



The American Hungarian Federation

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Is Commemorating Kossuth Relevant At All?

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On the occasion of the American Hungarian Federation's and co-sponsoring organization's commemoration of March 15, 1848 hosted by the Embassy of Hungary

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Your Excellency, Mr. Deputy State Secretary, Distinguished Guests, Dear Friends:

We come to the part of the program when we switch to English so that those who are not completely fluent in Hungarian can participate in our commemoration of Hungary's democratic revolution and war independence of 1848 - 1849.

I would like to thank Ambassador Szemerkenyi for hosting this wonderful and timely event. I also thank you my fellow Hungarian Americans for joining us this afternoon as this community and the American Hungarian Federation have done so for decades to commemorate this singularly important period of Hungary's history. By participating you are continuing a tradition that extends back to Lajos Kossuth's highly acclaimed trip to the United States from December 4, 1851 until July 14, 1852.

Kossuth was only the second non-American to address the United States Senate and the House of Representatives, the first being the Marquis de Lafayette.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention that it was the American Hungarian Federation that commissioned the bust of Kossuth and presented it to the American people for placement in our nation's Capitol.

From the moment he set foot on American soil, Kossuth was enthusiastically received. His reception in New York was only equaled by the reception that had earlier greeted George Washington and Lafayette.

During his extended tour of the United States, Kossuth delivered more than 300 public addresses and lectures, including his famous speech in which he stated, "All for the people and all by the people. Nothing about the people without the people. That is Democracy, and that is the ruling tendency of the spirit of our age." These words were uttered by Kossuth over a decade before President Abraham Lincoln's famed "for the people, by the people" speech given at Gettysburg in 1863.

Lincoln, who met with Kossuth, eloquently referred to Kossuth, as the "most worthy and distinguished representative of the cause of civil and religious liberty on the continent of Europe."

The other day someone tried to convince me that commemorating the Ides of March had somehow lost its luster and relevance as Hungary is now a free and independent country. Are Kossuth and Hungary's noble quest for freedom really less relevant today?

I respectfully and vigorously have to say “no” for three reasons. First, Kossuth and Hungary’s cause stood for the universal principles of freedom and democracy. These principles are as relevant to us as they were for the generations living in the 19th century; we must jealously guard them.

Second, Kossuth inextricably ties Hungary and the United States together – his trip to the United States is part of the history of both countries and served to strengthen the emotional and historical ties of the two nations. As Hungarian Americans it is incumbent upon us to know this history and pass it on to our children so that these ties are never weakened.

Finally, Kossuth is a remarkable example for us to follow. Remember Lincoln’s words, “most worthy and distinguished representative of the cause of civil and religious liberty.”

We still have unresolved issues to address, as democracy has not yet grown strong roots everywhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, intolerance toward religious and national minorities shamefully and surprisingly still flourishes in some places.

One need only consider the Szekely flag dispute, denial of the Hungarians’ request for autonomy, or the alarming proposals to redistrict – that is eliminate the Hungarian administrative units – of the Szekely region in Romania; or the violence against Hungarians for speaking in their mother tongue in Serbia; or the discriminatory language and citizenship laws in Slovakia; or rising anti-Semitism; and I could go on.

And this is where Kossuth’s championing liberty and democracy comes into play. We can, we must follow his example; we can, we must educate the public in our communities about these critically important matters. We can, we must educate to dispel faulty information about Hungary and Hungarian history; we can, we must vigorously support policies that will promote democracy and minority rights.

The legacy of Kossuth and Hungary of 1848-49 is indeed relevant today!

Now this is where I would normally end my presentation. But there is another theme I would like to mention in view of the diaspora meeting for which we are grateful to Amb. Szemerkenyi.

Considering our dwindling community and the seemingly insurmountable obstacle we often face, we can only hope to live up to the legacy of Kossuth and the freedom fighters if with a sense of *humility* and *selfless service* we strive for far greater unity when confronting mutual challenges. And we should not lose sight of the fact that the recognition of the benefits of greater unity coupled with the commitment to take *affirmative acts to achieve unity* must come from within us.

Unfortunately, there are times we don’t always act in a unified manner and this, whether we admit it or not, harms our otherwise good works and what we are trying to accomplish. Some, for example, carry around real or imagined grievances that prevent them from working with others and weaken much-needed initiatives.

Let me now close with two quotations on the value of unity – one a profound quotation and another a humorously incisive one:

- “Behold they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now *nothing which they propose to do will be impossible* for them.” Genesis 11:6
- “The Destiny of Man is to unite, not to divide. If you keep on dividing you end up as a collection of *monkeys throwing nuts* at each other out of separate trees.” T.H. White

Do we choose to do the impossible or do we throw nuts? The answer is quite obvious even if we only want to honor the legacy of Kossuth and the freedom fighters with deeds and not just words.