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THE VITEZI REND CHIVALRY, FEUDALISM AND NOBILITY IN HUNGARY IN THE XX CENTURY

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During the history of the Carpathians, this geographic area was inhabited by about a hundred of different tribes, none of which succeeded in conquering and controlling for a long time the whole territory. The only exception where the Magiars, or Hungarians, which where able to conquer and reign on the whole region from 895 to the end of the 20th century.

Under the command of Prince Arpad the Magiars started the occupation of the Carpathians in 895 and in the year 900 they completed the quest. Large border areas of about 50-80 km towards the Austrian Alps at the east, along the right shore of the Sava river and the Danube to the south and towards the Carpathian mountains towards east and north-east remained fluid in its power structure, but the heartland, called Etelkoz, was never abandoned. This oriental Hungarian territory was hold until the Mongol invasions in the 13th century. Maps drawn at that time call it Cumenia Ungarica and its political organization by the Hungarians followed the conquest by Arpad in the years 895 to 900. After him the kings of the Arpad dynasty completed the colonization of the whole territory.

It is of historical evidence that both Avars and Huns, which held the territory for long times, have blood relationships with the Magiars of today. Contemporary documents report that around 870 a Hungarian speaking people, called «Szekelvek», took residence in Hungary with a large number of people. Documents attest furthermore that already during the Roman occupation of Transylvania (Eastern Hungary) and Pannonia (Western Hungary) Hungarian speaking tribes where present in the Carpathian area.

After the final conquest of the territory in the years 895-900, Arpad and his people held for 40 days an open assembly close to the river Tizta near Pusztaster, in order to formally found the Hungarian State. The assembly established rights and obligations of the Hungarian people and the Hungarian State had its formal origin.

In 907 the Franks rose an army of 100000 against Hungary in order to subdue or expel them from the carpathian territory, but Arpad with an army of only 40000 succeeded in repelling their attacks.

Arpad and his successors after this protected and defended successfully the Hungarians against their enemies. The grand-grandchild of Arpad, Geza, and his son Stephan, started a process of alliance with the Pope of Rome and sustained by missionary activity started a progressive conversion to Christianity.

In the year 1000 Stephan was incoronated as first King of Hungary by the Pope. Interestingly the Christian descendants of Arpad after 1000 called themselves «Kings of the House of Arpad», not accounting for the fact that legally they, with the christian coronation, became kings of their own right. On the other hand Rome continued considering them as a feudal dependency.

At the start of the «*New Hungarian Kingdom*» contrasts and rivalry dominated the royal succession.

Hungarian succession right privileges the oldest son in good health of the dominating family to inherit the throne. In contrast in western Europe the eldest son was elected son.

This difference has given space for quarries con contrasts in the interpretation among different pretenders.

Many called for the throne, and in fact several regnants died in unclear circumstances in young age. One must remember several outstanding kings, as St. Ladislaus, who united Croatia to the Hungarian Crown during his reign. Furthermore Coleman, remembered as a protector of the written word and books, Bela II called «the Blind», whose was blinded during St. Stephan's reign, Bela III the peaceloving, Andrew II under whose reign a bill of rights similar to the english «*Magna Charta*» was signed in 1229, just 7 years after the English document), Bela IV under whose reign th Hungarian suffered one of the worst disaster of their history, the Mongolian invasion by the Tatars, which raided, killed and burned everything on their path. This later king was so called the Second Founder of Hungary.

The House of Arpad came to an end in 1301 and the exact reasons are still under scholarly scrutiny; a new dynasty with a connection to the Arpads on the female side established itself and for about 200 years kings of mixed dynasties d on the Hungarian throne: Czech, Bavarian, Angioine and Habsburg.

Most where illuminated reigners and the prosperity of Hungary rose as in the Western European States.

With the passing of the Crown to the polish king Vladislaw Jagellone in 1440 the destiny of Hungary worsened. This notwithstanding Governor Jano Hunyadi, close to the young and not expert king, succeeded in battling the ever expanding Turks.

