

The Travels of Daniel Webster's Best Friend

Sleeper-McCann

Five years ago, we went on a Boston Athenaeum tour of the Sleeper-McCann house in Gloucester. In the kitchen, there was a large hutch with a huge plate with "Kossuth" written across it. Sylvia asked the tour guide about the significance of the plate. "I have no idea," was the reply. Sylvia volunteered that Kossuth was probably the most famous Hungarian who ever lived and it was interesting to see the plate there in the kitchen. In the gift shop after the tour, we bought a book about the house with (who knew) a foreword by my oldest sister and a photo of that plate on the back cover.

Kossuth

Prior to the year 2020, there were five statues or busts of this famous Hungarian named Kossuth in the United States. Statues in Riverside Park, NYC, as well as Cleveland, Ohio and Kossuth County, Iowa. And, a bust in Los Angeles and one prominently in the US Capitol Lower Rotunda. The Capitol inscription reads: "Father of Hungarian Democracy, Hungarian Statesman, Freedom Fighter, 1848-1849." He is the only foreign leader other than Lafayette to have received such an honor. And, in the last years of his storied life, Daniel Webster could easily have called Kossuth his best friend. They were virtually inseparable. Once again, a Dartmouth man chose wisely. So, who exactly was this man? More on him later. But, first, the story of his travels.

On a lovely Spring evening in 2020, completely out of the blue, Sylvia asked me, "How would you like to have a bust of Kossuth Lajos stored in our garage?" Reversing the Hungarian practice of last-name-first and Anglicizing his name, she was asking about Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian equivalent of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln combined. As we routinely have a Washington Street in many or most towns, virtually every town in Hungary has a Kossuth Ut. The equivalent of a Nobel Prize for Culture in Hungary is given under the name of Kossuth. The square in front of Parliament, the most prominent spot in the entire country, is named after Kossuth. He led a revolution against the Austrian leaders of the Austro-Hungarian empire, fighting for the independence of his country (sound familiar?), and is in so many ways the heart and soul of the country. It doesn't matter, in fact it might even be more compelling, that his revolution failed and he was forced to flee into exile.

"Seriously?" I replied. And, then I said, "That would be incredible." She told me that a bust had been commissioned, had been cast, and was already in transit from Hungary. It would be arriving in about a week. The idea was to have it installed in front of Faneuil

Hall in Boston, one of the many places in this country where Kossuth gave inspiring speeches. All they needed was the certain approval from the Boston powers-that-be and it would be a done deal. The New York Consul had reached out to the New England Hungarian Society to ask if anyone had a safe and secure storage place for the bust while the details were worked out for its installation. After an extraordinarily short discussion, we threw our hat in the ring and - to our surprise - were soon chosen as the temporary resting place for this bust. As our garage is a converted barn, we needed to install new locks on its entrance door. And, for many obvious reasons, we decided that nobody would hear a peep about the bust. We viewed its arrival with a mix of excitement, intrigue, and apprehension.

Days later, after a few confirming emails, a moving truck backed up and unloaded a crate with the bust - and then a several thousand pound crate with its base. With difficulty moving over our cobblestones at the entrance to the garage and with indispensable help from our high school son and a few pieces of 4x8 plywood, the two crates successfully found a home in our garage. At this point, a limo arrived with the Hungarian Consul of New York and two men we alternatively called henchmen and thugs. They were probably neither. Out of nowhere came crowbars and each crate was opened to determine that they actually contained the bust and its base. Closing them back up, the Consul then produced for us a lovely book on Kossuth, a bottle of Gal Tibor wine, and a bottle of palinka. "We have toured the Gal Tibor vineyard," Sylvia noted, "and we know his daughter Veronica who now runs it. We love their wines!" FYI for wine connoisseurs, Tibor Gal was discovered in Hungary under Communism and brought to Italy to make great wines. He invented the Super Tuscan before moving on to South Africa and dying young in a car accident. His children are now back in Hungary, grown adults, and fluent in Hungarian, Italian, and English - most likely among several other languages.

So, once again, who exactly is this Kossuth guy?

