

“KOSSUTH: THE HERMIT AND THE CROWD”

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Kossuth, the crowd hero, was the pioneer of an exciting new political discourse that used the Magyar vernacular. In exile, Kossuth presented himself as “the wandering son of a bleeding nation.” Eventually, he retreated into the role of the hermit of Turin. His funeral attracted a crowd of over a million people in 1894.

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Let me begin with three familiar images of Louis Kossuth and the crowd.¹ Lithographs of the electoral crowd for the Pest county election of 1847 depict carriages on the streets, flamboyant dress and scenes of exalted rhetoric. One youthful admirer, Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky announced to the crowd on election eve that he knew of four special days since the creation of the world: the first when light was created out of chaos; the second when Christ was born; the third when the French Revolution broke out, and the fourth would be tomorrow, when it would be decided if Kossuth was elected or not.² Kossuth, the crowd hero, was the pioneer of an exciting new political discourse that used the Magyar vernacular. Lamartine in France, Robert Blum in Germany, and Kossuth in Hungary were a recognizable type – the theatrical orator of 1848. But Kossuth was also more. He would span the lives of several generations of Hungarians. From his arrest and imprisonment in 1837 to his burial in 1894, Kossuth seemed ever present in Hungarian political life – either center stage or as an oracular figure off stage.

A second popular image is of the massive crowds of London and New York greeting Kossuth four years later in 1851. As the principal martyr of defeat in 1849, Kossuth attracted some of the largest political crowds the western world had ever seen. His heavily accented and impassioned rendition of Hungarian martyrdom was not simply heard by vast crowds in the United States, it was also telegraphed around the country, so that Kossuth occasioned what we would call a media frenzy. “My country was martyred! Her rulers are hangmen!” was the prin-

cial message he brought his various audiences."³ He succeeded in making of the Hungarians what the Poles had been to the previous generation of Englishmen and Americans – martyrs in the march to progress.⁴

Kossuth presented himself as “the wandering son of a bleeding nation,” a homeless exile representing “my down-trodden land,” with his authority resting on the fact that “my people took, and take me still, for the incarnated personification of their wishes, their sentiments, their affections, and their hopes. Is it not then quite natural that the woes of my people also should be embodied in myself? I have the concentrated woes of millions of Magyars in my breast.”⁵

Finally, a third association of Kossuth and the crowd is the mammoth gathering of over a million people awaiting the Kossuth funeral procession in Budapest in 1894. This funeral came after forty-five years of exile, and it brought forth the old schism and the old unity. Kossuth had refused to accept the Compromise of 1867, and consequently Franz Joseph forbade the Hungarian government from accepting the body and giving the dead insurrectionist a hero’s burial. The Hungarian government was painfully embarrassed by the king’s insistence that members of the cabinet, government officials, and army officers not attend the funeral. But the municipality of Budapest claimed the body and held a “private” funeral attended by millions in a moment of great collective emotion. The whole nation mourned Kossuth’s death and embraced his son Ferenc, who had accompanied his father’s body from Turin.

These three crowd scenes encapsulate a popular story of the rise, fall and redemption of the nation’s greatest son. Imbedded in this narrative of Kossuth and the crowd are decades of Kossuth the Hermit, making periodic interventions in Hungarian political life. Here he could be a rancorous exile summoning the resentment of defeat, or remain the man of principle who served as a troubled conscience of fading and abandoned ideals. In either event, he represented an ambiguity, a tension that remained characteristic of Hungary between 1849 and 1914.

The first of the exile’s interventions came in September 1849, the moment of defeat, when Kossuth issued the Vidin Letter that fingered General Görgey as a “traitor.”⁶ Kossuth’s curse consigned Görgey to the fate of a recluse waiting for decades for some vindication of the military leadership he had exhibited during the lost war of independence. Kossuth fostered a nagging “what if” in popular discourse. This reduced Hungary to a nation so vulnerable it could fall victim to a traitor. Mihály Vörösmarty’s 1850 poem “Átok” [Curse] gave the myth of the traitor a high cultural resonance. The counterpoint to a martyrology focusing on unjust defeat and persecution was a demonology, i.e. a negative dialogue with the repressors. Kossuth’s nationalist rhetoric blended demonology and martyrology. A martyr was a witness for his cause; the demon became a figure to be driven from one’s environment. Dominating the stage aside from the traitor Görgey were

the dictator Haynau and the villainess Archduchess Sophia. Kossuth proclaimed during his tour of America that the latter, “the mother of the present usurper of Hungary,” was to be “cursed through all posterity,” for she was “the source of all misfortune which now weighs so heavily upon my bleeding fatherland.”⁷

