor's military forces, first of all against the serfs. Miklós Bercsényi, the Lord Lieutenant of County Ung told him of the grievances of the nobility who also suffered from the military and were afraid that Vienna would eventually take measures to the complete loss of what remained of their privileges. All that contributed to Rákóczi coming out in opposition to the policies pursued by Vienna—in keeping with the family tradition. He knew only too well that without support from abroad he would get nowhere. The War of the Spanish Succession, however, seemed to create favourable conditions for embarking on an opposition venture. The Emperor was forced to withdraw his forces stationed in Hungary in order to use them against France in the West. In agreement with his most intimate friends Rákóczi decided to seek support abroad. He sent letters by Loungewalt, one of the Emperor's officers who enjoyed Rákóczi's confidence, and went on leave to Liège to the French Defence Minister (*secrétaire d'Etat*) on two occasions, appealing for support from Louis XIV.

The officer, however, delivered a copy of the letters to the Vienna Court, as a result, Prince Rákóczi as well as all the plotters except Miklós Bercsényi who had fled to Poland were arrested in April 1701. Although he denied all charges brought against him he was certain to have been sentenced to death or life-long imprisonment if he had not been able to escape to Poland on November 7th with the assistance of his wife, the Jesuits

close to the Emperor and, last but not least, Captain Gottfried Lehman, the commander of the prison at Wiener-Neustadt.

His arrest and subsequent exile finalized his decision to do all he could against the Habsburgs. He could not reckon with support from Augustus II of Poland who had already allied himself to the Emperor. All he could reckon with was assistance from some of the Polish aristocrats by taking advantage of the feudal anarchy prevailing in that country. In that endeavour he received substantial help from Elizabeth, the wife of Adam Sieniawski, the palatine of Belz. She belonged to the Lubomirski family and became not only Rákóczi's political adviser but also his mistress. However, he expected real encouragement from Louis XIV who was hesitating to help in spite of the fact that the Marquis du Héron, the French Ambassador to Poland gave a very warm recommendation to his king. This is what he wrote to him of the Hungarian prince:

Le Prince Ragotsky est bien fait, il a beaucoup d'esprit et infiniment plus que je n'avais ouï dire. Il conserve dans ses malheurs une fermeté dont peu de personnes seraient capables.

Bercsényi had informed the French Court about the possibilities and methods of an uprising earlier in a detailed memorandum and following the arrival of Rákóczi they sent another, more complete one, to France. The withdrawal of the Emperor's forces from Hungary, the bitterness of the people and the intolerable yoke of oppression were, in their view, the factors that were bound to lead to success provided they would be backed up by a foreign force running into several thousands. Prince Rákóczi and Count Bercsényi worded their principal objectives as follows:

Notre intention est, à l'occasion de ces conjonctures, de venger la liberté injustement opprimée et de délivrer des misères de la servitude le peuple qui gémit et n'aspire que ce moment, et par ce moyen servir le Roi par une diversion et mériter l'éternelle protection et alliance de Sa Majesté, pour le maintien le plus solide du Royaume procurer l'élection d'un roi qui convienne à Sa Majesté.

Louis XIV was ready to assist them but he was not hopeful about the outcome of the uprising. He went only as far as permitting the Marquis Bonnac, the French Ambassador in Warsaw, to give a modest grant to be confined to one occasion and he decided to monthly grants available only after the overwhelming majority of Hungary's territory was in the hands of Prince Rákóczi.

Heading the Uprising

While diplomatic moves were in progress abroad, the serfs and the minor nobility organized themselves against the Habsburgs and sent successive

letters to Rákóczi who stayed in the castle of Brzeżany, in Southern Poland, appealing to him to come home. Following prolonged hesitation the Prince crossed the Hungarian border on June 16th 1703 before his friend and aide Count Bercsényi who had gone to Warsaw to see the French Ambassador Bonnac returned with some help.