When the son of Hunyadi, Matthias the Just, was coronated King of Hungary, he succeeded in crashing down on ravaging corruption, controlling the work of public servants, sometimes even by person, introduced a general taxation scheme, rose a well trained standing army and over all managed to stop the Turk invasion at the southern borders of the country.

Unfortunately following his death (he probably was poisoned in his palace in Vienna by nobles upset by the general taxation), two more totally inept Jaghellonian kings gained sovereignty of Hungary.

Due to the Nobles' refusal to join the battle against the Turks, when these attacked Hungary in 1526, the Nation suffered a major defeat: more than 20000 Hungars died in few hours of combat.

The two nobles able to support the King, the Hungarian voivod of Transylvania and the ViceKing of Croatia did willingly delay their arrival at the battlefield. They were still at large when the notice that the King had fallen in the battle, arrived. There is testimony that the King was actually stabbed in the back by a kin of the Voivod of Transylvania Szapolyai, who ... for the Throne.

Following this Hungary was divided in three parts. The central one came under Turk rule, the oriental (Transylvania and Partia) were seized by Janos Szapolyai, the richest Hungarian feudal ruler. The western and northern part came under the rule of the Habsburg ruler Ferdinand II.

Under Turk domination the Hungarian population was systematically persecuted under Islamic law, by selling the males as slaves and sending the females as concubines to the harems, conducting to a close-to extinction of them in the Turk dominated lands.

In the meanwhile the Hungarian king preferred battling among themselves than the Turks.

Finally after 150 years, in the time from 1687 and 1700, the Habsburg rulers in agreement with other Christian nations and the surviving Hungarians – population fell to 2 million in the Turk dominated lands - succeeded in throwing out the Turks from Hungary.

The Kings reigning in Transylvania at the end of the seventeenth century had abdicated in favour of the Habsburg, whose reign did so extend to two third of Hungary. After the defeat of the Turks, their power covered the whole country.

The new sovereigns considered Hungary a colonial property and used it for resources as minerals, coal, wood and agriculture, and over all soldiers for their armies, to be sent to battle and die for the Habsburg interests in Western Europe.

When the Hungarians realized to have passed from the domination of the Turks to the domination of the Habsburgs, they staged a popular rebellion in 1848 against the Austrian Emperor.

While having the Habsburgs one of the most powerful armies in Europe, the popular enthusiasm was so powerful in the uprising to succeed in winning this military power.

Upset by the defeat, the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph called for the Zar of Russia and by joining power they reversed the military situation winning the originally victorious Hungarian Army in October 1848. Austrian revenge was horrible on the Hungarians. Many were executed, among them 13 generals and the Prime Minister of Hungary. Many went to prison or had to flee the country. As retribution the Habsburgs declared the German language as obligatory in all the Country.

About 20 years of work by the fervent patriot Ferenc Deák and his associates was necessary to stop Austrian violence and bring the King of Hungary to terms with his people, introducing a parliamentary democracy in 1867. This Charter was followed by what is called the «Golden Era» of Hungary and its population, with work opportunities, creation of resources and rising general prosperity.

Unfortunately this happy period did last less than 50 years. Under the influence of the ever rising Russian power and will of expansion, the Serbs planned and realized the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo in 1914.

Unregarding the historical fact that the Serbs were responsible for planning and performing the assassination, after the First World War the Hungarian were held responsible for the war's outbreak.

This to favor both the winning allied powers as the Russians and their allies, two of which were not even existing at the war's outbreak, as are Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, for their collaboration. Hungary was punished without any fault, just because of its status as being close to the losing states.

During second World War Hungary was compelled to participate in the war, not having other way of behaving left. After the war the Allied Powers and Soviet Union repeated the errors of the Versailles and specifically Trianon Treaties after World War One.

Worse even, Hungary was in the oriental part of Europe, over which Jalta had given free hand to the Soviet Union, and so it became victim to the worse oppression the Hungarian people ever experienced.

