

ALEXANDER CSOMA DE KÖRÖS

by

Elek Máthé

The great Hungarian traveller and philologist, whose Tibetan-English dictionary and Grammar was published a hundred years ago, in 1834, in Calcutta, was, as he liked to call himself, a Siculo-Hungarian, and was born about 1790 at Kőrös, a little village in Transylvania.

As the article of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us, he came of a noble family which had sunk to poverty. He entered the famous College of the Transylvanian Presbyterian Church at Nagy-Enyed, in 1799. After having passed out of a grammar school, he was admitted to the higher course of academical studies, and soon the desire was kindled in his soul to study the languages of the East, to travel in Asia, and to find the lost vestiges of the origin of the Hungarian race.

Later, after taking academic honours, he was sent to Germany, with the scholarship of his College. These travelling scholarships of the old Transylvanian College were provided out of the funds collected on behalf of the College during the reign of Queen Anne, in the early years of the XVIII century, when the Protestants of Transylvania were in great distress and applied for help to their brethren in England.

The contribution from England was the basis on which the future material prosperity and intellectual progress of the College of Nagy-Enyed was reconstructed; and thus the income of the fund was appropriated for travelling scholarships. Csoma went to Göttingen, and for 3 years studied the various Oriental languages under the guidance of Prof. Eichorn, the learned Orientalist of Göttingen University.

In 1818 he returned to Hungary, with very definite plans to begin his great journey to the East as soon as possible. This seemed to be rather an adventure than a scientific expedition; but Csoma's energy was invincible, and his enthusiasm was blind to the hindrances and difficulties. It was towards the end of 1819 that, with really modest funds obtained from an older friend, he left his native country, which he never saw again. He was lightly clad, as if he intended merely taking a walk (an eye-witness, one of his former professors, relates the circumstances of his farewell) when he started along the road leading towards the frontier of Rumania. His journey lasted for more than 2 years; he travelled mostly on foot, suffering untold hardship and privations. He reached Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, on January 6. 1822, as he himself tells us in a letter written to a British official in India. He set foot on Indian territory first in Lahore, in March of the same year. He wasted no time, and with the help of a friendly and understanding Englishman, William Moorcroft, whose diary was later published, he went first to Kashmir, and then

to the province of Ladak, in the western part of Tibet.

Here Csoma went to a small place called Zangla, where he lived (in a Lama Monastery) for more than a year. His desire was — as he tells us himself — to be acquainted with the structure of the strange tongue of the Tibetans, and to know something of the mysterious treasures of Tibetan literature, which before Csoma's researches had been entirely unknown to the outer world, not only to Europeans, but to everybody outside Tibet.

A curious desire! But Csoma was a most unusual man. His inner life, the world of his thoughts, remained as closed and as secret as that mysterious country where he spent the best years of his life.

The year spent at the Lama Monastery of Zangla was decisive in respect of Csoma's later career. With the assistance of a Lama he learned the Tibetan language grammatically and studied in the library of the Monastery many hundred volumes which were the basis of Tibetan learning and religion.

The great aim and desire of his life remained undoubtedly — as we have already said — to find the lost vestiges of the origin of the Magyar race. But, in the meantime, he put aside this final purpose of his work and labours, and with untiring energy, started to become a pioneer, as Moorcroft tells us, in making clear some obscure points of Asiatic and European history.

Through Moorcroft and later on through Capt. Kennedy, the officer in command at Sabathir, in the Northern Provinces, he got into closer touch with the British authorities. As Th. Duka, his biographer, says, this friendship of Moorcroft and Kennedy decided Csoma's fate.¹ Through their endeavours the British Government of India granted him a regular allowance of 50 rupees a month, which enabled him to prosecute his Tibetan studies, and, as regards his own position, to perpetuate his name in the domain of science and literary research.

With the help of the Government's monthly allowance the clouds of uncertainty which had hung so long over his fate were dissipated, and he was ready to start on his second journey into Tibet, and actually did so in June, 1825.

Now he was in constant correspondence with Dr. Wilson, Secretary of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. This time he spent 18 months in Tibet, living again in a Gonpa or Lama Monastery in one

¹ Theodore Duka: *Life and Work of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös*. Trübner Oriental Series, London 1885. — Duka himself was an interesting man. He was a medical officer in Louis Kossuth's army during the Hungarian War of Independence in 1848. He emigrated to England and as a medical officer was sent to India. Here he collected the material, mostly in Calcutta, and published the biography of his great countryman, both in English and Hungarian.

of the other little known Tibetan villages, a place called Pukdal. Though he wrote in his reports of disappointment, caused by the indolence and negligence of the Lama from whom he learned and received his instructions, he nevertheless collected sufficient material for the publication of his proposed dictionary and grammar of the Tibetan language.

