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**DÁNIEL BALLABÁS**

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## COUNT ÖDÖN SZÉCHÉNYI'S STRANGE MARRIAGES

The second child of István Széchenyi and Seilern Crescentia, Ödön Széchenyi was born in 1839.<sup>1</sup> For later generations, he became well-known as a fireman: by 1870, he organised the Budapest fire department and, at the invitation of the sultan, he moved to Constantinople in 1874 where he launched the Turkish fire-fighting organisation.<sup>2</sup> According to his mourning card, he passed away in the spring of 1922 as an Ottoman imperial deputy chief of ordnance, Turkish fire-brigadier commander-in-chief, Knight's Cross of the Order of Leopold, diamond 1<sup>st</sup> class medalist of Order of Osmanieh and 1<sup>st</sup> class medalist of the Order of Medjidie.<sup>3</sup> Ödön Széchenyi's career as a firefighter seems to be a huge success however, his family life left a lot to be desired. This study primarily focuses on his private life: although his marriages are interesting on their own, this paper attempts to put them into a wider perspective by meeting the requirements of the era's social expectations. This paper aims at depicting the long-term consequences of a hasty marriage.

Ödön Széchenyi's first wife was Irma Almay (1844–1891), whose family (original name: Wurm) had settled in Pest in the second half of the 18th century. Her grandfather, József Wurm (1770–1854) was an ironmonger and made a fortune during the Napoleonic wars. He saw his wealth increased when he built a profitable block of flats (Wurm court) in Pest. In 1834, he gained nobility and lands with Almási nobility particle and he changed his name to Almay. One of his daughters was married to Pál Bugát, chief medical officer, while the other one became the wife of Lipót Rottenbiller, Mayor of Pest. His son, Rudolf (Rezső) (1812–1879) chose his wife from the Baron Fellner family. This army-contractor family belonged to the same upper-middle class as the Wurm-Almay family. In 1871, the Wurm court had 310 residents and it was Pest's 8th most populated block of flats. Its national income was 66,600 forints which was the third highest in the city. The daughters of Rudolf Almay and Adél Fellner were married to old Hungarian noble families. Gizella's husband was Baron Antal Liphay while Irma's husband was Count Ödön Széchenyi.<sup>4</sup> For the Almay family, these marriages meant higher social status but for the Széchenyis, it was a step back. The two marriage certificates were quite telling. These were issued on the same day in the same location and with an almost identical wording. In one of the

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1 The research was supported by OTKA K 134378 (Parliamentarism in the era of Dualism from a regional perspective) project.

2 Ödön Széchenyi's career as a firefighter, see Roncsik 1938.

3 Exhibited in the István Széchenyi Memorial Museum in Nagycenk.

4 Vörös 1997: 75–86.

documents, Rudolf Almay and his wife stated that their daughter is married to the son of the deceased István Széchenyi and Seilern Crescentia with their names in bold. However, his marriage with Irma Almay was announced by Ödön Széchényi himself and he did not even mention his widow mother.<sup>5</sup>

