

Dr. Berki Imre: Gróf Széchenyi Ödön élete és munkássága **Dr. Imre Berki: The life and work of Count Ödön Széchenyi**

The first decades

Count Ödön Széchenyi, the second son of István Széchenyi „The Greatest Hungarian” and Countess Crescence Seilern, was born on December 14, 1839 in Bratislava (Pozsony). His grandfather was Ferenc Széchenyi, founder of the National Museum. His father, István Széchenyi was the most important personality of the liberal reform movement started in the first half of the 19th century, he was also the founder and member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He initiated the building of Chain Bridge (Lánchíd), the start of steam boating in Hungary and the channeling of Danube and Tisza was also promoted by him. His brother Béla, 2 years older than him, was a famous traveler and the honorary member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

He lived in Nagycenk, his education was conform with his social background, *„He is an unruly boy, there are many problems with his education [...] still his parents spoil him. He is tending towards eccentricities [...] there was no one who could restrain him.* He studied in Sopron and in his family home in Nagycenk. He fluently spoke in French, German, English, Italian, Turkish, and he knew Latin and Greek languages also. From the age of 8 his father was not beside him, at the fall of the revolution he was only nine years old. He often visited his father in the Döbling hospital. His father called and kept his attention on sports. For his father’s advice he travelled a lot to see the world. His father wrote in one of his letters: *„Ödön wants to be a sailor! I don’t mind. What else who could be! Of Kossuth realizes this, he will be glad that his practical encouragement „Go to the sea, Hungarian!” had an effect on my son, too.”*¹

From his young age he often made longer and shorter trips in Europe in order to get acquainted with the culture of the different countries. It is apparent from his early years that he had an excellent technical sense, that he was very interested in novelties, especially in sailing and in engineering. He wanted to be excellent in everything, worthy to the son of „The Greatest Hungarian”². The family background defined Ödön Széchenyi’s whole life and his activity.

The period of reflection. Community involvement, patriotic enterprises

Ödön Széchenyi, following the example of his ancestors sought to use his wealth and talent for the sake of his homeland. Between 1871 and 1872 he was a Member of Parliament and also started progressive enterprises in order to develop the national economy and to substitute the nation’s wealth.

He moved to Pest in 1861 after his father’s death (April 8, 1860). The restless young man seeking for adventures stepped into public life continuing his father’s activity. But that age did not favour the son of „The Greatest Hungarian” as he was considered a rebel, all his movements and travels were followed by the secret police, and they tried to blacken him. Many of his

¹ Széchenyi István 1858. október 25-én Döblingből, Tasner Antalhoz írt leveléből.²

Kocsis Piroska: Gróf Széchenyi Ödön, a magyar mágnás és a török főúr Archívnet [14. évfolyam \(2014\) 6. szám](#)

contemporaries did not understand him and did not appreciate his efforts³, so he participated actively in several organizations and associations.

Among other things, he participated in the creation of the First Hungarian Travelling Association (Első Magyar Utazási Társaság) which promoted the facilitation and spread of travelling abroad, as well as in the formation of the Boating Association of Buda-Pest (Buda-Pesti Hajós Egylet) which goal was the propagation of rowing. In 1862 he rowed in his boat Sympathy from the Bavarian Vilshofen to Pest, in the first phase alone and from Linz with József Kele.

He inherited his interest in sport from his father. He was one of the leaders of the National Boating Association (Nemzeti Hajóegylet) which grew out of „Csónakda”, in the beginning he was also competing as a rower. Later on he was a main organizer of competitions and balls, he even composed music to propagate this sport. Rózsavölgyi and Co. published his pieces of music: Mermaid’s polka, Boating Association’s polka, Regatta quartet, Katinka Waltz etc.

Between 1861 and 1863, he participated in five organizations and associations. He was the founder, stockholder or donator of the Boating Association of Buda-Pest (Buda-Pesti Hajós Egylet), the Association of Commerce and Industry (Kereskedelmi és Iparegylet), the Public Theater of Buda (Budai Népszínház) and other economic and cultural institutions.

He could not secede from the thought to connect Europe by waterway with the Atlantic Ocean, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. He succeeded and during the spring of 1867 he arrived to Paris on his steam-boat (planned by him) through the rivers Danube, Main, Rhine and Seine. For his enterprise he got from Napoleon III the Medal of Honor, and his boat named Mermaid received a gold medal in the World Expo of Paris.

