

It's the Survivors Who Rebuild! ... the Story of József Osztróvszky

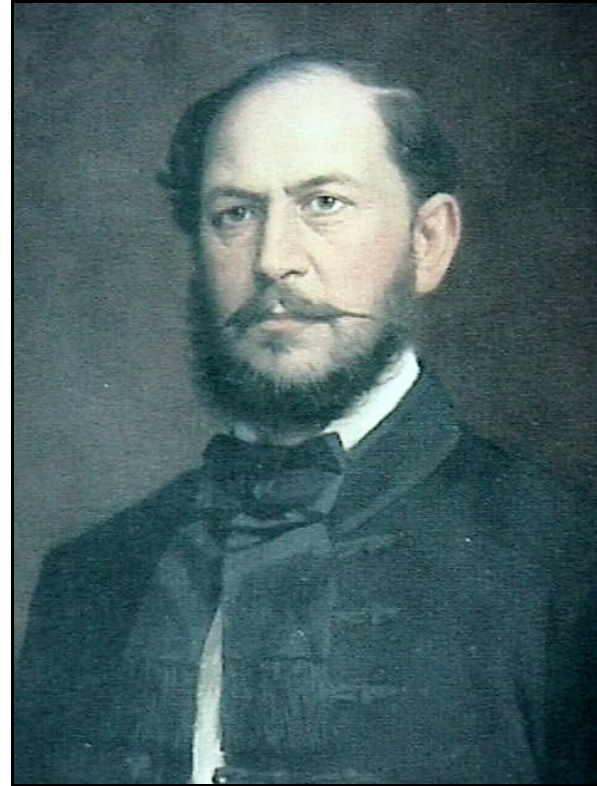
by Vic Berecz.

Our Yankee neighbors to the north proudly proclaim, *Live Free or Die*. Martyrdom is a great symbolic act. But, I'd like to recount the story of a survivor. With it, I hope to convince you that progress is driven by the living -- that it's the survivors who are presented with the opportunity to rebuild a nation.

That survivor is József Osztróvszky, my great-great-grandfather. My mother in New York, because her father had died when she was still young and the family had no contact with relatives in Hungary, knew very little about her ancestors. She knew only that her Heszlényi grandfather was born in Szeged, and that his wife was named Mária Osztróvszky. She also knew that her father had been orphaned at age five, and was brought up by his grandfather and his aunt Vilma. She knew nothing else about the family. It was not until recent years, when I began investigating my roots in Hungary -- and when I had some luck on the Internet -- that I became aware of all that was happening in 1849, when my great-grandmother Mária was born.

József Osztróvszky was born in 1818 in Szeged. He was the son of a prosperous butcher. Like all the wealthier Roman Catholic boys of Szeged, József attended the Piarist Academy. He went on to study law in Pozsony (now Bratislava, Slovakia). While there, he served as an aide to a member of the 1839-40 national assembly. This was the Diet which instituted Hungary's first liberal reforms. After receiving his diploma, József returned to the city of his birth to open a law practice.

His father, also named József, was an very successful businessman in the wholesale meat industry. He was also involved in civic affairs. He first met István Széchenyi in 1833. He was so influenced by this liberal leader and dynamo



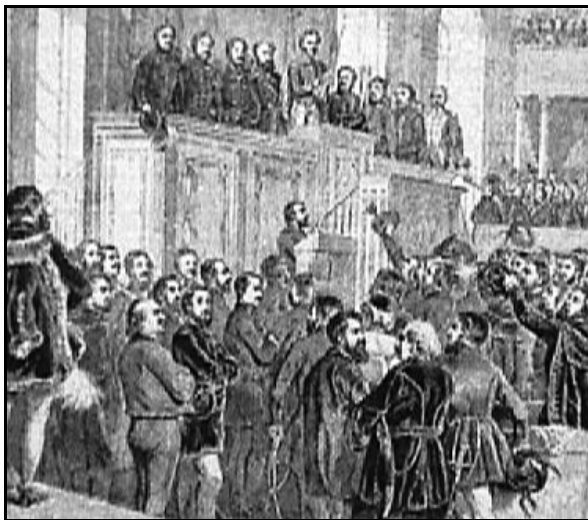
**József Osztróvszky in 1861 ...
from painting in Szeged City Hall.**

of Hungarian progress that he dedicated his later life to broad civic interests. In the 1830's and 1840's the elder Osztróvszky was a founder of the Szeged Savings Bank, a casino board member, and managing superintendent of the Szeged hospital. By the way, Széchenyi's accounts show that he presented a silver watch to that "Szeged butcher" -- so apparently the positive impression was mutual.