The question of the relations between Rákóczi and the serfs has been a matter of continued debate. The Prince was well aware of the fact that there was "instinctive hatred" (*haine naturelle*) between the people and the nobility and it was beyond any doubt that he himself stood for the interests of the nobility. Nevertheless, he was prepared to accept the overtures of the serfs in the hope that this would help him to win the nobility's support for the cause of the war of independence. Recalling the conditions under which the war of independence commenced he wrote in his *Memoirs*: "I was inspired by the passion of a young man and a love of country" (*animé par l'ardeur d'un jeune homme et par la zèle de la patrie*) and added, "I was encouraged and strengthened by the intention of winning the confidence and love of the people" (*fortifié et encouragé par le seul dessin de mériter la confiance et l'amour du peuple*). Was that the manifestation of the paternal care extended by the Prince, a sort of charity that recognized the serf as a human being and was prepared to help him? Obviously, certain elements of this can be traced in Rákóczi's ideas, but perhaps we are not too far wrong in saying that there was more than that, that is getting closer to the people without whose support it was impossible to fight the war of independence. We have good reason to presume also that Rákóczi accepted the initiative of the serfs in an effort to exercise pressure on the nobility. The nobility did not want to join the independence struggle in the early stages, while the serfs wanted to struggle concurrently against the Emperor and the nobles who served him, or were only too cautious being those who exploited the serfs. Rákóczi wanted to win the nobility over considering their participation in the war of independence as necessary. He appealed to what he described as "the upper classes, the nobility and all the other arms bearing classes" to join him and defend the nobility's rights and privileges. At the same time the peasants who looted the country houses of the nobility were bid not to set fire to any property, or plunder and roam about the countryside. Serfs and their families who were ready to take up arms were promised exemption from dues of any sort. This was the *hajdú* privilege which was first granted by the princes of Transylvania to serfs serving them with arms in the early 16th century. Rákóczi's idea was to further a joining of forces thus achieving the common objective: national independence.

In spite of that, however, part of the nobility yielded to Rákóczi's appeal

only under pressure. Not only because they were afraid of their own serfs but also because they were not hopeful about the outcome of the uprising however dissatisfied they may have been with Habsburg rule. The Prince did not think very highly of the petty nobility which he felt to be closer to him in several respects than the magnates. "The nobility," he wrote in his *Memoirs*, "were ignorant of the science and art of war" (*parmi la noblesse l'ignorance des sciences et de l'art militaire*), "their inadequate education stands for the illusion of honour and virtue" (*Leur mauvaise éducation représente souvent des fantômes illusoire d'honneur et de vertu*). However, Rákóczi blamed not only the nobility for their own ignorance, drinking, and the idle and easy-going life they led but also the Austrian dynasty on whose part it was a deliberate policy to keep the Hungarian ruling class in such a state. Nevertheless it was that class that Rákóczi wanted to lean upon in the first place because he could not like Louis XIV of France who relied on the bourgeoisie for support against the nobility and above all the high aristocracy. In the absence of a bourgeoisie the army might well have played the part of an appropriate counter-balancing factor as opposed to the aristocratic anarchy he was so familiar with from his Polish experiences. And when I say army I mean what was termed as "gallant order" and was composed of the minor nobility, the soldiers who used to serve in the border castles and the liberated serfs. A force of this kind would have received massive political support from the middle nobility primarily some of the Protestants whose path to public office was blocked by the pro-Habsburg officials, they were interested in creating an independent state also because of the religious persecution they suffered.

In his efforts to bring about unity, Rákóczi attached paramount importance to the elimination of religious conflicts. They were, in most cases, linked with both social and political ones. In a letter dated June 15th, 1704 and addressed to Louis XIV, he said that he had tried to favour all the three received denominations because the House of Austria as he put it—took maximum advantage of religious denominations in all earlier rebellions. Louis, *le Roi Soleil*, who persecuted the Huguenots, approved of Rákóczi's approach as shown by the instructions he gave to his representative, to be sent to Hungary.

Rákóczi tried hard to create the economic foundations necessary for waging a war of independence and to this end he endeavoured to utilize the country's resources and the contributions made by counties without levying additional taxes. He built up an efficient system of economic institutions and made arrangements necessary for supplying the armed forces. From the very beginning his attention was focused on military

matters and he gave top priority to the establishment of a standing army.

He started the war of independence in the hope of obtaining support from abroad. For this reason all his activities connected with domestic issues were closely associated with his foreign policy.

In 1704 his principal hope was that his forces and the Bavarian and French army marching on Vienna from the West could be united. That was the motive lying behind the *kuruc* (the term covers Rákóczi's forces) advance in what is Slovakia today, and in Transdanubia. The Bavarian Elector, however, was not particularly enthusiastic in spite of the fact that Rákóczi had offered him the Hungarian throne. Meanwhile, Rákóczi tried to seek support elsewhere, since he realized that the hope of an ultimate alliance with France alone was not sufficient. He sent his envoys to Charles XII of Sweden and the Elector of Brandenburg and sought ties with the Turks but with very little success.