Istvánné Széchenyi expressly opposed her son's marriage,<sup>6</sup> and she did not even participate in the wedding which took place in Esztergom on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1864. According to the report of *Fővárosi Lapok*, „the basilica has not seen such a high number of people since its consecration; even residents from the neighbouring settlements came to visit the capital of the diocese to witness the celebration of the son of the greatest Hungarian. (...) Having come with his full assistance, the Cardinal Prince Primate had a silent mass followed by the actual wedding. (...) The bride's huge silk wedding dress was decorated with lace frills from Brussels; her veil and her apron were also made in the Belgian capital; her swan-fur white coat even showed her dignity; the bride's long train was held by two servants; her hair was decorated with an orange-blossom wreath held by a quality diamond bouquet; she wore 3 luxurious but simple bracelets; all of them are kind gifts. (...) The bridegroom wore gold embroidered yellow boots, red pants, white atilla and a cornflower blue velvet cloak. All of them were rich in gold. There was a falcon wing on his calpac which symbolized high aspiration. After the wedding, the Prince Primate delivered a touching speech where he warned the newlyweds that they should respect their sacrament and the sacred responsibilities. The ceremony ended with the pontiff's benediction.” The newlyweds were cheered by „almost 10,000 people” followed by the wedding feast which took place in the cardinal's palace. The couple then traveled to Vienna when Ödön introduced his wife to his mother.<sup>7</sup> In one of her letters, Widow Lajosné Széchényi wrote the following about this meeting: „We had been waiting for so long. Around 6 o'clock, the poor victim appeared. Blushed and confused, she was struggling with the freezing cold and the curious witnesses. She was wearing Hungarian clothes; her shoulders were covered with two thick braids. Her bonnet was made of a golden net. Generally, she was a nice woman but not attractive. Her nose is big; her chin is protruding. Opinions differed whether she was pretty or not. I found her much nicer and much more loveable than I had expected. (...) After lunch, poor bride was stuck in a window booth and was given a lot of wedding gifts one after the other. I felt sorry for her because she looked like a victim there.”<sup>8</sup>

Then the couple have gone off the radar for almost 10 years. Meanwhile, they have had 3 children: András Széchényi (1865–1907), Vanda (1870–1916) and Olga (1873–1889).<sup>9</sup> In 1874 (as it was suggested previously) Prime Minister

5 MNL OL P 623. 510. „Meghívók, értesítések” 91, 92.

6 Bártfai Szabó 1926: 493.

7 *Fővárosi Lapok*, 1864. jan. 12. 30–31.

8 Széchényi (szerk.) 1913: 334.

9 Gudenus 1998: 52.

István Bittó informed Ödön Széchenyi that „His Majesty, the Sultan wishes to prevent the recurring fires in Constantinople and, witnessed by ambassador Count Ferencz Zichy, he declares that he would be honoured if My lord could manage the fire departments in Constantinople.”<sup>10</sup> Széchenyi accepted the kind order and after having abandoned his family, he moved to the Turkish capital; as he said, his wife had been pretty reluctant to go with him.<sup>11</sup> The couple then became estranged but I could not specify its reason and its exact date. Undoubtedly, their „unowned” children came off worst. The lack of a secure family and financial difficulties led to serious personality problems: in case of András, his lifestyle was really shameful for the Széchenyi name and tradition.

Ödön's wife was thought to be lavish by him since she was constantly travelling abroad where she was wasting a lot of money although Ödön's wealth was not big enough to cover his wife's needs. According to him, she was given Ödön's complete wealth of 150,000 forints but she wasted the whole amount. Exact details have yet to be investigated although Ödön Széchenyi herself did not deny that she was down-and-out by the early 1880s and she needed Ödön to support her and their children. She claimed that all he did was to send money to them: as a father he did not really care for his children. Although he did not even contact them regularly, he blamed his wife for neglecting their children.<sup>12</sup> (To be able to understand the abovementioned things, it is crucial to note that both parents wanted to obtain guardianship of their children; that's why they intended to make each other look bad in the eyes of the public.) After his death in 1879, Rudolf Almay, by his will, bequeathed 150,000 forints to his grandchildren which was a relief for the family who had to face difficult financial situations. at the time. Since they were minors, they could only enjoy the interest of that amount since the capital was managed by a fiduciary who was appointed by the orphans' court.<sup>13</sup>

The lack of a proper education was clearly visible in the case of András Széchenyi – although his parents blamed each other, they eventually agreed that András needed assistance. In the 1870s, a private tutor helped him and then he was taken to the Csöndes Institute. He was withdrawn from there by his mother because she (as she said) could no longer tolerate that her son had to clean shoes and do similar things. András continued his studies in

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10 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Bittó István miniszterelnök levele Széchenyi Ödönhöz, 1874. okt. 6.