Osztróvszky and his father were major factors in the politics and public affairs of Szeged in the 1840's. Politically, the younger József remained a follower of Széchenyi and Ferenc Deák throughout his life -- with one short deviation that we will note later. In 1846,

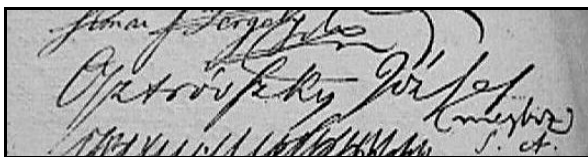
the Osztróvszky's, among others, formally established the Liberal Party of Szeged. From then onward, law and liberal politics were the central focus of my ancestor's life.

In early 1848, the thirty-year old Osztróvszky was elected leader of the Szeged city council, and on July 2 was one of 415 members elected to Hungary's new, representative Parliament. He was one of the few middleclass citizens to be elected to that Parliament. When the military situation forced the Parliament to move from Pest to Debrecen, Osztróvszky went along.



Opening of 1848 Parliament.

As the Parliament became more radicalized, advocating total independence and dethroning the Habsburgs, Deák withdrew as did many others. But, Osztróvszky stayed on and was one of the 121 members who supported the April 14, 1849 declaration of independence. Shortly after, Kossuth's revolutionary government appointed



Osztróvszky's Signature on Hungary's 1848 Declaration of Independence.

him commissioner for the Szeged district. He returned home again to take on that assignment

In May of 1849, virtually all of Hungary was under the control of the revolutionary government. But, as I'm sure most readers know, Austria sought Russian assistance against the rebels, which reversed the recent Magyar battlefield successes.

After the defeat at Győr, Kossuth promulgated his Szeged Plan. This plan was to move defenses back towards Szeged, and included a scorched earth policy to hobble the Austrian advance. On July 12, the same year, Kossuth and what remained of the Hungarian government fled to Szeged, which became the capital of revolutionary Hungary for a few weeks. The Parliament, meeting in Szeged, enacted the nationality law, which guaranteed the right of all ethnic groups to free national development. The military situation deteriorated, and government finances reached a critical threshold. Still, there was general optimism in Szeged as a result of Kossuth's personal presence and leadership. But, it did not last long. Prime Minister Szemere warned that, due to military pressure, the capital would again have to be moved.

In late July, days before the evacuation of Szeged, the pregnant wife of Osztróvszky, and their young son, went to nearby Hodmezővásárhely to live with her sister and brother-in-law. There, their daughter Mária was born -- as it turns out, just four days before the surrender of her father along with Hungary's armies.

Osztróvszky himself left Szeged for Arad with the retreating Honvéd army and the government. General Arthur Görgei arrived at Arad with his army on August 10, but the city had already been evacuated by the Honvéd forces. Only Kossuth and what little remained of the government were still there.



View of Szeged from across the Tisza River in 1849.

On the 12th, Kossuth resigned his post as Governor of Hungary and fled to Turkey, leaving Görgei in charge of the government and the only major revolutionary army still in the field. Osztróvszky attended the last meeting of Parliament in Arad that day, and moved with the army to Világos.

Görgei had three choices: continue fighting what he believed to be a lost cause, flee the country as Kossuth had, or surrender and try to get the best possible terms. At Világos, the following day, Görgei surrendered to the Russian commander -- not the Austrians.

We all know of the 13 generals who were executed in Arad on October 6, 1849 and have gone down in history as great martyrs. Few know, though, that Austrian retribution went on for almost two years, with trials for 4628 Hungarian rebels, both military and civilian. In September 1850, a military tribunal in Pest sentenced József Osztróvszky to death by hanging for his activities as a member of Parliament during the War for Independence. About 500 others were also sentenced to death.