He did not reject negotiations with Vienna either; he was quite pleased with Dutch and English mediation in the hope of reaching an agreement backed by international guarantees.

The period of choice

On August 13th, 1704 the Bavarian and French forces suffered a decisive defeat at Höchstädt (Blenheim). Prince Maximilian-Emanuel was forced to leave his country. The victory of the allies offered Vienna the possibility of releasing substantial forces from the West and dispatching them to Hungary. On December 25th, 1704 they beat Rákóczi's *kuruc* army at Nagyszombat.*

Prince Rákóczi was not really distressed by the unfavourable turn of events but they were sufficient to convince him that the resources at his disposal were not enough to allow him to resist successfully. That is why he repeatedly urged France to give him more substantial military and diplomatic assistance.

After a prolonged journey Pierre Puchot the Marquis des Alleurs, envoy of Louis XIV arrived in the town of Eger on February 28th, 1705. The Marquis whose office was that of military adviser (*lieutenant général*, and not ambassador) put different questions to the Prince following the ceremony of the presentation of his credentials as to whether the Hungarians wanted peace or war and what means were at their disposal to carry on the war.

* See István Vas's poem on the battle of Nagyszombat on p. 58.—The Editor.

Rákóczi informed him that quite a few of the generals, aristocrats and church dignitaries proposed peace while the minor nobility and the people, especially the Protestants, were in favour of continuing the fight. Referring to the material resources at his disposal, the Prince told the French diplomat that they were inadequate, but he refrained from levying taxes, and with that measure he attempted to bring home the idea of freedom. He gave a detailed description of every military implication the French Court was interested in. The Marquis des Alleurs had a highly favourable opinion of Prince Rákóczi and he reported to his master:

Le Prince Rákóczi n'a que 32 ans, il est grand et bien fait, il a le port majestueux et la physionomie belle. La douceur et la docilité tiennent le premier rang entre les qualités de son esprit, ce qu'il accompagne de beaucoup de bonne volonté et d'une continuelle application. Je puis même dire que pour avoir été élevé dans l'obscurité, il sait beaucoup de choses et les sait bien. Il parle et écrit six langues: hongrois, latin, français, italien, allemand et polonais. . . C'est un Prince vertueux, laborieux, affable, généreux, bienfaisant. Il est très exact dans la pratique de la religion. On ne peut rien ajouter à sa valeur et il paraît être exempt de passions de son âge.

Louis XIV, who recognized Rákóczi as Prince of Transylvania, a rank he obtained thanks to the vote of a section of the estates, increased the amount of aid on the basis of his representative's favourable report to 50,000 livres a month. It was enough to cover the expenses of some 4,000 men. He sent a number of French officers to Hungary as well. But he rejected Rákóczi's request for more aid mainly because of France's economic difficulties. The Prince, however, wanted more than merely financial aid and some officers; he tried to secure a treaty of alliance as well which was rejected by the French with the argument that the king was not allowed to make commitments involving the subjects of another ruler. Dethronement of the Habsburgs was the only way of meeting the conditions set by the French Court. This would have automatically brought about the election of a new king. In Rákóczi's view Hungary needed a foreign ruler with outside forces at his disposal to face the Habsburgs and stand up to the Hungarian nobility. This major decision led to his convening the National Assembly in 1705, originally on the field of Rákos just outside Pest, the traditional site of earlier Hungarian Diets. Later, however, following the lost battle of Vöröskő, the meeting had to be transferred to Szécsény, some distance from Pest.

Rákóczi did not propose the dethronement at the session of the National Assembly in Szécsény for two reasons: partly because of domestic opposition and, also because Joseph I who succeeded Leopold I appeared to favour conciliation. The 1705 meeting of the feudal estates established a confederation corresponding to the Polish model according to some, while

others maintain that they followed the Dutch, and elected Rákóczi ruling Prince; however, it also endorsed the power of disruptive aristocratic generals. That was the fact though Rákóczi maintained that he had been granted unlimited powers in military, political and financial matters. The most progressive resolution adopted by the National Assembly at Szécsény was the one on religious issues in the wording and passing of which Rákóczi took part. It ruled that disputed questions among the denominations had to be settled peacefully by talks on the basis of "the exclusive freedom of conscience and the right to practise any religion".

