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EDITORS
Peter Pastor
Ivan Sanders



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Pál Teleki
(1874–1941)

***The Life of a Controversial
Hungarian Politician***

BALÁZS ABLONCZY

Translated from the Hungarian by
Thomas J. and Helen D. DeKornfeld

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47 Cecilia Drive, Wayne, New Jersey
07470-4649
E-mail: pastorp@mail.montclair.edu

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PREFACE

The life and work of Pál Teleki are among the hot topics in contemporary Hungary. The 2004 plans for erecting a Teleki statue triggered astonishing passions and public debates.¹ The controversy swirling around the proposed monument was not limited to historic issues but reflected the current divisions in Hungarian public opinion, the inability to reach consensus and the problem of coming to terms with the past.

I learned only after the completion of the Hungarian version of this book, that, indirectly, I also had a personal link with the late scholar and prime minister. For some of the school reforms he introduced were still in place at the school I attended as a youngster.

I also had a link with him through my grandfather. He was a student at the famous Sárospatak Protestant Boarding School in 1933, when, as a member of the school's Boy Scout troop he attended the World Boy Scout Jamboree in Gödöllő. My grandfather died more than twenty-five years before I was born and leafing through family archives, I found a postcard he had written to his parents from the jamboree. There is nothing particularly interesting on it. A seventeen-year-old boy advises his parents that he is well, is busy exchanging memorabilia with other scouts, is amazed by the Japanese and Armenian scouts, and asks that the stamps on the postcard be saved for his stamp collection.

The more than seventy-year-old card suddenly and personally brought to light the presence of a twentieth century Hungarian politician and I found out that I had a personal link to Teleki, the organizer and head of the jamboree. This should not have affected what I had to say in this book or, at least, I hope that it had not.

Studying Teleki is made very difficult by the fact that there is no single collection of personal papers. According to some, it was the prime minister himself who destroyed the papers in 1938, while according to others, the papers kept at the monastery in Pannonhalma were burned by the abbot in the spring of 1945 when the Soviet authorities were asking for them. Thus, in the absence of internal documents, I had to study his life from the outside. I had to identify and find the individuals, organizations and establishments with whom Teleki had a relationship and had to use the documents thus examined to reconstruct Teleki's life and career. The research was just like the writing of a mystery novel. I wandered down a number of cul de sacs but the excitement of a number of unexpected discoveries was ample compensation. By using the widest possible base for sources and information, it was my goal to present a picture of Pál Teleki that was not a hagiography, a genre commonly used in works about him, yet did not show only the darker sides of his political life, a genre which has recently gained in popularity.

Biographies or biographical studies are, according to traditional historiographic theory, never of interest in and of themselves. A biography must raise questions and must list a series of "whys" and "hows" in order for the author to be able to answer his or her own questions. A biography of Pál Teleki makes this particularly difficult because his life cannot be confined within the boundaries of a narrow historical analysis. He was a politician but his life must be approached from a geographical, intellectual, educational, and even psychohistorical perspective. His biography is made much more interesting by demonstrating the influences and choices which guided his ascent in public life, what forces impacted him, how he networked and also, how he lived, how much he earned, and how he answered the telephone. I endeavored to satisfy many of these requirements but am aware of the fact that the results could fall far short of the expectations.

Writing about somebody's life is tempting providence.



Many people assisted me in my work but there are some who must be thanked quite particularly. It was my professor, Ignác Romsics, who

drew my attention to Teleki and who assisted my work for a number of years with much encouragement and careful pruning. He honored me by a careful and thoughtful reading of the text and by giving me valuable advice. The remaining errors are all mine. Another professor to whom I am very grateful is László Kósa who, from the beginning of my studies, observed and generously supported my researches. Without the help of my family all of this would have come to nothing and this book would never have seen the light of day without the assistance and support of my parents, my wife Zsófia and her parents. Professor András Gerő, the director of the Habsburg Institute in Budapest, most kindly encouraged the preparation of a version that would be translated into English. I am grateful for his help.