This led in 1956 to a fierce and deep rooted uprising, which was dramatically militarily crushed by the Soviets with the guilty silence or even applause by western communist leaders and maintenance of the Jalta-doctrine no intervention scheme agreed upon by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin.

The change in power in the years 1989-1990 did not have an immediate effect, as secret agreements secured to the communist establishment a substantial power until their death.

Hungary must so rely on a totally new generation of new and dynamic leaders, grown in world of free expression of their opinions and able to stand up in an ever-changing European political landscape.

With this it is particularly necessary to foster and education that respects typically Hungarian traditions and lifestyles, the knowledge of its history and its language, which survive against all odds during many centuries and must be protected now against forces of massification, so that Hungarian identity can be preserved in the future.

GENERAL FACTS

While being the Order of Vitéz an Order of relatively recent foundation in 1920, due to its structure and the parsimony of conferments, it has always been one of the most yearned for Orders, specially by the Military. In fact it has always had typical military connotations, its highest authority is called Capitan General (Főkapitány).

The Order does not confer the title of Knight, but that of Vitéz, a word from ancient Hungarian vocabulary that holds several substantial meanings: warrior, soldier, champion, hero, knight; and attributes: men of value, heroic, without fear, resisting all danger.

For this a simple translation for the Order's name is not easy.

But the Vitézi Rend has the singular character to confer a specific attribute, an honour in other times equal to a nobilitation, on its recipient, being furthermore hereditary and linked to the land, as a landed nobility.

The basic concept of the Vitéz Order is given by the millenarian history of Hungary and its roof date back to the first period of national evolution. Form the reign of the first Christian king Saint Stephan upwards, Hungarian kings used always to reward deeps of bravery with concession of nobility and land.

The Vitéz Order has maintained a relatively democratic structure since it's foundation, as everybody who embodied the said requirements of bravery and honour could become a member, without distinction of origin, religion or social standing. All had the same rights, all used the same distinctive badge.

Vitéz Order is bestowed only to Hungarian nationals, foreigners can receive it as a honorary title.

At the time of the Angiò the spirit of chivalry gained great prestige and in the Middle Ages being a Knight was considered the highest secular honour. A knight was seen as the protector of the widows and the orphans, an outstanding member of the kingdom and trusted supporter of King and Truth, protector of the Faith.

The principle of land ownership related to military bravery developed during time.

After World War One Hungary was a defeated country: lost the war communists tried to come to power, Romania intrigued to put itself in charge of government and Hungary was forced to sign the severely punitive Trianon treaty. Admiral Miklòs Horthy de Nagybányai succeeded to be nominated the «Regent» of Hungary —which remained formally a monarchy— in 1920. This created a generally favourable situation to create a new Order which could celebrate the heroes of the lost war and would sustain and foster the reconstruction of national pride, which was severely battered by the loss of the war.

The «order of the Brave» (in Hungarian «Vitézi Rend»), also said «Knighthood of the Heroes», was the first and probably most important order created after the Great War, with the State Order n. 6650/1920 seating as Prime Minister Count Teleki and Head of State the Admiral Horthy, Regent of Hungary from 1920 to 1945. Horthy sea-

ted also as Captain of the Order from its foundation to its formal closure in 1945 (the communist government law 529/1945 de facto dismembered the Order).

THE VITÉZ TITLE, THE «NOBILITY BY HONOUR» AND THE ASSIGNMENT OF LAND

The title of *Vitéz* was linked to the Order, this is still used today before the family name of the recipient, considering the Hungarian custom to cite the family name first and the Christian name last. The title was hereditary for the eldest son, which inherited the title, if physically and mentally sane, at age 17.

The Order showed characteristics similar to an hereditary order, similar to a nobility title or a feudal title, as it came with the concession of close to 10 hectares of land, creating a landed nobility, as used in feudal times.

The assignment of land was part of an agricultural reform performed by *István Nagyatádi Szabo*. In early 1920 most land was still in the hands of few large landlords, the reform was part of a project to modernize landownership as Hungary has an extreme need to evolve towards a more equilibrated and modern nation.