While celebrated abroad as never before, Hungarian national identity felt besieged and vulnerable at home in the reactionary early part of the 1850s. The discrepancy between Kossuth’s oratory abroad and the stillness bred by enforced silence at home highlighted the exile community’s growing divergence from the reality in the homeland and its impoverished political speech.⁸ Kossuth’s foreign adventures were unique to his person and the conditions abroad, making them impossible to emulate within the country. At the same time Kossuth’s demonology was, ultimately, too apocalyptic. Internal critics such as Zsigmond Kemény sought to counter the weight of Kossuth’s heroics and the pursuit of a futile policy. It was naive to have assumed that the European powers would have allowed Hungary to emerge from the revolution as an independent country, and more than fanciful to imagine that cheering English-speaking crowds could make any difference to Hungary’s future, Kemény argued. He feared Kossuth’s nationalist enterprise would further Hungary’s isolation and narrow the perimeters of Hungarian potential. Kemény championed Deák as the intellectual architect of the turn away from Kossuth, the “people’s apostle” who had allowed the ship of state to capsize. Kemény countered the pessimism of the exiles. Instead he argued, “Everything is new, everything is untried, everything is unusual.” “Epimenides’ long sleep is inappropriate for us in these eventful times.”⁹

The Hungarian experience of defeat required a recognition that the system of ideas that had sustained action during the revolution had collapsed, and that action was unequivocally restricted. Nevertheless, Kossuth dominated the Magyar imagination throughout the decade of counter-revolution. Hungarian boys continued to imagine themselves as proud heroes in Kossuth’s army. “The Kossuth Song,” initially sung as a recruiting ditty during the general mobilization of December 1848, evoked the experience of the uprising more strongly than anything else. Therefore, the public singing of “The Kossuth Song,” with its six hundred variants, would become the favored act of defiance during the next decade-and-a-half.¹⁰ Cheers for Kossuth, or wearing the Kossuth cap, were grounds for arrest during the 1850s, but “Éljen Kossuth” [Long Live Kossuth!] graffiti also appeared. Occasionally, prescriptions for disobedience, supposedly from Kossuth, appeared on wall placards, or in proclamations and manifestos that were passed around.¹¹ In Szeged, on one market day in 1851 when the town was filled with peasants, a file of prisoners crossed the spot where Kossuth had delivered a recruiting speech two years before. The first prisoner in line suddenly stopped, took off his hat, and shouted repeatedly “Éljen Kossuth!” The whole square suddenly joined the refrain, and Austrian forces had to be called out to prevent any serious incident.¹²

The very cry “Éljen!” became suspect among the authorities, who feared any cheer would turn into a yell of “Éljen Kossuth!”

Hungarians continually combed over their memories in order to make sense of their situation. Memory at home became a hybrid between that which had happened and solutions for life in the present. Émigré memory was more static. Even while he was being mythologized, Kossuth’s actual political sway waned. Kossuth’s message from America to his people was, “Be patient; hope, and wait thy time!”¹³ “Be faithful as hitherto, keep to the holy sentences of the Bible, pray for thy liberation, and then chant thy national hymns when the mountains reecho the thunder of the cannons of thy liberators!”¹⁴ This was the prescription for an unquiet wait: sustaining the invisible crowd through hymns, prayer, and memory.