Returning home from the World Expo, during the same year he made a petition about building a device on the Castle Hill similar to the elevator seen in Paris. The Association of the Mountain Path of Buda (Budai Hegypálya Társulat) opened on March 2, 1870, the funicular on the Castle Hill in Buda. The height difference of the 100 meter long, double tracked rail planned by Henrik Wohllart, was 48 meter and had an elevation of 30 degrees. It was driven by a 35-horsepower steam engine.

In 1867 he participated in the foundation the Hungarian-Swiss Machine Factory Co. (Magyar Svájci Gépgyár Rt.) which was the base for the later MÁVAG factory, and in 1868 he took part of the establishment of the Újpesti Boat Factory (Újpesti Hajógyár).

In 1868 he also founded the First Hungarian Hotel Co. (Első Magyar Szálloda Rt.). As a result three years later the exclusive Grand Hotel Hungaria was inaugurated on the bank of the Danube. At that time it was the most luxurious hotel of Europe. (Later he sold his stocks due to his deteriorated financial situation.) He built a three-story hotel and coffee-bar on the plot situated in Fő street 72-73, owned by his wife Irma Almay. The Hotel Széchenyi was opened in 1870 (later it became Hotel Fiume situated in Lánchíd street 12).

The rack railway of Budapest was also built on the base of his ideas in 1873.

He had several plans which have not been realized like creating steam-engine city railway instead of the horsecar, establishment of a steam-engine ferry at Tétény and between Óbuda

³ Kocsis Piroska: Széchenyi Ödön, a „tűzpassa” Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár <http://mnl.gov.hu/print/8282>

and Újpest, propagating city billboards, building night asylums and flophouses, foundation of private telegraph offices, all of which aimed the introduction of progressive institutions.

From the baptism of fire to the professional qualification

The relationship between Ödön Széchenyi and firefighting began in the early 1860's: on September 2, 1860 first in his own village, Nagycenk, then in Fertőszentmiklós he participated in the firefighting and got through the baptism of fire. He experienced the lack of professional firefighting in his own surroundings, as well as its annoying, sometimes tragic consequences⁴.

„In Nagy-Czenk a fire broke out on the 2nd of this month which burnt 8 houses and farm buildings. One of the sons of the great István Széchenyi, Ödön (as Béla was not at home) together with Count Géza Zichy immediately run to the place of disaster, and these noble-hearted counts were the first to fight the fire, in such a way the Count Ödön Széchenyi's clothes began to burn on his body, they immediately acted to alleviate the misery of the poor victims. – The same day another fire broke out in Fertő-Szent-Miklós which caused the destruction of 98 houses. The noble Count Ödön immediately appeared also here, the day after he sent bread to the starving people!”⁵

In 1862, after Count János Waldstein⁶ stepped back, the Hungarian Court Chancellery assigned him as a government commissioner of the third World Expo held in London. As a government commissioner he committed everything in order to place the Hungarian exhibits „in a place compliant to the dignity of the nation”. He achieved that the exhibits were put „in a conspicuous place”, in two exhibition courts which were decorated with Hungarian flags with „Hungary” labels on them, thus propagating „our national independence”. During his five-week long stay in London he got acquainted with the world-famous local firefighting organization, the „Fire Brigade”⁷ and reported for duty having the best references in order to learn practical firefighting knowledge.⁸

The English firefighting was surprised by the enterprise of the young and rich Hungarian magnate and let him join the firefighting organization. Shaw Eyre Massey who was a commander with great knowledge and expertise, and who is known of the introduction of the

⁴ Lindner Gyula: Széchenyi Ödön, a magyar és a török tűzoltóság megszervezője Belügyi Szemle 2020. sajtó alatt

⁵ *Pesti Hírnök*, 1860. szeptember 11.

⁶ Dr. Count János Nepomuk Waldstein-Wartenberg (Nagymegyér, August 21, 1809. – Vienna, June 3, 1876) doctor of philosophy and legal affairs, art collector, imperial and royal chamberlain and secret counselor, director-member of the Hungarian Academy of Science.

⁷ The organization of the firefighting in London began in the second half of the 18th century. In 1830's 10 fire insurance companies financed their activity, and during the World Expo of London it functions already with 130 firefighters. Their Commander, Shaw Eyre Massey took over the leadership of the London firefighting in September 1861, from Commander James Braidwood who died one year earlier during a fire.