And, why is he the heart and soul of the nation? In the late 1840's, there was a growing feeling that the Austro-Hungarian empire was not really a "dual monarchy" as promised, but was really run totally out of Vienna. Kossuth, a nobleman, lawyer, and politician, had written for years about the interests of the Hungarian people. He was actually jailed for writing about the importance of the Freedom of Speech. While in prison, he taught himself English by reading the King James version of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. As soon as he was released from jail, he was chosen for a succession of political positions and immediately decided to take on the Habsburgs. The odds were completely stacked against him - Russia even interfered on the side of Austria - and his Revolution failed, so Kossuth had to escape and go into exile. (If he had succeeded, it

is almost certain that the Great War would not have unfolded as it did. We can only speculate how). Once in exile, Kossuth was able to set on display his extraordinary oratory in political debates and public speeches. American journalist Horace Greeley said of him, "Among the orators, patriots, statesmen, exiles, he has, living or dead, no superior." After his escape and reunification with his family, Kossuth went first to England, and then to America. He traveled and spoke all over the United States for about a year and a half. He spoke in every important setting from Boston to Washington - and to many of our Western states. He was the second foreign leader to speak to a joint session of Congress - and this was a mere 75 years after our own Revolution. It is easy to imagine how his words were able to resonate in our young nation at that time. In 1851, there was a Kossuth mania at Christmas and New Years. Hungarian dishes were served at restaurants. Ceramics, cravats, pipes, umbrellas, belts and buckles, purses, jackets, braids and tassels bore his name or inspiration. The American Museum on Broadway "was literally covered with paintings and flags in his honor." One portrait of Kossuth, with Hungarian and American flags had the words "Kossuth, the Washington of Hungary." He never met George Washington, of course, but he may have met Abraham Lincoln, and passages from his speeches echo clearly in the Gettysburg Address. "The spirit of our age is Democracy. All for the people, and all by the people. Nothing about the people without the people. That is Democracy!" he wrote in 1852. More importantly, he was arguably the best friend of that other great orator, Daniel Webster, in the last two years of his life.

By the way, Kossuth was born with the family name of Kossut. The "h" is an honorary addition to one's Surname in Hungary. Perhaps that explains why I tend to be treated well when we visit! Sorry, I couldn't resist.

The Glowing Bust

But, I digress. Back to our delivery. After the strong men had completed their most critical role in this process, we could see the work of art that had been delivered to our humble barn resting place. When the crate was opened and the Consul and Sylvia looked inside, the sun was preparing to set. The light hit the bust at such an angle that it appeared to give off a glow on its own. The sun was setting behind them, but a light was shining from the bust onto them. It was magical. We knew it was a bronze bust, but it seemed to be alive!



And, why palinka?

It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that every important social event in Hungary starts with a glass of palinka. A clear distilled drink made from a variety of fruits and carrying an alcohol content ranging from 40-70%, palinka is served in attractive shot glasses and clinked with the ceremonial Hungarian phrase (even though it is all in one word) for "To Your Health." As some friends know, if you miss the accent on one of the four e's in the word, your toast would shift to "On Your Ass." One accent on one letter. It is best to get the pronunciation right! Usually, the first glass is thrown down in one gulp and the glass firmly placed back on the table. I can attest that at least one of our classmates knows how to do it. I've done that too, but today I sip. When in Hungary, we always start dinner with at least one glass of palinka.

Conversations with a Classmate

After the bust arrived, I let one of our classmates know about what had happened. An esteemed authority was required. so I contacted Roger Arvid Andersen. Without any hesitation, he replied, "Oh, I know all about Kossuth" and shared details about his historical significance. A delightful conversation ensued. "You need to get that thing insured," he advised, "and get rid of it as soon as possible." That was the plan.

A "No Thanks" from Boston

Ooops! The Consul undoubtedly put the cart before the horse by commissioning the bust before knowing with certainty where it would go, and soon the wheels fell off the cart. This bust would have been a perfect addition to the front of Faneuil Hall, the location of one of his most inspiring speeches. However, that's not the way the Mayor saw it. He wrote back, "The last thing we need in Boston is another statue of a white male." OK. So, off to Plan B. But, there wasn't any Plan B. "Do you know anyone who would like this bust?" we were asked. We had lots of ideas, but the most practical ones didn't have any takers. Would we have to keep it? Would we have to install it in our own back yard!