Kossuth remained the man on the outside, ready to topple the system on the inside. He attempted to spark insurrections within Hungary at the outbreak of the Austro-Italian war of 1859 and the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. Kossuth’s proclamation of June 23, 1866, concluded, “I embody a principle called 1849.” Hungary had been isolated then, he said, but now, as an ally of Prussia, “we are neither alone nor abandoned,” and will reap the fruits of Hungarian efforts in 1849.¹⁵ The bid for independence failed, and eighteen days before the coronation of Franz Joseph as King of Hungary, Kossuth published his “Cassandra Letter,” condemning the Compromise of 1867 as a surrender of national independence. The argument was published in newspapers, alternately entitled “Freedom,” “Liberty,” “Fraternity,” and “March 15.” The threat that the Kossuthites might disrupt the coronation dissolved in the face of a skeptical, but also buoyant, celebratory crowd on coronation day. In the aftermath of the coronation, the new Andrassy-led government launched a vigorous campaign against “Kossuthite subversion” in certain Kossuth strongholds, such as Heves County.¹⁶ The government also staged a show trial, targeting the publicist László Böszörményi for publishing Kossuth’s “Váci Letter,” in which Kossuth restated his repudiation of the Habsburg Monarchy and insisted that there could be no compromising of a free Hungary.¹⁷ With the Böszörményi trial the “Kossuth cult” was, in effect, placed on trial and convicted of being impractical. While stalwart Kossuthites mobilized the old martyrology, the Andrassy regime succeeded in marginalizing Kossuth and his supporters as fanatics.

Kossuth retreated into the role of the hermit of Turin. It was a time of writing memoirs, greeting Hungarian delegations, and periodically issuing missives to the homeland. The media would turn their attention to Kossuth on March 15, Kossuth’s birthday, name day, the anniversary of the seizure of the Buda castle, and the day of the Arad martyrs. By the 1870s the ranks of his generation were also beginning to thin. As he mourned their passing, he remarked that he had heard their voices calling him from the grave: it is your turn now! In 1872 he was wondering, “Why

am I hanging around here anymore? I am just using up oxygen uselessly. ... I just leave a myth behind me, not any actual accomplishment.”

The clear divisions between Deákists and Kossuthites broke down in the early 1870s, especially when the economic crash of 1873 exposed the frayed edges of the Deákist camp. Scandals had followed the agreement, and few of those who had forged the compromise remained in Budapest to reform the system. The ailing Deák grew ever more disillusioned with his tarnished party. Furthermore, the economic downturn led to a paralysis that forced the political class to look for some new solution. There was a yearning even among Kossuthites for some resolution in which neither the defenders of the Compromise of 1867 nor the unreconciled would have the last word. Or rather, a Janus-faced system that spoke simultaneously out of both corners of the mouth. This was poignantly expressed at a March 15th banquet in 1874 when Lajos Mocsáry toasted Kossuth; only to follow that up with another toast where he voiced the hope that in time all of Hungary “would turn into a large banquet for the March 15, 1848 memorial holiday,” and its toastmaster would be Franz Joseph.¹⁸

When Deák died in 1875, parliament commissioned a Deák statue.¹⁹ One Kossuthite deputy dared to object, “lest every majority apotheosize its men.” The usually aloof Kálmán Tisza, the architect of an emerging fusion of Deákists and Kossuthites, “became pale from excitement,” the newspapers reported. “His hands trembled, and at first, his words were halting... He unleashed ‘holy anger’ on Ernő Simonyi’s head” and vociferously defended the compromise and the wisdom of its architect.”²⁰ But Kossuth would have the last word. In a letter he reminded the Hungarian public that Kossuth, “an exile from the fatherland, was also exiled from Deák’s heart.”²¹

Kálmán Tisza did succeed in patching together a new alignment in the Liberal Party that co-opted some of Kossuth’s followers. A gangling, dour Calvinist party boss, Tisza fended off Kossuth’s influence by relegating the self-styled hermit of Turin to an older generation already transfixed in time, consigned to the role of the idiosyncratic conscience of 1848.²² In sharp contrast to the flamboyant Gyula Andrassy and the oracular Kossuth, Tisza’s political style was decidedly bland. He was content that Franz Joseph and Kossuth would cast long shadows, so long as he might stand in between them. Kossuth also adapted to his role. In 1877 he flatly turned down any thought that he might return to act as the intermediary between the king and the nation. During the Kálmán Tisza era from 1875 to 1890, the king adapted to the party system in Hungary, carving out a central role for himself. In March 1879, a great natural disaster permitted Franz Joseph to project an image of the concerned father of his Hungarian kingdom. The government received a telegram reading, “Szeged was. We are saving what can be saved.”²³ When Franz Joseph toured the second-largest city in Hungary, a high drama en-

sued that was not dependent upon orchestrated ceremonials and fanfare. The sovereign came prepared with words of comfort and promises of aid for the flooded-out city, but when he came face to face with the immensity of the tragedy, he wept while making his address. This prompted Kossuth to write, "I, who don't recognize the power of your king, who view with complete indifference the glitter of purple luxury, bow myself in tribute and respect at the sight of the king in whose eyes the tears of human involvement shimmered."²⁴