Following the 1705 Diet Rákóczi was all out to prove that he was not opposed to agreement between the Hungarians and the Vienna Court; that is why he focused his attention primarily on peace talks.

Meanwhile, social conflicts grew sharper and subsequent tension mounted between the soldiers coming from the ranks of the serfs and their officers representing the nobility. This led to dissatisfaction on both sides. General dissatisfaction combined with the hustle and bustle of the Austrian Emperor's envoys and the English and Dutch mediators increased the desire for peace. The Prince was seriously considering the possibility of reaching agreement with Vienna but he did not believe that he would be able to force the Habsburgs to make substantial concessions especially on the issue of independence for Transylvania which ceased to be even a semi-independent principality at the end of the 17th century. In the view of his contemporaries an independent Transylvanian principality could have been the only way Hungary could oppose Habsburg absolutism. Rákóczi shared the 16th century anti-Habsburg position and refused to yield an inch even under pressure which included sending his wife to see him and then allowing his sister to visit him, manoeuvres designed to make him change his mind owing to personal favours. On the occasion of his wife's visit he met Wratislaw, the Czech Chancellor who headed the Emperor's peace mission. He rejected the Prince's demand and warned him of what was in store for him in case he refused to accept Vienna's peace conditions. Rákóczi recorded in his *Mémoires*: *Hé bien, Prince—me disait-il-vous vous fiez aux promesses de la France, qui est l'hôpital des princesqu'elle a rendu malheureux par le manquement à sa parole et à ses engagement; vous en serez du nombre et vous y mourrez. Je répartis que je n'examinais pas la conduite de la France en cela, mais mon devoir.*

After that Rákóczi made the "House of Austria's intention to prolong its rule with disdainful cruelty" responsible for breaking off negotiations.

The fact that Rákóczi was right in the question of the peace talks at Nagyszombat is proved by the letter addressed to Queen Anne of England by George Stepney, an English mediator. The letter dated July 26th 1705

was written in Vienna and enclosed was a protest by Rákóczi addressed to the Queen with the following comment:

"I hope the style is as it ought to be (for He has sent me no Copy) at least I see no fault in the Direction He has given to her Ma^{ty} and the States Gen. (which is the same *mutatis mutandis*) and I must own in Justice that what he mentions as matter of Fact is literally true. . . . The truth is, We ought not to have concern'd ourselves in this Mediation (and so I represented in my Letter to Mr. Secretary Hedges near 3 years ago when it was at first propos'd). But since Her Majesty by the advice of her Council is engaged in it and by the humble address of the Parliam^t was mov'd to urge it with more efficacy, it seems wonderful that no manner of notice has been taken in England whether we succeeded or not: whereas it was certainly for the Dignity the Mediation that some Remonstrance should have been made by her Ma^{ty} and the States Gen, when they perceiv'd this Court acted upon wrong principles; And we were never in a better Condition and Right of speaking plainly than now, when the whole burthen of the Warr against France lyes on us, and these Ministers turn all their Application to Hungary, and draw daily more Troops from the Empire."

In connection with this let me quote a sentence from Stepney's previous letter dated a few days earlier, in which he defended Rákóczi's right to Transylvania and warned that the Hungarians could not abandon their demand to this effect:

"This (that is giving up their demand) is laying an Axe to the Root of the Tree and any man who has had the happiness of living under a free Government cannot but be a little concerned to see a poor people (where of 5 parts of 6 are of the Reform'd Churches) depriv'd of their Liberties at one Blow, and given up to servitude and future persecutions notwithstanding a Powerfull Mediation, of the same Profession with themselves, has been pleased to appear in their behalf."

During his autumn campaign of 1706 Rákóczi's forces upset the Austrian forces retiring from Transylvania under the command of General Rabutin and prevented the fast advance of an Austrian army commanded by General Starhemberg on Hungary from the West. They should be regarded as successes even if the *kuruc* had made several mistakes which the Marquis des Alleurs and the French officers sent by Louis XIV did not hesitate to point out to Rákóczi and report to Versailles.