Imaginations Run Wild

Suddenly, every unexpected sound in the driveway was a thief in the night. In the middle of the day - or night - we dreamed up mysteries for books and movies about Hungarians of various persuasions for whatever reasons wanting to spirit the bust away. We were going to enlist our dear friend and classmate, Peter Werner, to help us put something cinematic together. We told each other that when we could finally go public about this work of art, we would tell people that every night, we went out to the barn with three glasses and a bottle of palinka. It would be a silly tale to tell. "Oh, the stories he told!" And, maybe we did. And, maybe HE did!

Ship-to-Shore Radio

Just when we had given up, almost a year after we had taken possession of the Kossuth bust, we were informed that it had finally been given a proper destination. Niagara University, where there is a thriving Hungarian program. OK, we thought. We are standing by. Then, out of nowhere, a self-proclaimed Irishman arrived with a truck and said, "I am here for the statue." "Great. Do you have any paperwork?" "Nope." "Well, you can't have it." "OK" he replied with a shrug and left. How curious.

Weeks later, Sylvia got a phone call. "Shhhsh. woosh, shhhsh." "Hello," she replied thinking she was on a ship-to-shore call. Then, it cleared up. "Yes, Sylva?" In Hungarian, szylva means plum. "Uh, no, this is Sylvia." Suddenly, the connection cleared up. "Right, that could be. I'm calling about the statue." "OK, do you have paperwork." "Yes, I do. We are taking the statue to Nigeria Falls." "Do you think that could be Niagara Falls?" "Right, that could be."

In about an hour, a truck arrived and a very happy driver stepped out in flip-flops, shorts, and gigantic earphones. Unlike the previous guy, this one actually had paperwork. Proper paperwork. We took photos of it all. Again, we had to provide lots of wooden pieces to guide the tiny front wheels of the manual forklift over the cobblestones when it was carrying the base. We got it started in our driveway, which rolls increasingly downhill. Mr Flip-Flop maneuvered it, only slightly out of control, to the back of the truck and got it on the lift. Sylvia and I and a neighbor were watching. "Hmmm," he said, "Could you three hold the base on the lift as it goes up? I don't want it to fall." This was a two thousand pound base. "Uh, no," we all said in unison. "Say," I offered, "Don't you have any straps in your truck? You could tie it to the sides of the truck to hold the base in place." This wasn't a crazy guess, as I could see at least four or five straps in the back of the truck. "Yuh," he replied, "but they're all too short." Then, putting my Dartmouth education to work, I suggested, "But, you could tie them together and create a longer strap." "Oh! Right!" Once the cargo had been lifted to the bed of the truck, I gave him some further advice. "Make sure you don't let that thing get going and pin you against the front wall of the truck." "No problem," he shot back. In moments, we watched with considerable concern as Mr Flip-Flops pinned himself at the front of the truck. An average sized man holding back a 2,000 pound crate on a modestly steep driveway. But, fortunately for our happy moving man, he escaped with a well-timed push and a slightly painful squirm.



Destination: Niagara Falls

So, now we had a destination and a date. The bust and its base were no longer stored in our garage. We could no longer share drinks of palinka with the greatest Hungarian hero ever.

The dedication was set for an early October Saturday afternoon. But, in an extraordinary act of kindness, the Consul must have known that the Dartmouth-Penn football game was being broadcast on ESPN that Friday night. Whew! First things first!

The dedication was an interesting affair, well attended by Hungarians from all over the Northeast. Sylvia was formally thanked for giving Kossuth refuge for a year while things were sorted out. The presentations were delivered in Hungarian and in English and the Consul dressed in a military costume similar to what Kossuth is wearing in his bust.

After the ceremony, a dinner celebration was held at the local Hungarian Club.



And, here we are celebrating with the Consul the installation of the Kossuth Lajos bust in Niagara. We will no longer be able to share our evening drinks of palinka with him in our barn!