

CHAPTER ONE

FAMILY, DESCENT, AND YOUTH

Opinions about the origins of Pál Teleki's family and about the beginnings of his soaring career are divided. According to one version, the family fled the Turks advancing across the Balkans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were given property in the fifteenth century in south-east Hungary, in counties Bihar [Bihor], Arad [Arad], Békés and Zaránd [Zărand]. (All of these areas are presently in Romania). The property included the farmstead of Telek [Teleac] in Békés County as well as property in Zágórhíd [Zagăr] and Szék [Sic]. It was this last settlement that provided the predicate for the family that was known as Teleki from Szék.

According to others our first information about the family dates back to the second half of the sixteenth century. The Garázda and Teleki families lived and were active in Transylvania, which was independent between 1541 and 1690. This was on the overlapping edges of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. The best known figure of the family was Mihály II Teleki, who was born in the early 1630s and who at an early age became the court postmaster to György II Rákóczi, the prince of Transylvania. His career advanced under Mihály Apafi. He could look back on a meteoric career and at the end of the 1680s he was the lord lieutenant of Fehér [Alba], Torda [Turda] and Máramaros [Maramureş] Counties, captain-general of Csík-Gyergyó-Kászonszék, commander of the two most important fortresses of Transylvania, Huszt and Kővár, the tax farmer of the prince's tithe, the commander in chief of Transylvania, a councilor and the most important Transylvanian negotiator with the Habsburg empire. He skillfully escaped from the Turkish entanglements, became oriented toward Poland and participated in

the return of Transylvania to the Habsburg empire. A ruthless but imposingly stylish magnate, he was the last major Transylvanian politician of the seventeenth century who could come to terms with Transylvania's independence but also with an overall European and south-east European constellation. His task was largely complete when he fell in the battle of Zernyest [Zarnesti] on August 21, 1690, fighting on the side of the emperor.

In recognition for his services Mihály Teleki was awarded the title of count of Hungary by the Emperor Leopold I, in 1685. In 1697 the title of count of the Holy Roman Empire was added, posthumously, by the emperor.¹ This patent also formally established the family coat of arms. Mihály Teleki had thirteen children. Two of these, Mihály III and Sándor, had numerous descendants and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Telekis constituted an ever increasing, frequently intermarrying family both in Transylvania and also in Hungary. The Protestant branch acquired large estates in Pest, Pilis, Solt, Kiskún and Nógrád Counties. They endowed libraries, gathered collections of art, became generous contributors to Hungarian culture and many of them entered the learned professions. One historical work lists twenty-five Telekis, who by virtue of their literary activities and other contributions, deserved the attention of posterity.²

We know little about Ede Teleki (1813–1875) Pál Teleki's grandfather. He attended the Kolozsvár [Cluj] Lyceum from 1828 to 1832 and then lived on his estate at Paszmos [Pasmuş]. He was married to Countess Matilda Haller in 1837 in Váradolaszi [Oradea] and they had six children. The fourth of these, Géza was Pál Teleki's father, born in Dés [Dej] on September 28, 1843.³ Although Ede Teleki was a member of the Upper House of the first parliament in 1848–49 he did not attend the sessions. The Transylvanian events of the anti-Habsburg Hungarian War for Independence left its marks on the family. The largely Romanian and German inhabitants of Paszmos stormed the chateau during the civil war in Transylvania, looted, burned and partially demolished it. The Teleki family was forced to flee from Paszmos and eventually chose their estate in Kővárvidék County as their new residence. Their chateau was located in Nagybánya [Baia Mare].

Géza Teleki was six years old when the family had to flee from the Romanian villagers attacking the ancestral chateau. The youngster was

deeply affected by the sudden move and by all the excitement surrounding it. He was never in doubt whom to blame and in his letters written many years later the only political or social comments were critical of Romanian movements.⁴

Géza Teleki studied in several religious schools and finally graduated from Marosvásárhely [Tîrgu Mureş]. Even as a young man he enjoyed writing and, as an adult, published a number of articles in various papers. For one year in 1863–64 he attended the Academy of Agriculture and Forestry in Hohenheim, Württemberg. Returning home he became honorary sheriff in Kővárvidék County, studied law and was elected in 1866 as county recorder, the third highest elective position in the local administration.⁵

