

ANDRÁS TARNÓC

THE RETURN OF THE HOLY CROWN

(Glant Tibor: *A Szent Korona amerikai kalandja 1945–1978*.

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January 6, 1978 marks a special day in Hungarian history and in the course of Hungarian-American relations as well. After an almost 33 year absence the Hungarian Crown and the attendant crown jewels were officially returned by the government of the United States. Tibor Glant's excellent work, titled *A Szent Korona amerikai kalandja 1945–1978* was inspired by the twentieth anniversary of that momentous event.

Being the principal icon of the nation, the Holy Crown is unseparable from the upheavals of Hungarian history, and its very removal from Hungary deserves a further look. As the author asserts, the possibility of taking the Crown beyond Hungary's borders was pondered after the defeat of the 1848 Revolution and War of Independence and eventually the removal was realized in 1945. Whereas, in both cases the intended destination was the United States, the historical circumstances differed. Kossuth and Szemere fleeing from Hungary were motivated by an honest appreciation and reverence toward the role and function of Hungary's national relic and dared not to break one of the stipulations of the 1715 oath of the Crown Guard, forbidding the transfer of the Crown beyond Hungary's borders. In 1945 the fascist Szálasi government viewed the Crown as a legitimizing device for its unlawful dictatorial regime. It is no coincidence that the Crown was taken abroad in the year marking the collapse of fascism and at the same time indicating the termination of one of the darkest periods in Hungarian history. Whereas Kossuth was driven by a sincere respect and loyalty to Hungary's national relic, the

leader of the Hungarian fascist government was compelled by a twisted megalomaniac desire for this national symbol of power.

Glant offers a thorough and highly entertaining overview of the milestones of the Holy Crown's adventure. The brief stations of the Holy Crown's ordeal, culminating in its departure from Hungary on December 27, 1945, the Mattsee interlude and the eventual handing over to the American forces, however do not only symbolize a surrender, but a hope in a better future. The Holy Crown taken to the United States in 1953 appeared to have served a dual purpose. For Hungary it functioned as a symbol of historic continuity and of national identity, and the U.S. considered it as a collateral, or a guarantee for a democratic future in the region. The crown's presence in America even at the height of the Cold War held the promise of normalization of the relations between the two countries.

The Holy Crown as a metonymy can either represent the Hungarian state and being a central issue to be resolved between Hungary and the United States, functioned as a barometer measuring the intensity and quality of Hungarian-American relations between 1945–1978. Glant views the adventure of the Holy Crown not as an isolated event, but as a process, or a continuum. The work in fact progresses on two levels, describing the Hungarian government's efforts at achieving the return of the national relic and discussing the accompanying political developments in America.

The Holy Crown, however, as Glant argues is not a strictly interpreted issue between Hungary and the U.S., but a cornerstone of the relationship between two world orders. Hungarian-American relations started as an object-centered continuum reified in the 1902 unveiling of the Kossuth statue in Cleveland and the presentation of Washington's statue in 1906 in Budapest. The return of the Holy Crown in 1978 appears to be the culmination of this process taking place between the two nations divided by the contemporary political climate and united by the past. The fact that the United States government held the Crown for safe keeping, offered a chance for a new beginning, provided a hope for cooperation and a stable relationship even in the darkest days of the Mindszenty trial and the Vogeler affair. In fact, the Crown buried literally in the vault of Fort Knox, and hidden figuratively in the subconscious of the American people, represented a certain international obligation or unfinished business to be attended to.

As Glant points out, the idea of returning the Holy Crown and the crown jewels emerged several times before 1945 and even the American government's position was not a unanimous one owing to the somewhat murky conditions of its acquisition qualifying it either as a war booty, or a property of a foreign nation to be held in the U.S. for temporary safe keeping. While the Hungarian government made repeated efforts to reacquire this national relic, American policy makers did not deem the political conditions in Hungary conducive to the return. The giving back of the Crown jewels was treated as a condition for the normalization of the relations between the two countries.

Glant correctly evaluates the dual role of the Crown carrying different meanings for Hungarians in America and for those who remained in the Old Country. Largely conditioned by living in Hungary between 1920–1945, the post-World War II immigrant generation embraced the Doctrine of the Holy Crown, viewing the national relic as a symbol of the Hungarian community incorporating all Hungarian people and Hungarian territories. Those remaining in Hungary after 1956 and also the Hungarian government primarily viewed the Holy Crown as a historical relic.