The Order had also a social impact in this way; land redistribution was linked to deeds of bravery simple individuals had performed for Hungary, as stated in the diploma of the Order: «*Symbol of eternal gratitude by the Land of Our Fathers*».

This land reform was directly connected to the Order, but its realization resulted quite difficult. As the Order by itself did not own land, the possibility to assign landownership to its members depended on donations, which came mostly from large landlords (*latifundium*) and state property. This land could than be assigned to the eligible members.

In principle every *Vitéz* was eligible to the assignment of 10 hectares of land.

Practically close to 5500 *Vitéz* actually received their land, total assignments where about 80000 hectares.

This concessions where stated in the large diploma, which, due to the low number of actual assignments, are very rare at this day. *Vitéz* rules stated that the house erected on a member's land, should sport a visible *Vitéz* emblem on it, to state that it's owner was a legitimate *Vitéz* Order Member. This *Vitéz* emblems where generally realized in Ceramic and where used by many members.

In this way a new social class was created (the elite of heroes), which was hereditary and therefore build up a strong liaison to the Hungarian nation and its national authorities.

The new Order was linked to the sword and the soil, as represented with the symbols of the Order's badge.

All destinataries where heroic soldiers which complied with the requirements of the conferment of the Order, and received specific medals.

At its start the Order was linked to the medals of the Habsburg Empire, obtained during the Great War, which had finished only two years before.

Concessions during the forties were linked to decorations of the Second World War, requirements remained overall the same in these periods.

These decorations were the small silver medal for bravery in case of enlisted men (96000 awarded to Hungarians during the First World War) and the large silver medal for bravery for NCO (26000 awarded to Hungarians during First World War).

The «*Signum Laudis*» was given from the grade of Lieutenant and from that on higher grades where awarded with higher medals. The small silver medal for bravery rarely got its recipient any title by itself, as it was awarded to too large a number of persons, and can be considered a minimum requirement.

This procedure made it possible to give recognition to exceptional acts of bravery also to man which fought in an army and for a country which unfortunately lost the war.

The Order was awarded during a large annual ceremony by the Regent Admiral Horthy himself. The ceremony took place at Székesfehérvár, the town where the first Hungarian kings were buried. In fact the ceremony was held at the ruins of the original church where the ancient coronations had been performed,; a place of high symbolic value.

Investiture was performed with a sword specially crafted for the ceremony, which is nowadays preserved in the Hungarian Military Museum of Budapest.

VITÉZ AFTER 1945

With the treaties signed during and after World War II the allies assigned Hungary to the Soviet influence area. Under this foreign regime, hostile to the idea of Nation, the Order of Vitéz could not maintain a relevant role in Hungary.

Nicholas Horthy was forbidden by the allied powers to engage in any political activity, a request he honoured also during his exile in Portugal. Anyway through his many documents written at that time it is known that he continued to foster the conservation and role of the Order. Following his moral and spiritual heredity, after his death in 1957 the members living in exile in the West became active to assure the survival and the activities in the Western free countries of the Order. They invited H.R.H. Fieldmarshal Archduke József, who was elected the first Vitéz on August 21st, 1921 and was living in Western Germany after the war, to preside a general election and to call for a Legislative Assembly of the Order of Vitéz. This Assembly is known as the «Council of the Vitéz Order». After preparatory work in the years 1958-59 the Council met and elected H.R.-I.H. Archduke József as the second Captain General of the Order.

H.R.-I.H. Field-marshal József, in order to secure a document attesting on scientific base the validity also of the bestowments done in exile, called on the International Commission for Orders of Chivalry, the most important international organ in establishing the validity of knightly orders or institutions.

The Commission, seating under the Presidency of Baron Alessandro Monti della Corte, determined the validity of the Vitézi Rend and in 1964 it was inserted in the International Register of Chivalric Orders, assigning it to the «Semi-Independent Orders». The publication was distributed widely to all Chivalric Orders and Member States of UNESCO.

