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The History of Kossuth Square

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PREFACE

There are many squares in Hungary named for Lajos Kossuth, including three in Budapest. One of these is usually referred to with a capital letter as “The” Kossuth Square. It is the square around the Parliament. Nobody confounds it with any other square by the same name. This book records the history of The Kossuth Square. Yet I must immediately correct this claim. This book deals with those human wishes and actions which shaped the importance of the square and filled it with a symbolic and spiritual content.

I have, therefore, aimed to describe the history of the square and interpret it in a fashion which allowed me to introduce and demonstrate the changing but ongoing human intentions and endeavors.

The dimensions of the narrative determine the various starting points of the story. In a physical-topographic sense the story begins in 1885 when the foundations for the Parliament building were laid down. In a symbolic sense the starting point is 1896. It was at that time that the first major political program was initiated here, even though the building had not been completed. In a spiritual sense the starting point is 1906. It was then that the first memorial was erected on the square. It was the Gyula Andrássy statue that has since been removed.

Not only the starting points differ but, I believe, that a similar difference exists in the end points as well. In a physical sense 1972 is the end of the story. This was when the last empty space on the square was filled. In a symbolic sense there is no end to the story. In a spiritual sense the end point is 2002 when the last monument on the square was dedicated.

The diverging threads of the story, the various starting and ending points and the never-ending progress of the square made it necessary to
present the square in its unique individuality and complexity. This was the only way to solve its strange and worldly mysticism.

The diverging dimensions demand that they be approached by varying methodologies. The historical interpretation of the events cannot be modeled according to the architectural evolution of the buildings. Description of the various monuments must differ from the collective approach taken toward the events.

Any approach toward such a complexity, in which the nature of the dimensions is so variable, cannot be adapted to a single theoretical framework. To use a descriptive narrative method would be absurd when relating the physical history of the square. Because of the context of the memorials a description according to the theoretical framework of memorial architecture would be of only limited value. The often widely divergent meanings of the events which have taken place in the square make it impossible to discuss them by trying to confine them to a theoretical construction. I attempted to resolve this problem by using expressive and relevant concepts. This might or perhaps does have theoretical criteria but which, dogmatically, are not threaded on a single theoretical scheme. To put it more simply, let me paraphrase some words of Mephistopheles from Goethe’s Faust: “Every theory is grey, and green is the golden tree” of history.

The square-centered approach in a number of dimensions raised some serious obstacles. What I wanted to say always had been constrained by the chosen program. I tried to indicate this in the text.

It is seemly in a preface to explain why this book was written. This is a personal matter and there are two reasons. In 1990 my book about Heroes’ Square was published in both English and German, under the titles of Heroes’ Square and Der Heldenplatz, and was published by Corvina in Budapest. Since that time I continued to think about the square because symbolic politics have become one of the major concerns of my scholarly endeavors. I knew in 1990 that the Kossuth Square had to be studied. The more I became involved in the history of symbolic politics the clearer it became that the history of the Kossuth Square should not and could not be avoided. I also realized that to date nobody had done this with any completeness.

Now then the square and I have met. On my part it is the realization of an old and fervent desire.
Even though I do not compare the two squares in this volume, I have to make a one-sentence comment. Both squares play a key role in Hungarian symbolic political history. Heroes’ Square has a national essentiality, which is interpreted politically, and which is a point of national grandeur and glory. In fact it is the altar of the nation. Kossuth Square has a power-political essence, which is placed in a national context. There are many other differences between the two squares, but the above is the most significant.

There was another reason for my interest in Kossuth Square. I will speak to this in the postscript of this volume.

* * *

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Special thanks are due to the officials of Studio 73, Ltd., landscape architects Sándor Mohácsi and Péter István Balogh, Sr., who advised me about the details of their prize-winning designs.

* * *

I sincerely hope that this book will provide a documented and reasoned explanation why Kossuth Square deserves its honorific adjectives and the elevated role and character in Hungarian culture which it had held and still holds.