Modifications of the international political environment and the attendant easing of the tensions of the Cold War laid the foundations of the American effort aimed at the return of the crown jewels. The Carter administration's decision to return the Holy Crown and the attendant crown jewels to Hungary can be treated as an example of the exercise of presidential power. Richard E. Neustadt envisions three primary factors of presidential power: formal powers conferred by the Constitution, professional reputation, that is the President's standing in the eyes of the Washington establishment and finally the public perception of the chief executive's authority (164). According to Neustadt, it is the power to persuade, that is convincing the legislators or other members of the political environment, that the action to be taken by the president is beneficial for them and for the nation as well is the most influential component of the executive decision making apparatus (35).

Elaborating and implementing its plan for the return of the Holy Crown, the Carter administration had to cope with a formidable challenge concerning the components of Neustadt's model. The President's constitutional authority to decide in the issue was

questioned by Kansas Senator Bob Dole's petition seeking the transfer of the decision making power to the Senate on the contention that the actual return of the Holy Crown, should be dealt with by a treaty subject to the "advice and consent" of the upper house of Congress. Another petition by Nebraska Senator Carl T. Curtis asserted that the Holy Crown as a booty extracted from a vanquished foe was the property of the United States giving jurisdiction over its disposal to the Senate. The United States Supreme Court rejected both claims thereby affirming Carter's formal powers. Congressional opponents and proponents represented the Washington audience of the Carter decision. The opponents included Ohio representatives Louis Stokes and Mary Rose Oaker, and Senator Bob Dole from Kansas. Indeed, the Oaker letter vigorously objecting to the return decision was, signed by 40 representatives. Also, as Glant reports, the protesters included the Mayors of Boston, Honolulu, Pittsburgh and Cleveland and the governors of Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, and Missouri. Furthermore, the Carter administration had to face impassioned protests and demonstrations organized by Hungarian-American groups as well.

Carter largely by gaining the support of such outstanding figures of the Hungarian-American community as Ferenc Nagy and Béla Király, however, was able to reach his goal thereby preserving his professional reputation. While almost simultaneous negotiations facilitating the return of the Panama Canal to the Republic of Panama resulted in several concessions on the part of the administration, in this case, the presidential initiative for the returning of the crown sailed through unscathed. The success of Carter's effort was also assisted by the acquisition of the support of such key figures as Senator Joseph Biden, New York Representative Ted Weiss, than the only Hungarian-born member of Congress, and of Pope Paul VI.

According to the author, both sides viewed the decision as a success. Americans cherished the fact that Hungary became one of the most democratic countries in the Eastern Block displaying a partial commitment to democracy and promoting religious freedom and tolerance. The return of the crown jewels was presented as a device to encourage the reinforcement of Hungarian national consciousness and the expansion of the freedom of religion. Carter describing Hungary as a nation open and receptive to values Americans hold dear was able

to use Neustadt's power to persuade, promoting the decision as a benefit to the American people.

The return of the crown jewels paving the way for the acquisition of the Most Favored Nation status in trade relations was one of the greatest successes of the post-1945 Hungarian diplomacy. The diplomatic maneuverings connoted a certain degree of freedom from Soviet control and signaled an effort at achieving a quasi-autonomous status within the Eastern Block.

Glant's work painstakingly retracing the details of the removal and return of the Holy Crown is a welcome addition enriching both the scholarship on Hungarian history and the domestic achievements in American Studies. It is noteworthy that the author chose an event from the recent past on which the figurative dust has not yet settled, and whose participants are in most cases alive. This apparent lack of historical perspective, however, does not present an insurmountable obstacle for the author, as he is able to present the findings of his thorough and careful research in a remarkably objective manner. However, Tibor Glant's book is valuable for another reason. As it is often mentioned the average citizen is far removed from the workings of history, and he or she can gain an insight into the background of milestone events only after the respective period is viewed as one belonging to the distant past and its actors disappeared through the trapdoor of history. The present work, however, focusing on a relatively recent event breaks this imposed code of silence taking the reader on an unforgettable journey in the labyrinth of contemporary foreign policy decision making.

WORKS CITED

Neustadt, Richard, E. *Presidential Power*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980.