This classification was maintained until 2001, when under the suggestion of the new ICOC President and Chairman Dr. Pierfelice degli Uberti a new edition of the Register was released, which inserted the Vitézi Rend in the chapter of «Other Institutions of Knightly Character» in the section dedicated to the «Successors of knightly institutions founded originally under the sovereignty of a State», giving it a proper classification.

As its «power of high protection» Vitéz recognizes the «Sacred Crown of Hungary».

After this facts the Order has shown a new and important period of expansion not only in Hungary but also abroad, in all parts of the world. In Italy the Order is present since 2006 and the first official Ceremony was held in Casale Monferrato under the patronage of S.A.R. prince Jozsef Arpad. Worth of mention is the ever rising number of new admissions of persons which have given proof of courage and bravery in front of mortal danger in the quest for freedom during the national uprising in 1956.

Among the Italians members of the Order one must remember Baron Alessandro Monti della Corte, first President of the International Permanent Commission for the Study of Orders of Chivalry (who started the tradition for all ICOC Presidents to be member of the Order) and the Noble Bali don Achille di Lorenzo (1909-2000), who acted for several decades as Cancellor of the Constantinian Order of Saint George of Naples and Maggiordomo Maggiore of the Real House of the Two Sicilies, nominated by H.R.H. don Ranieri, Duke of Castro.

After the death of the second Captain General of the Order, H.R.H. Field marshal Jòzsef (1872.1962), the Council of the Order elected General Ferenc Farkas de Kisbarnaki, the heroic defender of the Tatar pass in Second World War, Chief Scout and organizer of the the Mondial Eucharistic Congress of 1938. At his resignation at age 85, the Council elected as his successor and fourth Captain General of the Order the grandchild of Field-marshal Jozsef, H.R.-I.H. Archduke Jòzsef Arpad in 1977.

Today there are about one thousand members of the Order.

THE ORDER'S BADGE

The symbol of the Vitézi Rend is a badge, worn to symbolize openly the membership in the Order, and is called vitézi jelvény (decoration of the heroes/knights).

The Vitézi Jelvény was designed after a public tender, won by Szilazi Jozsef on February 6th, 1920.

The badge sports the national Hungarian crest topped by St.Stephan's crown with it's cross tipped to one side. It is surrounded by oak leaves on the left and ears of wheat

on the right and put on a light blue background and completed by a white sun on the upper part. An upward oriented sword divides the image vertically. The symbols of war, bravery, land and the Hungarian nation form a perfect union with the founding thoughts of the Order. The badge is assembled from three parts, the sky-blue background being the base. The Hungarian national emblem forms the central part and the sword is put on top of them.

The badge shows the specifically Hungarian points as used in most Hungarian uniform ribbons and orders. It was fixed to the uniform in a fashion to make it easy to attach and removed it without damaging the uniform. On the military uniform the badge was always worn on the right side, at breast level.

DOCUMENTS OF THE ORDER

The Order was awarded with two main official documents. The first one was the Grand Diploma (Oklevél in Hungarian), on which only name, rank and date of conferment of the title were written. Originally it was used to have the diploma framed with special gilded frames, which bore the sword at the bottom and the Order's emblem at the top. The second certificate (Igazolvány in Hungarian) was to formally certify the right to war title and badge, and on it was also written the registration number.

When land was given to a Vitéz, a third document of great dimension and generally already framed was given to the recipient.

The Order has also a significant social function as there were several meeting occasions, as an annual Ball. Order Houses were erected and in some cases schools were named after it.

VITÉZ CROSS

Between the First and Second World War a Vitéz Ring was awarded as the highest possible distinction, this is nowadays obsolete. Between 1997 and 1998 the «Cross of Vitéz» was established in order to honour the most eminent and exceptional merits acquired by a Vitéz. This is now the highest honour inside the Vitéz Order and has been awarded at this time to 11 persons only.

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