11 MNL OL P 623. 304. VII. 32. 12. 8.

12 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Jegyzőkönyv, amely felvétellett Budapest Főváros árvaszékénél 1886 év június hó 25 napján kisk. grf. Széchenyi Andor ügyében 1886 év május hó 11 napján 9452 szám alatt kelt árvaszéki végzés folytán.

13 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Felosztási javaslat. Előterjeszti Dr. Török Béla ügyvéd, mint kisk. gróf Széchenyi Andor vagyongondnoka, úgylis mint gróf Széchenyi Ödön úr meghatalmazottja, néhai Almay Rudolf úr végrendeleti intézkedései folytán gróf Széchenyi Ödön szül. Almay Irma asszony gyermekei javára rendelt 150.000 ftnyi hagyományból gyámpénztári kezelés alatt álló értékek tárgyában.

Theresianum where he was really „mischievous” and he escaped. He was then taken care of by his father in Constantinople. He made András attend a trade school and he provided his son with a job in a bank – although András could not stay there either for a long time.<sup>14</sup> From the middle of the 1880s, he had larger and smaller scandals. Without his parents’ consent, he went to Monte Carlo where „he supposedly wasted all his money at the infamous Monte Carlo gambling dens; he even accumulated a 1650 franc debt in the hotel where he stayed”. In Constantinople, he left a 600 forints debt and, according to the estimation of his fiduciary, in the summer of 1888, he owed landlords, waiters and craftsmen 1,500 forints. He was constantly unavailable: one day checked in from Cairo and from Yokohama the other day. From Yokohama, he claimed that he was going to travel to Chicago.<sup>15</sup> His pistol battle with Richárd Wahrmann became a public sensation in March 1887. The Count sustained a life-threatening injury and he was even sentenced to 1 month in prison.<sup>16</sup> The administration fee and András’s hospital treatment cost 1000 forints, which was a huge problem for his „poor mother who was constantly sitting next to his sickbed”. His marriage was scandalous as well. „It was foolish of the young Count to get married at the age of 19. In a spa, he met a very attractive Russian lady, much older than him; he proposed her on the spot. (...) In the second year of their marriage, the woman gave birth to a boy. The couple had already become estranged. After the birth of the baby, the woman left her husband and she was wandering in the world for months. (...) Although she was not in need, she compromised her title of Countess by becoming an actress without any artistic skills and then she signed a contract under the pseudonym of Ilona Sárvári and she was singing at the Orfeum.”<sup>17</sup> András Széchenyi’s offences attracted the attention of the orphan’s court as well. On the basis of a proposal by László Sipőcz, head of the orphan’s court, the Count’s minority was extended in 1888. According to the explanatory statement, „András, grandson of the great István Széchenyi, is completely unaware of his duties and absolutely unworthy of the grand Széchenyi family due to his loathsome behaviour”.<sup>18</sup> As a result, they successfully stop him to waste the

14 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Jegyzőkönyv, amely felvétellett Budapest Főváros árvaszékénél 1886 év június hó 25 napján kisk. grf. Széchenyi Andor ügyében 1886 év május hó 11 napján 9452 szám alatt kelt árvaszéki végzés folytán.

15 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Budapest főváros tekintetes Árvaszékéhez jelentése Dr. Török Béla ügyvédnek, mint kiskorú gróf Széchenyi Andor gondnokának, 1886. máj. 15., 1887. jan. 27., 1888. jún. 12., 1890. jún. 15.

16 Clair 2002: 308.; BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Budapest főváros tekintetes Árvaszékéhez jelentése Dr. Török Béla ügyvédnek, mint kiskorú gróf Széchenyi Andor gondnokának, 1887. ápr. 4., 1891. jan. 4.

17 Országos Hírlap, 1898. december 1. 9.

18 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Budapest főváros tekintetes Árvaszékéhez Dr. Sipőcz László árvaszéki elnök előterjesztése kiskorú gróf Széchenyi Andor ügyében, 1888. márc. 31. Másolat.

inheritance of his maternal grandfather however, he continued his controversial lifestyle. His parents were unable to handle their son.