The publication of Kossuth's diary brought forth the old schism and reignited the old refrain of injustice.²⁵ The old martyrology was more comfortable, even if it did not conform to the dualist social reality. Kossuth had assumed the role of the monarch in exile, but he could not stem the social dynamics that were unraveling the consensus of Hungarian politics that had made almost everyone liberal and in favor of industrialization. He bristled at the Hungarian socialists' repudiation of Kossuth as a gentry politician with outdated views.²⁶ In early 1883 Kossuth countered that the lower and middle gentry were the very pillars of Hungarian liberalism, a beleaguered elite worthy of and needing defense; and by that summer the losers of industrialization, urbanization, or liberalism had lost their patience. During the Tisza-Eszlar rioting in the summer of 1883, Kossuth would stand together with Tisza and Franz Joseph in denouncing the anti-Semitic crowd. The racist rioting was a blow to his notion of liberal politics. It had been the proudest claim of Hungarian liberalism that the old power relation between sovereign and subject was being replaced by the distinction between the cultivated and the uncultivated, and that the liberal elite was entrusted in cultivating the unenlightened. Liberalism was elitist to the present and democratic to the future, projecting political inclusion to all who were educated and owned property. In the Hungarian context this had provided a path for assimilation of Jews, who were willing to matriculate through a Hungarian school system, but remained exclusive to other language minorities who wanted to develop their own language cultures. The new political anti-Semitism threatened this conception. On the danger of this anti-Semitic nihilism, Franz Joseph, Tisza, and Kossuth were in full agreement, struggling to check it in their own domains. Against the liberal strategy two avenues of resistance lay open to the disenfranchised of the eighties: one leading to the forming of a distinctive socialist subculture or in the case of the minorities an alternative identification, and the other leading to an ultimately nihilistic attack on the liberal concept of culture. The chastened crowd had been open to those who embraced the martyrology of a defeated revolution. Kossuth represented the myth of Hungarian martyrdom, which implied a certain solidarity among loser groups. The anti-Semitic crowds, by contrast, repudiated such openness; they represented the exclusivist resentment of the losers from industrialization. Kossuth sighed, "As a man of the nineteenth century, I am ashamed by this anti-Semitic agitation, as a Hungarian it embarrasses me, as a patriot I condemn it."²⁷ But the Kossuthites were wrenched

by division, with some of their numbers attracted to the exclusivist nationalism of the anti-Semites. At their March 15, 1884 rally in Cegléd the anti-Semitic faction stoned Gábor Ugron, one of their principal critics in the Independence Party.²⁸ Although this wave of anti-Semitism soon passed, Kossuth's sense of isolation increased.

Tisza resigned over the most symbolic of issues, refusing to take responsibility for a law that, in effect, would deprive the eighty-seven-year-old Kossuth of his Hungarian citizenship.²⁹ Kossuth declared, “I believe that I am the only one on earth” that is without a fatherland. “Yet even if Hungary abandons me, I will not renounce Hungary.”³⁰ The act of burying Kossuth, which for so long seemed a looming responsibility for Tisza, passed to his lieutenants in the Liberal Party. In 1894 the liberal regime lost the goading presence of Kossuth. By having to contend with the hermit as hero, the liberal regime had gained a greater dynamism and the illusion of democracy. The emerging socialist opposition confronted the liberals with a new type of politics, the politics of the streets, and with demands for serious suffrage reform. To this juncture, the factions of the political elite, however disparate, had agreed on the restricted electoral system. The Kossuth radicals had wished the exclusion of the minority nationalities, and neither the compromise liberals nor the conservatives had desired to include workers or peasants.