⁸ Regarding Ödön Széchenyi's life see Roncsik, 1938.

famous „bronze helmet” and of the iron curtain still used in the theatres, had no regard for the Count’s origin and his aristocratic English contacts. He made him done the most difficult and tiring jobs, thus Széchenyi carried, cleaned and greased with fish-fat the hoses and did maintenance tasks in such a way that *“it caused him a back-ache”* and *“his palms were callused”*. The Count passed the test, with his performance, resolution, enthusiasm and kind manner he endeared himself and gained not only the Commander’s appreciation but that of the officers, as well as the respect of the firefighters.

During his stay in London, Ödön Széchenyi learnt the different practices of the firefighting profession, got acquainted with the organizational structure of firefighting, the various elements of training and the most modern firefighting techniques.

In his free-time he lived a very busy social life, he was a personal friend of the Prince of Wales, the later Edward VII. He was invited for lunch by the nobility of London, for example by Lord Palmerston Prime Minister. The Prime Minister and the English peers could not stop to praise his persistent and unflagging diligence and work, they expressed their acknowledgement as they knew that he is *„learning and working for the sake of his homeland”*.

It’s not by chance that he wrote in a letter to his brother in June 1862, that he brings with himself several books which can help in the organization of the Hungarian firefighting, adding that *„my goal is elaborate a plan of a firefighting association”*. Moreover he stopped in several French and German cities during his trip back to Hungary, in order to study their fire-protection rules and the local firefighting’s situation.

The organization of the Capital’s firefighting

Back at home, Széchenyi threw himself feverishly into the organization of firefighting in Hungary. In December 1862, he confers about the social profit of firefighting organizations and the necessity of voluntary firefighting associations on the pages of *Pesti Napló (Pest Daily)*. As he writes: *„In the cultured countries well organized firefighting institutions are expecting the evil flames [...] here in Pest – in the capital – despite the nice numbers of firefighting equipment, there is such a lack of preparedness and handling that the foundation of a reasonable and organized firefighting association is of main necessity”*.

In the same year the fame of the young Count’s organizational activity reached the celebrated author of that age, namely to Mór Jókai, too. Jókai wrote the following on December 7 in *Magyar Sajtó (Hungarian Press)* in the column *„Today’s story”*: *„Count Ödön Széchenyi founds a firefighting association in the capital. It is desired that this kind of institution be realized even in the smallest village of our homeland. This is not a parade invented by someone bored to have fun: the organization of firefighting is a real, exigent necessity in our country.”*

He summoned a meeting for December 16, 1862, to discuss the draft about the organization of a firefighting institution, he founded an organizational committee with 12 members, and from the beginning of the next year he organized a collection for the benefit of the future firefighting association.⁹ Thanks to Széchenyi’s good connections, a significant sum has been gathered. The French author Alexander Dumas, friend of Count Sándor Teleki, while staying in Hungary

⁹ Széchenyi szervezőmunkájához és a pesti tűzoltóság első éveihöz ld. Szilágyi et al., 1986, 171–187; Heizler, 2019, 15–30.

for some weeks in 1865, also donated 110 francs for the organization of firefighting, and this was gallantly rewarded by the Count presenting him a decorative sword.¹⁰¹¹

Beside the organizational activities, Széchenyi devoted time to writing also, in 1864 his work of 64 pages was published only once by Mór Ráth with the title: *Experiences about firefighting. Commended by Count Ödön Széchenyi to the attention of counties, villages and especially to the firefighting associations forming in these places*". This is the first Hungarian professional firefighting publication which examines systematically the technical and structural questions of firefighting, and which was snapped up after its publication.

Alajos Follman also joined to the theoretical activity, together with him he published a study on the structural framework of firefighting.

The Board of Governors refused in 1864 the draft of firefighting statutes handed in during 1863. The reason of the refusal was the non-transparent and complicated organizational structure of the firefighting association (the founders imagined a band of officers of almost 50 persons!), or at least this was the expressed reason by the politicians. But a political distrust can be suspected about the decision.

After this the Chancellery approved the request in 1865: "*it is approved that he can found with his co-founders the planned firefighting association in Pest-Buda*".

The Council of Pest city made a decision in the case „*Count Ödön Széchenyi contra Elek Thaisz Chief Constable*” which then lasted for more than three years, on October 18, 1866, and which was started because of the 1st § of the statute of the voluntary firefighting association. The Chief Constable of Pest, Elek Thaisz objected the 1st § of the statute of the voluntary firefighting association. In his opinion the Chief Constable had the right to decide upon firefighting technical issues – that is to say in clearly professional questions – in case of a fire, even overruling the decisions of the firefighting commander, in this case those made by Ödön Széchenyi. Finally, a bridging solution was made, according to which the voluntary firefighting association and its commanders were obliged to fulfill the orders of the Chief Constable or his assignees, but in respect of firefighting technical issues only the firefighting commander and his deputies could act. Thaisz appealed even this decision, and only his replacement put an end to this story.