The War of Independence Takes a More Radical Course

The military successes achieved in 1706 failed to convince the peace party of the nobility that the war could, and had to be, carried on. Under such conditions Rákóczi's endeavours concentrated on getting the allied estates and Transylvania accepted as international partners at the conference table. To this end he had himself inaugurated as Prince of Transylvania and convoked a National Assembly at Ónod in May 1707 to declare the dethronement of the Habsburg dynasty. Some of the representatives of the estates were opposed to the dethronement, but they came out even more strongly against voting taxes necessary for financing the continuation of the war and the introduction in any form of the general and proportionate sharing of taxation. As early as the beginning of 1707 the leading officials of County Turóc sent a circular to other prominent county personalities calling upon them to end the burdens arising from the war and asking them to refuse obedience to Rákóczi whom they described as a bigger tyrant than the Habsburg Emperor, alleging that he was carrying on the struggle to promote his own ends. The issue of the circular was brought up during the debate at the National Assembly, and the delegates of County Turóc tried to find excuses. When the Prince rose to speak, his voice was filled with the passion of one who had suffered insults:

"Beloved nation!" he shouted, "is this what I deserved for the many services I have rendered to my country? Is this that I deserve after exile? I have dedicated my life and blood, my all, to you. I neglected my wife, my children and my own fortune. My ancestors risked everything they had and sacrificed their blood and faith for the restoration of your flourishing freedom, out of their love of this nation. And now I am believed to be piling up treasures at the expense of my country. All I can do is to hand back the office I was given at the Diet of Szécsény. I will retire to my Transylvanian principality. I am prepared to find refuge in a remote corner of the country, after being described as tyrant instead of receiving the expected gratitude. I cannot tolerate or suffer this. I will take it into my grave. . . . Beloved nation, may you remove this shame from me!" Those words prompted aristocrats, among them Bercsényi and Károlyi, to cut down the delegates of County Turóc. Some of the nobility attacked while magnates defended Rákóczi. Later the National Assembly declared the dethronement of the Habsburg dynasty and passed certain taxes. This radical measure, however, failed to break the peace party, because power relations in Hungary had changed in favour of the Austrians and because aid from abroad appeared to be too distant a hope.

After the dethronement Rákóczi insisted that Louis XIV should conclude a proper treaty with the allied estates and himself, as Prince of Transylvania, in order to secure the support of the vacillating nobility. That was the main issue of his intensive correspondence with the Marquis des Alleurs and directly with the French Court which was reluctant to make official commitments in spite of the fact that, as early as in 1704, it had recognized Rákóczi as Prince of Transylvania and pledged that the cause of the Hungarians would be included in the general peace treaty.

Eventually Louis XIV yielded to the Prince's repeated demands and by 1708 the text of the treaties was ready but their signing had to be postponed because of the unfavourable turn in power relations in Hungary and because of the deterioration of France's international position.

Rákóczi wanted to sign the treaties as the Head of the ruling Hungarian estates and as Prince of Transylvania.

In the first Louis XIV was to have pledged to "defend the Hungarian Kingdom, placing its laws and privileges under his protection" (*protéger le Royaume de Hongrie et mettre ses lois et ses libertés sous sa protection*), restore the right to elect a king, not to interfere in the election but support the new king (who was believed to be Maximilian Emanuel, the Elector of Bavaria) not to conclude a peace treaty without securing the agreement of the Hungarians first offering assistance in regaining territories and provinces that belonged to Hungary earlier, provided he won the war.

Under the other treaty Rákóczi's rights concerning Transylvania were laid down along with a pledge on the part of the King of France to grant financial aid to the Prince in the event of both victory or defeat.

In 1707, Rákóczi put his hopes in Russia and not in France.

Following several unsuccessful attempts to establish contact with the King of Sweden who rejected any ties with the Prince despite mediation by France and other countries. The Czar desired to ask the Prince to persuade the French to mediate between him and the Swedish monarch. He also thought that Rákóczi could accept the Polish throne that had become a matter of dispute after Augustus II had been deposed by the Swedes and which Sweden's protégé Stanislaus Leszczyński claimed. The Prince was only too pleased to act as mediator but he hesitated about accepting the Polish crown being afraid to provoke the anger of the King of Sweden and opposition on the part of France. At the same time, however, he wanted to arouse the interest of Peter the Great in the affairs of Hungary and Transylvania and obtain his support for the new Hungarian ruler, wishing to secure the Transylvanian principality for himself. That is why he did not want to flatly reject the Czar's offer regarding the Polish throne.