The Liberal Party clung to power but with an increasingly aging hierarchy that found itself on the defensive. The very success in urbanizing Hungary rendered the rotten borough system on which the Liberal Party had manufactured its majorities indefensible, and the prospect for a mass base for liberalism began to dim. In reaction, the liberal elites, as the last representatives of the revolutionary tradition of 1848, as well as the generation that had fashioned the liberal compromise, sought to memorialize their achievements by anchoring liberalism in a thousand-year past. Modernists yearned for a break with the liberal culture of the preceding half-century. They were tired of the aesthetics of storytelling, and repudiated, in particular, the passion for tracing the nation's teleological development from its existence on the steppes under the barbarian chieftains. Modernists mocked the eclectic historicism and the aggrandizement of self-important individuals at the core of the memorializing project of Hungarian liberalism. Still the role of the mass as a passive but impressionable audience remained much the same for both the politicians and the modernists, and each sought to erect Kossuth monuments in their own image. There was outrage in the Budapest art world when Ferenc Kossuth, the son of the great revolutionary leader and heir to the stewardship of the Independence Party, tried to sway the jury away from a modernist design for the Kossuth mausoleum in the Kerepesi Cemetery.

The Kossuth cult was boosted still further by the discovery of the remains of Ferenc Rákóczi II (1676–1735) in Turkey. The identification of Kossuth with

Rákóczi, grafted the homage felt toward Rákóczi onto the martyrology of Kossuth. In order for Rákóczi's remains to be officially buried in Hungary, Franz Joseph was forced to acquiesce in the annulment of the 1749 law declaring Rákóczi a traitor and to accept the political cult of an anti-Habsburg rebel. Nationalists celebrated "an injustice purged," as if Kossuth himself had been rehabilitated. Ceremony after ceremony followed in rapid succession for three years, primarily in Transylvania and the outlying areas, but eventually in Budapest, as well.³¹ The Kossuthites had supported an expanded suffrage in theory, even expansion into the national minority communities. Their radical-liberal struggle in the name of "the nation" had also been presumed to be in the name of "the people." But when "the nation" proved unable to accommodate universal male suffrage, the "nation" was redefined negatively in relation to the nationalities, and the Kossuthites banded together with the government party in ethnically mixed regions.

Statues of Kossuth – the most evocative symbol of public discourse – proliferated on the urban landscape in the decade-and-a-half before World War I. Lingering monarchist qualms about erecting Kossuth statues in consideration of the king were brushed aside. The unveilings were invariably attended by Ferenc Kossuth and the Independence Party establishment. The Marxist theorist Ervin Szabó wrote no fewer than three articles in 1902 attacking the idolization of Kossuth and suggested that the memorializing Kossuth had remained a significant part of popular passion.³² Even as Szabó railed against the historicization of the hero of the liberal crowd, he was forced to acknowledge the Kossuth cult's peculiar staying power in Hungary. What passion a Kossuth statue could stir was evidenced in Szeged in 1903.³³ The commanding officer of the Szeged garrison ordered the removal of a wreath placed by some soldiers at the Kossuth statue on the Day of the Arad Martyrs – a holiday which still underscored the gulf remaining between Hungarian nationalists and the dynasty. When the situation escalated, police occupied the square, and 10,000 demonstrators angrily confronted the army in front of its barracks. Two civilians were wounded when the troops opened fire.

Marosvásárhely, the capital of the Székely lands bordering Romania, erected one of the first Kossuth statues, placing it directly across from a statue of General Bem in the town square. The message to the Romanians and Saxons could not have been made clearer. In the pouring rain 20,000 Székely marched four abreast in village companies, with military-like bearing under distinctive village flags. The maladroit Ferenc Kossuth appeared in a garish yellow travel jacket that looked incongruous amidst the Magyar gala of the Székely dignitaries. A poem celebrating Kossuth's prediction of Austria's disintegration was read. Less than twenty years later, when the monarchy did shatter, this area became part of Romania and this statue was torn down in *Tîrgu Mureş*.

At the funeral of Ferenc Kossuth in the weeks just prior to the outbreak of World War I two hundred thousand spectators turned out on the capital streets.