Géza Teleki entered national politics and after 1875 represented Nagynyíres in parliament on a liberal ticket.⁶ He made no waves in the House and his maiden speech was not delivered until fourteen years later. One of the great representatives of Hungarian liberalism, Kálmán Tisza formed a government during the summer of 1889 and invited the largely unknown Teleki to become his minister of the interior. Teleki's ministerial career was cut short in March 1890 when Kálmán Tisza resigned. In recognition of Teleki's contributions, the monarch appointed the forty-six-year-old count as a privy councilor. Subsequently, Teleki was engaged in social activities and in the management of his estate. According to 1893 data he owned 2,527 acres of land which was considered a very small estate even by Transylvanian aristocratic standards.⁷ On August 28, 1871, Géza Teleki married the nineteen-year-old Irén Muráti (or Muráthy) the daughter of the Greek merchant Konstantin Muráti. Muráti was described in the city register as a householder.

It is practically impossible to define "Greek" nationality. The Hungarian language of the eighteenth century used the term "Greek" to define somebody who was a Greek national, who was of the Greek Orthodox religion, who was a Greek-speaking Balkan resident or simply a Greek merchant.⁸ The general term "Greek" was used to refer to the true Greeks from the southern part of the Balkans, but also to Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians, Albanians and those Romanians who came from Wallachia and from Moldavia. In the eighteenth century Greeks settled in the larger cities, bought real estate and engaged in a

variety of commercial activities. Members of the Greek community in Budapest could rise to almost any level. A number of them were given a patent of nobility by the emperor and families like the Haris, Lyka, Manno, Sima and Nako rose to great heights and became the very symbols of wealth.⁹

The fact that Count Géza Teleki married the daughter of a Pest Greek bourgeois was unusual not only in his social group but in the endogamous Greek society as well. The Muráti family, whose name originally was Muratis, came from the north of Greece and it is not entirely certain that they were of Greek ethnicity. For a payment of fifty forints, Panajot Muráti became a citizen of Pest. In 1827 he was already the owner of the one-story house which was later torn down and on the site of which the handsome palace, in classical style, was built in 1831. It still stands at the corner of József Nádor Square and Harmincad Street. Later it was known as the Teleki Palace.¹⁰ His heir was his nephew, Konstantin Muráti, known as Szilárd Muráti, who was born around 1813 and whom he brought from his native Greece at age seven, took into his house and had educated. Szilárd (the Hungarian version of Konstantin) Muráti became a Pest citizen in 1844. He was already married and his wife, nee Mária Sacelláry, was also the offspring of a Greek family. Szilárd put his money into real estate and made a large fortune. In the 1880s, in addition to the house on József Nádor Square, he had six other properties in the fifth, sixth and seventh districts of the city.¹¹ Starting in the 1850s Szilárd Muráti's social standing kept rising. In 1857 he became a city councilor. Of his four daughters three were married to Greek families and thus Muráti became related to the Vrányi, the Curty and the Baron Economo families. The Muráti descendants always clung to their Greek identity but scattered during the first few decades of the twentieth century and settled in a number of European cities including Trieste, Vienna, Athens, Marseilles and Paris.

Soon after the wedding Géza Teleki moved into the house on József Nádor Square. According to friends of the family, the marriage was a very harmonious one with the young husband deeply in love with his bride, who is said to have ruled the household with a fist of iron. The only shadow cast on the marriage was the fact that the couple initially had no children. The first several, hopefully awaited, children all were born dead.¹² There was great joy in the house when on

November 1, 1879, after eight years of marriage, a healthy and hale heir was born, Pál János Ede Teleki from Szék.¹³

The small newborn brought such joy to the parents, that for gratitude to the Holy Virgin, they dressed him in her color of blue for the first six years of his life. The little Pál Teleki learned German before he went to school and even knew some Greek.¹⁴ In a later comment it appears that the early knowledge of these two languages was no accident because in the Muráti house the principal languages were Greek and German with Hungarian a poor third.¹⁵ Presumably only the servants spoke Hungarian. It was in this patriarchal house, noisy with aunts, uncles and cousins, that the little Pál Teleki spent his first years, primarily under the supervision of his mother. His father was frequently away on his official duties. The management of far-flung estates and the required social contacts, e.g. hunting, frequently called him away from the home on József Nádor Square. It was during these years that the strong and intimate relationship between mother and son developed, which was, however, always based on an evident authoritarian base. Irén Muráti did not tolerate any contradictions. Her teenage son respected and feared her from afar and was convinced that she would always discover every minor distortion of the truth.¹⁶