This led to the conclusion, in 1707, of the Warsaw agreement that was signed by Count Bercsényi for Hungary, and in which Rákóczi pledged support for mediation between Sweden and Russia. He accepted the Polish royal crown under certain conditions. Peter the Great, on the other hand, promised support for the Hungarians.

Hungarian and Russian relations could not produce any major results before the battle of Poltava after which Augustus II returned, to stay king until his death. The succession to the Polish throne was thus no longer timely but the issue of mediation between Charles XII of Sweden and the Russian Czar continued to be a burning one along with the possibility of Russian aid to be granted to Rákóczi. Russia tried to mediate at the Vienna Court as early as 1708 in an effort to pave the way for a just agreement but it got nowhere. In spite of the failure repeated attempts were made again in 1710. Rákóczi, on the other hand, tried to persuade the French Court to undertake a peace mission between Peter I and Charles XII. For this purpose he sent his envoy directly to Versailles.

The Agony of the War of Independence

Meanwhile the situation of the war of independence grew from bad to worse due to internal weakness, and disruptive activities that ended by some of the nobility switching sides, not to mention the predominance of the Habsburg forces.

In that very difficult situation the French Court left Rákóczi to his own resources, following the cancellation of financial aid, as from the end of 1707, a move ascribable primarily to the report on the situation sent by the Marquis des Alleurs in which the French envoy alleged that the Prince did not make proper use of financial aid, for he had spent it partly to cover his own and his wife's costs and in part to finance diplomatic missions that were, in his view, absolutely unnecessary. In addition, he accused Rákóczi of being too lenient to his generals, not maintaining discipline in the army, and not treating the foreign officers properly. The French, however, which continued to stick to the idea of an alliance with the Swedes and Turks in a most conservative manner, were upset primarily by the negotiations with the Czar and, in particular, by the conclusion of the Warsaw treaty.

Rákóczi considered it necessary to challenge these accusations.

A letter dated January 2nd, 1708 and addressed by the Prince to father Montméjan, the head of the Lazarist Mission in Warsaw, is a particularly sincere expression of Rákóczi's feelings. He regarded the establishment of

discipline and order in the army and the rebuilding of forts, arsenals and ordnance factories neglected by Vienna, as considerable achievements. He admitted, however, that his officers' ignorance and lack of skill (*l'ignorance et la mal habilité*) deprived him of the successes he had good reason to expect. He also blamed the people of "the lower rank and without any distinction" (*des gens sans connaissance et qualité*) whose bona fide ignorance could not be punished for if he had done that he could have spoken with Ovid, "if Jove resorts to his thunderbolts whenever a man sins, he will soon find himself running short of them" (*Si quoties peccant homines, sua fulmina mittet Juppiter, exiguo tempore inermis erit*). They could not bear foreigners for whom they had a natural dislike because of differences in character (*humeurs*) and in language.

Ignorance, he remarked, intruded into all the estates: "*(ma nation quoique guerrière de son naturel, mais fort négligée par l'esclavage de la Maison d'Autriche et où l'art de la guerre avait été depuis le Roi Mathias Corvin éteint.)*" That is why he had no trained officers and was forced to be lenient with magnates although he tried to take strict measures against some of those failing to live up to their duty.

In a letter the Prince wrote to Bonnac on April 25th, 1708 he discussed the principles according to which he governed and emphasized that in a free country it was impossible to resort to the methods and means used by the Czar in Russia. In any case, in the absence of adequate power at his disposal Rákóczi endeavoured to win the different estates over to his side, so he would deserve to be called *pater patriae*.

He also explained why he maintained a large court and said that it was important not only for retaining authority but also to educate the nobility:

Les raisons qui m'engagent a des dépenses, qui paraissent à plusieurs superflues, proviennent encore de l'envie que j'ai de former la jeunesse de ce Royaume et de tâcher de l'accoutumer à des moeurs et c'est pour cela que je ne trouve pas à propos de me contenter d'un petit nombre de domestiques et que je fais voyager ceux qui ont envie de voir les pays étrangers. J'envisage par là que la nécessité de dépenser pour la guerre n'est pas moins nécessaire à la conservation de notre liberté que celle que je dois faire pour inspirer à la noblesse des sentiments dignes de son rang.