One of his siblings, Olga Széchenyi was studying at the Sacré Coeur sisters in Vienna. Her short life ended in the spring of 1889 when she passed away in Gleichenberg after an unsuccessful medical treatment.<sup>19</sup> At the age of 14, Vanda Széchenyi was married to a Persian bey – certainly by the help of her father.<sup>20</sup> In the sources of the orphan's court, she was recorded as Dadianné Wahram Bey.

After the death of Olga, Ödön Széchenyi had a mental breakdown and a year later, she was put in charge of a guardian. By the Royal Court of Law in Budapest, she was considered as a person with severe mental illness. She was in a very difficult financial situation and when she was taken to the asylum, she did not even have clothes to wear. Later she was provided with the suitable clothes but it was a costly procedure. She „refused to be treated in Hungary from the very beginning”. As a result, she was taken to the first class of Landes Irrenanstalt in Vienna and, in December of 1890, she was transported to a private asylum. She passed away there on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1891.<sup>21</sup>

The life of Ödön Széchenyi grabbed my attention when I learnt that his first wife was alive when he had children from another woman: Ilona in 1888 (†1951) and Gusztáv in 1889 (†1966). Therefore, they were adulterine children. After the death of Irma Almay, Ödön Széchenyi got married for the second time on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1892. His new wife was the mother of the abovementioned children. He even had another legal child from Eulalia Kritopulo (Christopoulos) (1854–1918) called Bálint (1893–1954).<sup>22</sup>

Initially, Ödön Széchenyi concealed the fact that he had several illegal descendants. It is likely that his first wife did not know them since sources of the orphan's court did not indicate adultery. The broader public of the Széchenyi family became familiar of the illegal children when Gusztáv grew up and his father provided him with a free position in Academia Ludovika. During the 1907 general assembly, an appeal was submitted by the Széchenyi family in which they firmly objected to the allegedly illegal use of the Széchenyi name and the count title; at the same time, they intended to take the necessary legal actions.<sup>23</sup> One year later, in the spring of 1908, Gyula Andrassy jr., Minister of Interior informed the Széchenyi family that – „through the Ministry of Justice – Pasha Ödön Széchenyi's children, Gusztáv and Ilona were legalised by the grant

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19 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - Budapest főváros tekintetes Árvaszékéhez jelentése Dr. Török Béla ügyvédnek, mint kiskorú gróf Széchenyi Olga gondnokának, 1889. ápr.

20 Gudenus 1998: 52.

21 BFL IV.1411.b. - 1879 - 00501 - Széchenyi - A Budapesti Királyi Törvényszék 15563/1890. sz. ítélete.; Budapest főváros tekintetes Árvaszékéhez jelentése Dr. Török Béla ügyvédnek, mint elmebeteg gróf Széchenyi Irma gondnokának, 1890. jún. 15., 1891. jan. 25.; Gudenus 1998: 52.

22 Gudenus 1998: 52–53; MNL OL P 623. 512. 257.

23 MNL OL P 623. 304. VII. 29. 1. 2.

of a royal pardon".<sup>24</sup> At the 1909 assembly, it was publicly known that during the legalisation procedure, the King was of the opinion that the family agrees and approves his constitutional right to do that. So Ödön actually had their legalised by deceiving the King. The family assembly had therefore no other option than accept the irreversible fact.<sup>25</sup>