Even though the license itself did not mean the of the difficulties: in the beginning the firefighting association was merged with the Association of Gymnastics of Budapest due to the lack of members, and functioned under the name of National Gymnastics and Firefighting Association. This was usual in other places also, in several European cities the firefighters and the gymnasts cooperated.

In December 1867, on the first official meeting of the firefighting association, Alajos Follmann, royal district judge mentioned French, English and German examples in order to strengthen his mentioned plan which were accepted by the members. Even though the merge of the two associations was not a good idea. Due to the common financing, the common presidency and

¹⁰ Birkás, 1936, 138.

¹¹ Lindner Gyula: Széchenyi Ödön, a magyar és a török tűzoltóság megszervezője Belügyi Szemle 2020. sajtó alatt

the unseparated competences, many problems and conflicts emerged which complicated the cooperation, as it used to happen in these cases.¹²

In order to propagate the idea of firefighting, he presented a manual firefighting tool in 1868, on the square in front of the poorhouse. The success of it contributed to gaining the sympathy of the public and to defeat the unconcern and the lack of understanding. The Count's perseverance spread nationwide, thus voluntary firefighting associations were formed one after the other in the countryside.

In the General Assembly held in October 1869, the firefighters appeared already in uniform. With the Count's leadership the command elaborated the statute of the National Gymnastics and Firefighting Association, they applied for the assignment and transfer of the watchtower to the Council of Pest city, and then they put in place the practicing master's position and began the training with the firefighting engine bought in London.

The first fire guard of Pest

The firefighter saw that they are pushed into the background in the National Gymnastics and Firefighting Association at the usage of the income, so they seceded in 1870.

It is true that the statute of the voluntary firefighting was accepted in 1866, but Széchenyi managed to train his team by 1869. They built a climbing tower on the plot of the gymnastics association, and they practiced the assembly on the two English fire hoses bought by the Count on Sundays and other holidays, or in the morning before worships, in the evening after thanksgiving, thus as a result of the training they became apt to serve as firefighters.

The first voluntary fire guard of Pest began to function on January 9, 1870 on Eskü square (today March 15 square) with one commander and 8 firefighters. The first guard of firefighters was situated at the Pest bridgehead of Elizabeth Bridge. Three shops and the doorway of the downtown's church gave place to the commander's office, the barracks and the shed. They had no courtyard, their barn situated in the cellar was flooded whenever the Danube's water level was high. These musty rooms gave home for 24 years to the first guard. The equipment was stored and cleaned on the street, they washed the hoses in the Danube thanks to the fishermen who provided their boats for free.

The firefighters stayed in the basement floor from 9 pm till 5 am, during daytime they dealt with their civil jobs, thus they could not undertake the permanent service.

In case of a fire the „hose leader” blew on his shrilly musical instrument the signs of his own district all along his march to the place of the disaster, and when the members heard it, they had to run to the location of the disaster. Lining up they fulfilled the commander's or his deputy's orders the most rapidly possible.

On January 4, 1870, Waldemár Krause, a voluntary gymnast and firefighter sergeant from Leipzig was assigned by the suggestion of the General Commander for the leading of the team that is as a commander, with the title of fire inspector.

¹² Lindner Gyula: Széchenyi Ödön, a magyar és a török tűzoltóság megszervezője Belügyi Szemle 2020. sajtó alatt

Foundation of the professional firefighting

Although he was for the organization of voluntary firefighting, he soon realized that it was not sustainable as alone it was able to attend the permanent fire guarding tasks. As a consequence he suggested the foundation of the paid city firefighting unit already in 1869.

On February 1, 1870, the capital's professional firefighting unit was created by 12 persons with the unanimous support of the city council. It was located in the building on Eskü Square, the General Commander was Ödön Széchenyi (he was the elected leader of the voluntary association, and the assigned one of the professional one).

The city firefighters gave a permanent service which means they were on duty night and day. He raised their team by four persons already in March, 1870. Moreover a second guard was raised on March 23 – in Ferencváros on the corner of Nyúl and Oroszlán streets, in the former store of the finance office – by 13 persons. The General Commander reported to the council the accomplishment of the training of this group of 28 on April 20.