The views he expressed indicate the activities connected with cultural policy the principal objective of which was to train accomplished leaders, raising the cultural standards in general. Condemnation of Jesuit education, support for educational reform and assistance given to the arts and sciences offer indisputable proof that the *kuruc* leadership and the Prince personally introduced considerable innovations in these fields.

On August 3rd, 1708 Rákóczi was defeated by General Heister at Trencsén, an event that turned out to be fatal in the long run. After that the Prince again tried to find a solution to the internal economic and social problems. It was quite clear to him that the "soldier disbelieved the officer and vice versa"; he blamed not only the soldiers but he also had doubts as to the willingness of the nobility to help: "if we do not frighten the finicking aristocrats by the toughness of the soldiers, all cleverness will prove useless." In December 1708 he convened a session of the National Assembly at Sárospatak, where he forced the estates to financially support the war and grant irrevocable freedom to the serfs doing military service as well as to their families. The introduction of the general and proportionate sharing in taxation and the extension of the freedom of foot soldiers were too late; general disintegration was already in progress.

With the assistance of the Poles and Swedes who entered into his service Rákóczi made one more desperate attempt in early 1710 to hold up the advance of the Imperial forces commanded by General Sickingen at Romhány. It is true that the *kuruc* held their own much more impressively than in earlier battles but it was of little use. The advance of the Austrian army and the decay of the country, combined with the plague, sealed the fate of the war of independence. Agreement to be reached with Vienna was regarded as the only realistic way out by most of the *kuruc* nobles. Impelled by the increasingly pressing situation, Rákóczi was prepared to begin talks with General János Pálffy, the commander-in-chief of the Imperial forces stationed in Hungary. The conditions he proposed, however, were again rejected by the Vienna Court; all it was ready to grant was general amnesty to the rebels, and the return of their estates and property, while Rákóczi was promised personal treatment and privileges. The Prince did not find Vienna's propositions satisfactory and decided to go to Poland where he wished to meet Peter the Great in the hope of taking part in the mediatory moves between Sweden and Russia, which enjoyed French approval, and on the other hand, to appeal to the Czar for support for the Hungarians which could take the form of either diplomatic initiatives or the entry of Russian forces into Hungary.

He left one of his Generals, Sándor Károlyi, in charge of his forces. "Thus I leave my dear homeland, my greatest asset and my Munkács where there is the other treasure so dear to me in Your Grace, and bind your soul and faith believing the constancy of your resolution that you repeatedly expressed the other day in Munkács when saying that without the prosperity of your nation you would not be reconciled and we shall not leave each other." He arrived in Poland at a time when it was common

knowledge that Turkey was about to declare war on Russia, as inspired by Charles XII of Sweden, who had fled to Bender. It must be noted here that what the French offered to Peter I was mediation between Sweden and Russia and not the prevention of war with Turkey. Under such conditions it was quite evident that the Czar was unable to give assistance to the Hungarians.

While Rákóczi was negotiating with the Czar in Poland, Sándor Károlyi concluded a peace treaty with General János Pálffy without the Prince's knowledge and following assurances of special conditions for himself. Under the agreement the privileges of the Hungarian nobility were maintained, the property and offices held by the rebels were returned to them, and the rule of the Habsburg dynasty over Hungary and Transylvania was confirmed. That compromise determined the political, economic and social conditions that governed relations between the two countries up to 1848. Rákóczi protested against the agreement, being loyal to the objectives of the war of independence, because of his patriotism and on moral grounds as revealed by the letter he wrote to Károlyi: "I know that the principal argument is that I would be left on my own anyway and perhaps even the hope of external aid will also deceive me, but even if that is the case I prefer placing my hope with God alone with a clear and perfect conscience, instead of staining it with my incredulity, abandoning it all and rendering myself unworthy. This is my final resolution I will not part with as long as I live, and no misery or captivity could ever make me hesitate."

On the run

On failing to obtain support from Peter the Great even after the peace treaty he concluded with the Turks, Rákóczi moved to Danzig from the south of Poland to guide the activities of his diplomats in the royal courts of Western Europe. Guided by the hope of exercising some influence on the process of the general peace talks thanks to his presence, he moved to France, where he continued seeking support. He accommodated himself to the life in the French Court and found particular pleasure in hunting with the King and Count Toulouse. Saint-Simon and especially the Marquis Dangeau, the Prince's distant relative, gave a detailed account of the life Rákóczi led there and the respect he commanded. The eventual conclusion of a peace treaty by Louis XIV with the Habsburg Emperor in 1714 shattered all his hopes, and after the death of the French monarch he

joined the monks of the Camaldolian order in an effort to seek consolation in Jansenism but without giving up his political goals.