The family usually spent the summers in Pribékfalva [Pribilești] and the winters in Budapest. While in the country, the young Pál and the children from the neighboring estates were instructed by a teacher from Nagysomkút [Șomcuta Mare] at Kővárvidék [Chiorana] and also had some instruction from their nannies. His annual final exams were taken at the Lutheran elementary school on the Deák Square. There is a photograph which shows the father looking with paternal pride on his six-year-old son. In this period of his life the playmates of the little Pál were his cousins Edina and Jenő, the children of Sándor Teleki of Nagysomkút and Zoltán Takáts Felvinczi, the future renowned art historian and orientalist. The nearby Szamos [Someș] River and the eight acre park of the chateau provided an ideal playground for the children. In his teens Pál could use the library of the chateau which was celebrated for its huge collection of books and pictures and included every book that was ever written by a member of the Teleki family. It was Pál himself who eventually arranged the 3,200 volume collection, cataloged it and used it diligently. His love of books stayed with him until

his death. In his younger days, the boy also liked to play with lead soldiers, was crazy about the Karl May stories and challenged his friends to tricycle races. About this time he decided that he wished to become a navy officer.¹⁷ He was thrilled with the equipage that his parents gave him on his fourteenth birthday and he proudly drove the horses on the streets of Pribékfalva and in the park of the chateau.¹⁸ Even though he was small, lightly built and frequently ill, he loved horses and enjoyed riding even in much later years. The local friends and playmates were soon joined by the young members of the Transylvanian and Hungarian aristocratic families. They included the sons of Count Frigyes Wenckheim, Marquis György and Marquess Edina Pallavicini and the young Counts Esterházy from Csákvár, including Móric the future prime minister. Pál Teleki was known to his friends as “Bóli” and soon became a favorite of the social group. He was a very clever artist and could draw excellent caricatures in a few minutes. A good dancer, he loved to participate in all sorts of fun. It was at this time that he started collecting stamps which continued until the end of his life.

The usual aristocratic education naturally had to include hunting. At his first participation in a hunt, while in the company of his father and his cousins, the eleven-year-old Pál shot a few rabbits. It was here that his passion for hunting began and his recollection of these early days with all their details remained the subject of many future conversations. Géza Teleki, who was present on this famous occasion wrote, “My Pál wanted to shoot a rabbit. I did not wish him to do this with others, without my being present and thus, even though unwell, went out with him.... You may imagine Pál’s delight when he has shot a rabbit.”¹⁹ He also became very interested in ornithology, shot a large number of birds and sent them to the taxidermists at the National Museum in Budapest.

After completing the elementary school, Pál Teleki became a private pupil at the Piarist Gymnasium [High School] in Budapest. He spent practically no time at the school and just took the final exams, as authorized by the Ministry of Education.²⁰ The exams were taken every May between 1889 and 1897. His perfect record had only two minor lapses. In year seven he received only a “satisfactory” in drawing and in the eighth year he had the same grade in mathematics.²¹ The poor grade in drawing is surprising because the testimony of contemporaries

and a number of surviving sketches indicate that Pál Teleki had considerable talent. The educators attended to both religious and secular studies. The young Teleki did not need the instruction in languages offered by the gymnasium because already in childhood he learned four languages in addition to Hungarian. He spoke and wrote French extremely well, even though in later years he occasionally misspelled words. He learned some Greek from the relatives of his mother. He spoke German fluently and even as an adult he communicated with his mother in German. His command of written German was less than perfect and he occasionally composed a text in a “sloppy, Hungarian-Austrian style.”²² He learned some Romanian in Pribékfalva in order to communicate with the local inhabitants and with the servants at the chateau. He learned English from a private tutor, knew a few words of Dutch and could offer a toast and conduct a conversation in Italian.

He completed his baccalaureate exam in June 1897. The examining board listed Teleki and seven others as outstanding from a class of forty-three.²³ The exam indicated that the young man, educated in almost complete isolation, had acquired sufficient knowledge and information, not only to compete with his contemporaries but to be of a standing with the best of them.