It did not take long before the first big fire broke out in the life of the young firefighting unit. On April 22, 1870, at 3 am. the gong banging of the tower guards signaled that there is a fire in Óbuda. The spirit factory was on fire, both the city's and the voluntary firefighting units went to stop the fire. Thanks to their successful activity only the boiler room burnt down, the rest of the factory's buildings were saved. The authority's appreciation was shown by its permission to establish the third fire guard which initiated its activity on September 15, 1870, on Kerepesi Street in front of Népszínház (Public Theatre) in the building of the former civil department of weights and measures, with 14 persons, one hose – which was the first Hungarian product made in Ferenc Walser's Budapest factory – and with one tanker and four horses.

At the end of 1870 the firefighting unit reported about 63 fire cases.¹³

The foundation of the Hungarian National Firefighter Association

The idea of founding the National Firefighter Association started in the countryside¹⁴, as the birth of this thought came from leader of Sopron's firefighting organization. While Count Ödön Széchenyi was working on the establishment of the capital's firefighting and on removing all the obstacles from its way, the already functioning associations of the countryside were dealing with the idea of joining together in one association. The propagator and the main figure of the organization was Frigyes Rösch, a gymnastics teacher who was the commander of volunteers in Sopron. Already in 1869 he sent a petition to the Minister of Internal Affairs suggesting the foundation of the association, the support of firefighting by the local authorities and the subsidy of firefighting units by fire insurance companies.

¹³ Minárovics János: A fővárosi tűzoltóság története (history of the capital's firefighting). <https://fovaros.katasztrofavedelem.hu/26048/a-kezdet>

¹⁴ Markusovszky Béla: Magyar Országos Tűzoltó Szövetség története. I. rész. (1st chapter of The history of Hungarian National Firefighter Association) Az első két évtized (1870-1890) története (The history of the first two decades (1870-1890)). (Budapest, 1911. ifj. Kellner Ernő nyomdájának a betűivel. 4. oldal. (from the print house of Ernő Kellner jr., page 4)

The lack of the state's support about the raised idea was not dissuasive. Frigyes Rösch elaborated the draft of the statute with his colleagues, moreover they agreed in the timing of the inaugural session which was October 31, 1870. The firefighters of Pest did not agree in the beginning with the foundation of the association, they considered it too early, and they did not want to participate in the inaugural session. But Count Széchenyi realized that it would be very disadvantageous for the capital, he also saw that with the ones of Pest and Buda the association would be stronger and placing the association's venue in the capital could serve the firefighting issues more fruitfully. Finally, an agreement was reached: the place of the inaugural session would be Pest and the date of it December 5, 1870.

In the inaugural session 52 representatives of 17 association participated: 1. Debrecen College (around 1650), 2. Arad (1834), 3. Pest-Buda steam mill, 4. Sopron (1866), 5. Nagyvárád (1867), 6. Bratislava (1867), 7. Temesvár (1868), 8. Nagyszombat (1868), 9. Varasd (1868), 10. Esztergom (1868), 11. Pest voluntary (1869), 12. Nyitra (1869), 13. Pécs (1870), 14. Pest City (1870), 15. Zagreb (1870), 16. Kosice (1870), 17. Békésgyula (1870).¹⁵

In the inaugural session it was stated that: „*in order to propagate the noble idea and to forward more successfully this noble issue, as well as to represent the whole community of the firefighters, a national organization is needed*”. Széchenyi was elected as the first president of the association.

The firefighters' dream came true with the foundation of the Hungarian National Firefighter Association.

The founders of the association stated the goals as it follows: to represent the interests of firefighters to the parliament, the government and the authorities; to forward the firefighters' complaints, wishes and demand to the same; to gather and handle statistical data about the situation of fire protection; to elaborate and to publish reports; to develop fire protection and the theoretical and practical questions of firefighting; to remove any obstacles from the way of the above mentioned; to train firefighters. The draft of the statute voted in the inaugural session was sent to the Minister of Internal Affairs, the clause of approval was signed by Károly Zeyk, Secretary on September 12, 1870.