A new war broke out between Austria and the Turks in 1717, and Rákóczi accepted the invitation by the Sultan to go to Turkey in the hope that he would be able to pursue his plans. The opposing parties, however, made peace and the Turks yielded to the demands of Vienna: the Prince was forced to move to Rodosto, at some distance from Constantinople. Even at that stage he refused to retire from European politics and tried hard to assist French and Russian diplomacy in settling their relations with Turkey. He would have liked to move out of the isolation he was confined to in Turkey, but he wrote to successive French secretaries for foreign affairs, and to his one-time friends in vain; he was looked on as an unwanted guest in a France that had concluded an alliance with Austria.

The King of Poland Augustus II died in 1733, and King Louis XV of France wanted his father-in-law Stanislaus Leszczyński to return to Poland as successor. A new war was on the horizon in which Austria might well have turned against France. Rákóczi was ready to take advantage of the opportunity. In his last memorandum sent to the French Court he wrote: *"Il est certain que la disposition de la nation est telle aujourd'hui qu'elle avait été alors. Ses griefs étaient plâtrés d'abord, mais après la paix de Passarowicz tout a été remis sur l'ancien pied. Je ne suis pas moins zélé pour ma patrie et je suis encore engagé par des serments à soutenir la liberté et le droit de ma principauté."*

Ferenc Rákóczi II died on April 8th 1735. Saint-Simon, a contemporary not particularly lavish with his praises, wrote about him:

... Ragotzi était d'une très haute taille, sans rien de trop, bien fourni, sans être gros, très proportionné et fort bien fait, l'air fort, robuste et très noble jusqu'à être imposant sans rien de rude; le visage assez agréable, et toute la physionomie tartare. C'était un homme sage, modeste, mesuré, de fort peu d'esprit, mais tout tourné au bon et au sensé; d'une grande politesse, mais assez distinguée, selon les personnes; d'une grande aisance avec tout le monde, et en même temps, ce qui est rare ensemble, avec beaucoup de dignité, sans nulle chose de cette manière qui sentît le glorieux. Il ne parlait pas beaucoup, fournissait pourtant à la conversation, et rendait très bien ce qu'il avait vu sans jamais parler de soi. Un fort bonnête homme, droit vrai, extrêmement brave, fort craignant Dieu, sans le montrer, sans le cacher aussi, avec beaucoup de simplicité. En secret, il donnait beaucoup aux pauvres, des temps considérables à la prière, eut bientôt une nombreuse maison qu'il tint pour les moeurs, la dépense et l'exactitude du paiement, dans la dernière règle, et tout cela avec douceur. C'était un très bon homme, et fort aimable, et commode pour le commerce; mais, après l'avoir vu de près on demeurait dans l'étonnement qu'il eût fait tant de bruit dans le monde."

Rákóczi arrested the world's attention thanks to the cause he represented, and not primarily by his person. If we look back on the war of independence in the early 18th century, it cannot be denied the merit that it offered an alternative road of development, though it failed. By maintaining the privileges of the Hungarian ruling class the Habsburgs aborted any sort of social reform. As regards national minorities, it was the Habsburgs' clear endeavour, since the beginning of the 19th century to play off nations living in the Hungary of the time against one another. In spite of a relative economic development this policy eventually led to the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire and it also produced mutual hatred amongst the small nations.

Rákóczi did not wish to produce fundamental changes in the feudal system. He placed the independence of the country in the forefront. It is true that even if Hungary's independence had been achieved, it would not have eliminated the contradictions between the ruling class of the country and the serfs who belonged to a number of nations, but it would clearly have led to an end to intervention on the part of an outside power in the national conflicts that came into the open in the closing stages of the 17th century. The war of independence waged by Rákóczi's *kuruc* was in fact the forerunner of the 1848-1849 revolution. However, it was a drama in which the conflicts between the different nations remained in the background. It is my firm conviction that the translation into practice of the early 18th century idea of independence which enjoyed the approval of different nations living together would have saved this part of Europe from numerous subsequent troubles. How then could one describe Rákóczi?

He stood for the idea of independence, and in the midst of adversity, he stuck to his goal. His moral greatness serves as an example to us as well.