His fame had now reached the outer world. Dr. Gerard was travelling in the Himalayan countries on behalf of the Bengal Medical Service, introducing vaccination there. During his travels he met Csoma, and wrote in terms of the greatest admiration about him:

"I now turn — says Dr. Gerard — to the Hungarian, who is far from the least remarkable of the many objects which have passed before me in this journey. I found him at the village of Kanum, in his small but romantic hamlet, surrounded by books, and in the best health. He has been most persevering and successful, and were not his mind entirely absorbed in his studies, he would find a strong check to his exertions in the climate, situated as he is and has been for four months. The cold is very intense, and all last winter he sat at his desk wrapped up in woollens from head to foot, and from morning to night, without an interval of recreation or warmth, except that of his frugal meals, which are one universal routine of greasy tea. But the winters at Kanum dwindle to insignificance compared with the severity of those at the Monastery of Zangla, where Mr. Csoma passed a whole year. At that spot he, the Lama, and an attendant, were living in an apartment nine feet square for 3 or 4 months; they dared not stir out, the ground being covered with snow, and the temperature below the zero of the scale. There he sat, enveloped in a sheep-skin cloak, with his arms folded, and in this situation he read from morning till evening without fire, or light after dusk, the ground to sleep upon, and the base walls of the building for protection against the rigours of the climate.

"The cold was so intense as to make it a task of severity to extricate the hands from their fleecy resort to turn over the pages. Some idea may be formed of the climate of Zanskar from the fact, that on the day of the Summer Solstice, a fall of snow covered the ground; and so early as 10th Sept. following, when the crops were yet uncut, the soil was again sheeted in snow; such is the horrid aspect of the country and its eternal winter.

"I have mentioned the above as a proof of the assiduity of Mr. Csoma, who collected and arranged 40,000 words of the Tibetan language in a situation that would have driven most men to despair."

Csoma left the inhospitable country of Tibet in the spring of 1831, and soon arrived in Calcutta, where he was elected honorary member and lived in the house of the Asiatic Society. He was busy with the work of finally arranging and publishing his life's greatest achievement, his Dictionary and Grammar of the Tibetan Language, which was not ready till 1834. The Dictionary and Grammar, bound in one big volume of nearly 600 pages, was published at the cost of the British Government, in India. Many copies of the book were sent to the various

universities and scientific institutions of Europe and naturally to Hungary also. Communications with India 100 years ago were very slow, and it took a whole year for words of acknowledgment to reach him from his native country. Through the Hungarian Academy of Sciences considerable sums were sent to him, £200 and on another occasion £450. But Csoma accepted the monies only to buy valuable Oriental MSS and send them for the use of the Academy.

Csoma did not live long after the publication of his great work. He was employed as librarian by the Asiatic Society and lived in Calcutta an ascetic life, as though he had been a Tibetan Buddhist monk himself. He was 58 years of age already, when in 1842 he realized that, if ever, he must now start to attain the great and chief object of his life, to solve the secret of the origin of the Hungarians. He wanted to go first to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and then to the fardistant parts of Mongolia. Providence decided otherwise. He got as far as Darjeeling, at the foot of Mount Everest only. During the journey from Calcutta, when he had crossed the malarious sub-Himalayan belt of dense jungle, he became ill. He had reached Darjeeling in very bad condition, and after fighting for a whole fortnight against the deadly sickness, he died on April 11th., 1842.

He was buried in the Darjeeling cemetery, and a simple but noble monument was erected by his British friends over his grave.

Csoma's memory has always been honoured by his own countrymen. But he is not a forgotten man outside his own country either. The Buddhists of Japan remember him as a great saint and scholar who gave his whole life to the study of the Buddhist religion. And Mr. Baktay, a Hungarian scholar and traveller who spent many months in Kashmir and Tibet a few years ago, following the footsteps of his great countryman, has related in his book that when he visited in Calcutta the house of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and told the secretary, Mr. van Manen, that he was a Hungarian, everybody greeted him with warm and sincere enthusiasm, as a countryman of the great Alexander Csoma de Kőrös. Csoma's fine bronze statue, made by a Hungarian artist and sent as a gift to the Society from Hungary, stands in one of the most prominent places of the great entrance hall.

Csoma's pioneer work was appreciated by all Englishmen, and his great service in compiling the first Tibetan dictionary, and thus opening the vast *terra incognita* of an entirely closed country and unknown people to the outer world, will always be remembered. He was a great man and a scholar of the first order, but he was the most modest great man who ever obtained fame and recognition in the world of scholars. Besides modesty gratitude was the second feature in his character. He always felt grateful for the help of his British friends and for the modest allowance given to him by the British Government of India.

I hope there will always be some people in Britain, and in other countries as well, who will sympathize with this modest hero (nay, this veritable saint of human culture), who literally gave his life for the ideas which were most sacred to him.