From that date our firefighters could unite their methods and by organizing competitions they could improve their expertise, and considering that the saying of the association had more power than that of the municipalities which skimmed on fire protection expenditure, they were able to push the purchasing of modern equipment.¹⁶

¹⁵ Dr. vitéz Roncsik Jenő: A Magyar Országos Tűzoltó Szövetség hatvanéves története 1870-1930 (The 60 years history of the Hungarian National Firefighter Association 1870-1930. (City print, Debrecen 1935. page 17)

¹⁶ Bogdán István: Régi magyar mesterségek (Ancient Hungarian crafts (Budapest, Neumann Kht. 2006. Part 30: A vörös kakas szelidítése (Taming the red cock). A tűzoltómesterség (The profession of firefighting).

Széchenyi leading the capital's firefighting

In the background of the firefighters' day organized also in our present days there is the logic to propagate the firefighters' work, the different elements of their training, the technical details of firefighting etc. The base of this „social activity” that is to say to strengthen the position of firefighting in the society was laid down by Ödön Széchenyi. In May 1871, during a grandiose firefighting festival he tried to present by the participation of the firefighters trained in the previous year, what a firefighter does, how and in which cases and with which tools they act to help the public.¹⁷

Széchenyi, as General Commander was present at almost all the fire cases, and with his presence he motivated the firefighters for a more intense activity. From among the fire cases the fire of the National Theatre's scenery-store on September 13, 1871, must be mentioned when the firefighters could save the theatre's building and its wardrobe only by their heroic work. Several firefighters were injured, among them Count Elemér Batthyány who was hit by a burned timber and his hand was also burned. The Prime Minister, Count Gyula Andrassy went to the plot and he personally saw the firefighters' self-sacrificing work. The actors organized a performance of gratitude for the honor of the firefighters – they played *The Notary of Peleske* – and they donated the half of the income to the association.

The fame of the firefighters' self-sacrificing work got to the king who decorated Széchenyi with the Knight's Cross of the Order of Leopold, as Prime Minister, Count Gyula Andrassy said “*acknowledging the promotion of public interests, especially his zealous and successful activity in the field of firefighting*”. The king decorated the voluntary firefighters of Pest, namely Waldemar Krause, Alajos Follmann, Lajos Richter and Nándor Ernő Bárány, with the Gold Cross of Valor „for preventing the spread of the fire broken out in the National Theatre on September 13, with extraordinary courage and resolve”.¹⁸

In September 1871, a four-day-long grandiose parade was held, the first festival of the firefighting association in the courtyard of the Újépület (New Building) which was visited by Franz Joseph, too. For the parade a three-story climbing house was built where they showed the ladder and house climbing and fire-extinguishing. Beside the associations of Pest and those of the countryside, foreign firefighting units also participated in this event.

The *Vasárnapi Újság* (Sunday News) wrote the following about the firefighters' expressive performance on September 24, 1871: „*The practices done on the so called climbing house had the greatest effect, especially the final grand attack. For a sign hoses and firefighting vehicles appear in the gates of the new building, in one minute those are ready, in the other minute the quick firefighters are already leaning their ladders to the house (...) the hoses spreading enormous spouts of water on the top of the high building, firefighters are climbing on the walls, (...) a mother (a firefighter dressed like one) appears with her baby in a window, desperately looking for help, twisting her hands and shouting she decides to take the final step – only one*

¹⁷ Lindner Gyula: Széchenyi Ödön, a magyar és a török tűzoltóság megszervezője (Ödön Széchenyi, the organizer of the Hungarian and the Turkish firefighting) Belügyi Szemle 2020. sajtó alatt

¹⁸ MNL OL K 27–1871. szeptember 19. 39. ülés, 7. napirendi pont. - Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára. Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek, 1867-1944. - Eredeti, aláírásokkal ellátott jegyzőkönyv.

step! And then there is a big knock on the ground due to the fall of the double burden. But mother and child are all right and singing hallelujah, they leave the place of the disaster – toward a beerhouse.”

Széchenyi, as General Commander of firefighting paid special attention on the quality and modernity of the associations' equipment. He imported hoses from England, among them the steam-hose which was a novelty at that time. The General Commander bought a small steam-hose from the English Shand-Mason factory and he offered it through the capital's firefighting committee to the City Council of Free Royal Pest, for purchase. A very successful introduction was held with the new tool on December 12, 1872, on the Danube's bank. According to the press the tool produced a spout of water as high as a tower. The tool was used for the first time on March 1, 1873, when the Orfeum in Mező Street was burning.

He himself also planned „guard hose” which was a 500 liter water tanker with a sleigh locomotive hose behind it. This sleigh locomotive hose was moved from the vehicle when it was used, and the hoses were connected with the water tanker. Later on, he modified the equipment and the hose remained on the vehicle on a rotating base.