Mourners in black hats and suits massed along the long boulevards and maintained a pious stillness. The crowd was a fraction of the size of the 1894 Kossuth funeral; still, people wanted to see how the son of the great man was buried next to his father. The name Kossuth had lost little of its wondrous ring, but there was also the sense that the funeral marked the end of an era. Many made this the final opportunity to express their pain publicly over the loss of everything for which the name Kossuth had once stood.³⁴

Notes

1. On the role of the crowd, see Alice Freifeld, *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848–1914* (Baltimore and Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).
2. Adlerstein, Jankotvckh, *Chronologisches Tagebuch der magyarischen Revolution* (Vienna, 1851), vol. 1, 83.
3. Headley, P. C., *The Life of Louis Kossuth, Governor of Hungary. Including Notices of the Men and Scenes of the Hungarian Revolution. Appendix: His Principal Speeches* (Auburn, N.Y., 1852), 323.
4. “Two years after the bloody day of Arad, I first landed on the shores of England, a homeless wanderer, powerless and poor; and I saw my landing become the signal for a universal outburst of sympathy with my country’s wrongs, such as no people ever experienced from a foreign nation. Hungary, a couple of years before, scarcely known by name, I found a household word in every British heart...” “My Country and English Sympathy,” *The Atlas*, October 13, 1855, in Éva H. Haraszti, ed., *Kossuth as an English Journalist* (Budapest, 1990), 292.
5. Headley, *Kossuth*, 380.
6. Kossuth, Lajos, Open letter to the Hungarian ambassadors and diplomatic corps in England and France, Vidin, September 12, 1849 in Lajos Kossuth, *Írások és beszédek, 1848–1849-ből* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1987), 522.
7. Headley, *Kossuth*, 382–383.
8. For the history of the Hungarian emigration see, Lajos Lukács, *Magyar politikai emigráció, 1849–1867* [Magyar political emigration] (Budapest, 1984); Tibor Frank, *Marx és Kossuth* [Marx and Kossuth] (Budapest, 1985); Thomas Kabdebo, *Diplomat in Exile, Francis Pulszky’s Political Activities in England, 1849–1860* (New York, 1979); Tibor Tóth Somlyói, *Diplomácia és emigráció “Kossuthiana”* [Diplomacy and emigration “Kossuthiana”] (Budapest, 1985). For a contemporary account, see Dániel Kászonyi, *Magyarhon négy korszaka* [Ungarns Vier Zeitalter (1st ed. Leipzig, 1868)] (Budapest, 1977), 397–512.
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10. Gyula Ortutay, “The Kossuth Song,” in *Folklore Today*, ed. Linda Dégh and H. Glassie (Bloomington, Ind., 1976), 399–401. Gyula Ortutay, “Kossuth,” *Ethnographia*, vol. 58 (1952), 263–307.
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12. Charles Loring, *Hungary in 1851; with an Experience of the Austrian Police* (New York, 1852), 43.
13. Headley, *Kossuth*, 323.
14. Headley, *Kossuth*, 215.

15. A. Kienast, *Die Legion Klapka* (Vienna, 1900), 100.
16. Sándor Sebestény, "Regierungsfeindliches Auftreten der Oppositionskräfte des Komitates Heves nach dem Ausgleich vom Jahre 1867," *Annales Sectio Historia*, vol. 15 (1974): 195–219.
17. "Louis Kossuth's response to Joseph Rudnay, President of the Vác electoral district, published in *Magyar Ujság*, László Böszörményi, editor, 28 VIII 1867.
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19. *Neue Politische Journal* (hereafter *NPJ*), February 12, 1876.
20. *NPJ*, February 17, 1876.
21. *NPJ*, February 29, 1876.
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24. Lajos Kossuth, Letter of March 22, 1879 to Ferdinand Bakay, printed in *NPJ*, March 31, 1879.
25. Lajos Kossuth, *Irataim az emigrációból* (Budapest, 1880–1882).
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30. *NPV*, June 7, 1890.
31. Kálmán Thaly, *Rákóczi- emlékek Törökországban, és II. Rákóczi Ferencz fejedelem hamvainak föltalálása* [Rákóczi memorials in Turkey, and the discovery of Prince F. Rákóczi II's remains] (Budapest, 1893).
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33. *NPV*, October 7, 1903.
34. *NPV*, May 29, 1914; *Vasárnapi Újság*, June 7, 1914; *Pesti Hirlap*, May 29, 1914. See also, Gyula Krúdy, *Kossuth fia* [Kossuth's son] (Budapest, 1976).