Strangely enough, they were not immediately imprisoned. Osztróvszky was paroled home for a year, during which time he stayed with his family, and his daughter Vilma was born. Then, like all but 120 mostly military martyrs, his death sentence was commuted to imprisonment. Austria was feeling international pressure, and also recognized that these

Hungarians, who were accessories in the revolution, would be needed to help govern Hungary in the future.

József Osztróvszky served his sentence at the Josefstadt national prison in Moravia. While in prison, he was remembered for reading to illiterate prisoners and teaching others the principles of Austrian law. Like many of the other prisoners, he was pardoned after a few years imprisonment. He was released from Josefstadt and returned home in 1855.

But, by the terms of his parole, he was prohibited from practicing law for several years. So, he became principal agent for a Trieste insurance company, and lived in Pest where he was a founder and superintendent of the first Hungarian insurance company. When the time was ripe, Osztróvszky again decided to seek political office, and returned with his family to Szeged.

In the post-war period, he was again an enthusiastic supporter of Deák's efforts to find an acceptable compromise with Austria, and in 1861 was elected Szeged's mayor. Later in the year, he resigned in protest when compromise talks led by Deák broke down, and Hungary's constitutional assembly was suspended, returning the country to absolutism.

In 1866, the catastrophic defeat of the Austrian army by the Prussians, led to the necessary compromise with the empire's minorities. "The chief architect in bringing

Hungary from the dark abyss of defeat to a peak of splendor and reconciliation was Ferenc Deák.” according to Sisa. The *Compromise of 1867* for the Magyar side was hammered out by him and Count Gyula Andrassy. They were fortunate to have a “guardian angel” on the Emperor's side, in the person of the Empress Elisabeth. The compromise resulted in a 50-year experiment in multi-ethnic government called the *Austro-Hungarian Empire*.

In the year of the Compromise, Osztróvszky again ran for mayor in Szeged, but lost. The new Hungarian constitution, which came into being with the compromise, established a system of Hungarian courts. Two years later, the Justice Minister Boldizsár Horváth, appointed József Osztróvszky to the *Hétszemélyes Tabla* – in English “the Board of Seven Men” -- which later evolved into the *Kuria*. These were Hungary's equivalent of our Supreme Court. Osztróvszky was later promoted to the high position of presiding judge of that court, a position he held for seventeen years until his retirement.



Leopoldina Palásty in 1868.

József Osztróvszky was married to Leopoldina Lujza Palásty in 1846. My great-great-grandmother was the daughter of an estate manager in nearby Algyő, who was himself (supposedly) the illegitimate son of an Austrian Count. Poldi, as she was known, served as an army nurse during the War for Independence. The Osztróvszky's probably had eight children, though records exist for only seven. She died in 1880 in Pest.

Since my great-grandparents (their daughter Mária and her husband) both died young, my grandfather Gyula Heszlényi was raised by his maternal grandfather, József Osztróvszky, and his maiden aunt Vilma. They lived in a lovely apartment house near the City Park in Pest that is still standing.



Osztróvszky Home at 46 Damjanich Street.

József Osztróvszky died on April 22, 1899 in Budapest, and was buried in the famous old Kerepesi cemetery, where most 19th century Hungarian notables were interred. But, his moving around in the world wasn't over. In the 1960's, his grave was moved to the Reformed church cemetery in the town of Pécel – good Catholic though he was -- to make room for a “hero of communism” at Kerepesi.



Osztróvszky Gravesite in Pécel.

While he did not receive the acclaim of the martyred generals who were hung following the War for Independence of 1848-49, József Osztróvszky was an example of a 19th century survivor. He lived to make important contributions to Hungarian law and justice, based on the liberal principles of Széchenyi and Deák. He survived, and with never ending devotion helped rebuild the nation. His survival made a difference.

On last October 6 (1999), I was proud to be a part of the dedication of a monument, with which the people of Szeged and the Hungarian nation honored my great-great-grandfather. It took place in a square at the end of the street named for József Osztróvszky -- the liberal leader, the revolutionary, the rebuildler, the jurist -- who survived and prospered with his people.

[This article, with minor changes, was published in 2000 by the Magyar News and News of Hungarian Philately magazines.]



The author (right) and sculptor Jenő Kiss at the dedication of the Osztróvszky monument in Szeged on 06 Oct 1999.

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