In the first half of 1870s, he tried to support the national firefighting with further ideas: he wanted to found fire insurance companies, to activate a firefighting steamer driven by a steam hose, and he also worked on a fire alarm in this period. The realization of these ideas was hindered by an unexpected turn which had a basic effect on Ödön Széchenyi's further career.

The capital spent a significant sum of money on professional firefighting, but it did not assure the volunteers' financial sources, Ödön Széchenyi neither got a salary. In Budapest a fire alarm telegraph system was built which connected the fire guards, the Tower of the City Hall and the National Theatre. They reached at the management of the city to use the water necessary for firefighting in an unlimited and free form, and the training plot was also assigned.

By the end of 1872, the new climbing house finished on the square in front of poor house. At that time it was considered as the best one in Europe.

When Buda, Óbuda and Pest was united on November 17, 1873, Pest joined with 65 professional firefighters the firefighting of Budapest.

Ödön Széchenyi realized that the authorities should be involved in the firefighting issues, moreover that it would be the best to classify firefighting as a task of the state, so he turned to the Minister of Internal Affairs with a memorandum in May, 1873. In this memorandum he expressed that the all the developed world embraced the development of firefighting institutions, provides them the financial and moral support, that it is only in our country that it has to languish more poorly and more primitively. He called the attention to the ways and tools which can strengthen the young Hungarian firefighting. He suggested to create the national inspectorate of fire safety and firefighting. He finished his memorandum with this: *„at this time I must also declare that I place at Your Excellency's disposal all my inherited activities, all my experience in firefighting to create the above mentioned institution with all my pleasure and wholeheartedly”*. He also elaborated the order for the Hungarian royal and national inspectorate of fire safety and firefighting. He even prepared the budget of the inspectorate and sent it to the Minister of Finance asking for the support of the draft's realization but neither the Minister of Internal Affairs, nor the Minister of Finance acknowledged his plans.

On July 27, 1873, when the evaluation committee of Vienna's World Expo and 450 other foreign guests visited our country, he organized a grandiose firefighting presentation where all the firefighting units of Budapest participated.

From among the increasing number of fire cases I highlight the one which broke out during the night of July 29, 1873, in the wagon factory owned by the state situated on Kőbányai Street. Here six large workshops burnt down. The operation was led by Ödön Széchenyi and all the firefighting units of Pest participated in it. Such a big fire has never happened in Pest for as long as anyone can remember. The valiant firefighters saved the building where the steam-hammers and the smitheries were placed. These had a value of 260 thousand HUF. After extinguishing the fire, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Commerce thanked Széchenyi and the firefighting units led by him for the successful operation on the plot. After learning the lessons of this fire, Széchenyi pointed out the irregularities in a longer memorandum and asked the management of the railway company to cease them.

There was a fire case where the firefighters have been working under his leadership for one and a half day. The steam hose proved to be an indispensable tool during the fire of the Haggemacher steam mill, too. By the help of its water spouts the engine room was saved, after which the fire extinguishing of the flour and the grain continued for days.¹⁹

Count Ödön Széchenyi left the leadership of firefighting on September 10, 1874. Before his leave he took the leadership of Buda's fireguard after it merged with the Association of Budapest's Voluntary Firefighting.

The guard IV (in Próféta Street), the guard V (in Ráczváros) and the guard VI (in Óbuda) initiated their activity still under his governance.

In 1874 the total number of the crew was 97 who were in duty on six mobile guards, on the slaughterhouse and in the watch tower.

Guard I: general commandment of firefighting on Plébánia Square, 2 mechanics, 5 commanders, 3 hose guides and 18 firefighters;

Guard II: in Nyúl Street, 2 commanders, 1 hose guide, 9 firefighters;

Guard III: in Népszínház Street, 2 commanders, 1 hose guide, 9 firefighters;

Guard IV: in in Próféta Street, 2 commanders, 1 hose guide, 9 firefighters;

Guard V: in Ráczváros, 2 commanders, 1 hose guide, 9 firefighters;

Guard VI: in Óbuda, 2 commanders, 1 hose guide, 9 firefighters;

Guard of the slaughterhouse: 1 commander, 4 firefighters;

Guard of the watch tower: 4 firefighters.