An interesting question may arise: why did the family object to „smuggle” Ödön’s children? Were they only afraid of „dilution” or were there other compelling reasons of their objection? If we want to analyse the background of this case, we should consider the inheritance procedure of the Nagycenk entail. Ödön’s grandfather, Ferenc Széchenyi founded three entails for his sons in 1815. „According to his will, all of his sons (Lajos, Pál and István) should have an entail chosen by lot and this should continue to belong to their first descendant only if it is a male. Should the male branch die out, the entail shall belong to the other two oldest sons and their branches and the managing of the entails shall be equal.”<sup>26</sup> At the time, the beneficial owner of István Széchenyi’s entail was his first son, Béla (1837–1918). However, Béla has only daughters and in 1907 he was 70 years old therefore the inheritance procedure was expected within a relatively short period. Thus if Ödön’s children were somehow dropped out from the inheritance, István’ entail would go for the other two branches after Béla’s death. Possible actions against Ödön was provided by the founder’s provision which said that „those shall be dropped from the inheritance who were married to a woman not coming from an ancient noble family or with different religious views”.<sup>27</sup>

According to the era’s practice we can speak about ancient noble origin if the person was capable of showing a proof of noble descent. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it basically meant that (during an official procedure) the person had to certify his/her lineal and legal descent: 8 noble ancestors from the father’s branch and 8 noble ancestors from the mother’s branch. These 16 people (great-great grandparents) shall therefore come from a noble family and their ascendants (the lineal descendants of the applicant) could not be legalised or adopted. The imperial and royal chamberlains were also subject to ancient nobility not to mention certain honours and foundations. Only people with a noble origin could be members in the royal court and equal marriage should also happen between two noble people since the descendants of the under-ranked person did not meet the requirements of nobility. A carelessly chosen spouse could even affect several successive generations. These descendants were undesirable for those families who intended to keep their rank and a misalliance could cause serious financial damage. Certain founding letters

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24 MNL OL P 623. 301. VII. 28. 1. 25.

25 MNL OL P 623. 301. VII. 28. 1. 23.

26 Széchenyi 1933: 99.

27 Széchenyi 1933. 100.



stipulated that beneficial owners shall only come from an equal marriage.<sup>28</sup> It can be seen, then, ancient nobility was crucial for certain social classes and it had many practical consequences as well.

Consequently, the Széchényi family considered that „due to Ödön's illegitimate marriages (not married to a person with ancient noble ascendants), his son, Bálint, who came from an unknown Rác family and who has been a servant in Ödön's household, is not eligible for the beneficial ownership of the Nagycenk entail and Gusztáv, Ödön's other son is not considered as a member of the Széchényi family since he was born from adultery.”<sup>29</sup> The interested branches took a prejudicial action against Ödön in 1914 in order to make him state that neither him nor his descendants are eligible for the beneficial ownership of the Nagycenk entail. In his counter-statement, Ödön denied that his second marriage was illegitimate and he claimed that his sons from this marriage are fully eligible for the entail. According to the birth certificates, his wife was admitted to the Roman Catholic Church one day before their marriage, therefore she was Roman Catholic at the time of their marriage. As for her origin, “she was the descendant of an old Greek noble Kritopulo family from the Byzantine Empire which belonged to those Greek families that became under control of the Turkish state authorities after the Ottomans captured the Byzantine territory in 1453”. To prove it, Ödön attached certificates of several prominent people from Constantinople.<sup>30</sup> The reliability of the documents cannot be checked today and I do not intend to support one Party or the other. The most crucial aspect is the lack of ancient noble origin: a lower-rank marriage could be an important reference in case of inheritance procedures.

The actual lawsuit was postponed due to the First World War. In the autumn of 1918, the beneficiary owner of the entail, Béla Széchényi, passed away. Negotiations started between the legitimate branches and Ödön. Due to the tumultuous times, cash compensation was out of the question and eventually, Ödön was offered the so-called Hegykő farm which comprised approx. one fifth of the Nagycenk entail. In the spring of 1921, Ödön accepted the offer and he signed the relevant papers.<sup>31</sup> One year later, Ödön Széchényi passed away knowing that finally he had been able to provide a compensation for his children.

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28 Kempelen 1907: 5, 67–70, 95, 108.

29 MNL OL P 623. 301. VII. 28. 2. 16.

30 MNL OL P 623. 304. VII. 32. 12. 3–10.

31 MNL OL P 623. 301. VII. 28. 2. 144–146.

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