Do not forget that Széchenyi became famous across Europe thanks to his activity in Hungary, namely the organization of voluntary and later on the professional firefighting. Budapest's professional firefighting was one of the firsts in the world (just for comparison: professional firefighting units were established in Stockholm in 1875, in Oslo in 1894 and in Rome in 1887).

Széchenyi's name was known in the European royal courts, it's not by chance that he was entrusted to organize the fire protection of Constantinople after the great fire which broke out in that city. In the great fire of Constantinople many buildings burnt down, among them the English embassy, the American and the Portuguese consulates, the German house of hospice and the Italian theatre.

¹⁹ 150 éve született gróf Széchenyi Ödön (Count Ödön Széchenyi was born 150 years ago) (Budapest, 1989).

Thus mainly the representatives of these countries urged the Turkish Porte to establish the firefighting organization.²⁰

Ödön Széchenyi's private life

He married for the first time on January 10, 1864 in Esztergom. His wife was Miss Mária Teréz Adelheid „Irma” Almay of Almás (of noble origin), the daughter of Rudolf Almay of Almás (1812–1879) a wealthy landowner, and Baroness Adél Fellner of Feldegg. They had three children: András Széchenyi (1865-1907), Vanda (1870-1916) and Olga (1873-1889).²¹

In 1874 he moved to the Turkish capital leaving his family behind, according to him his wife refused to follow him²². Finally Count Ödön Széchenyi moved to Turkey, his wife and his children moved to Vienna.

The lack of a solid family background and the shortage in financial sources and in education, was especially conspicuous in case of András Széchenyi, and even blaming each other for this, the parents agreed in it. Olga Széchenyi's short life was ended during a medical treatment in Gleichenberg in the spring of 1889. Vanda Széchenyi married a Persian Bey at the age of 14, surely due to his father's mediation.²³

After the death of her daughter Olga, Madame Széchenyi's nerves failed and one year later the Royal Court of Budapest placed her under guardianship. As from the beginning „*she strongly disliked the idea to be treated in Hungary*”, first she got treatment in the first department of Landes Irrenanstalt in Vienna, then she was transferred to a private mental hospital in the end of 1890. She died there on February 19, 1891.

Still during the life of his first wife Ödön Széchenyi had children from another woman: György was born in 1887, Ilona in 1888 (died in 1951) and Gusztáv in 1889 (died in 1966). Thus they were illegitimate children born from an adultery. After Irma Almay's death he married for the second time with the mother of the above mentioned children, Eulália Kritopulo (Christopulos)²⁴ (1854-1918) on August 1, 1892. From this marriage one more, already legitimate child was born, Bálint (1893-1954).

²⁰ Lindner Gyula: Széchenyi Ödön, a magyar és a török tűzoltóság megszervezője Belügyi Szemle 2020. sajtó alatt

²¹ GUDENUS János József: A magyarországi főnemesség XX. századi genealógiája. IV. kötet. Budapest, 1998. (A továbbiakban: GUDENUS 1998.) 52.

²² MOL P 623. 304. VII. 32. 12. 8.

²³ GUDENUS 1998. 52.

²⁴ Kritopulo Eulália leszármazottja a régi görög byzanci nemes Kritopulo nemzetségnek, amely azon görög családok közé tartozott, amelyek Byzancnak az oszmánok részéről 1453-ban történt elfoglalása után régi lakóhelyükön megmaradva török államhatóság alá jutottak (Eulália Kritopulo was a descendant of the ancient noble Greek Byzantine Kritopulo clan, one of the Greek families which stayed in Byzantium after it was occupied by the Ottomans in 1453.)

During the spring of 1908, Andrásy Gyula Jr., the Minister of Internal Affairs informed the Széchenyi family that „Pasha Széchenyi’s children Gusztáv and Ilona were legitimized from supreme royal clemency by the mediation of the Ministry of Justice”.

For Ödön it was a continuous fight within the Széchenyi family to make his children accepted as his legitimate heirs. Finally, he was offered the estate of Hegykő (situated in the edge of Nagycenk entail forming the 1/5 part of it) which he accepted, and in the spring of 1921, he signed the family agreement about it, at the same time admitting that his marriages were morganatic. One year later Ödön Széchenyi could die knowing that he could assure some recompense and inheritance for his children.²⁵

Translated by Anita Hegymegi

²⁵ Ballabás Dániel: Gróf Széchenyi Ödön különös házasságai. (Special marriages of Count Ödön Széchenyi) In: Széchenyi István és Zemplén megye. Szerk. Tamás Edit. Kráľovský Chlmec 2011. 114–125