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# Noble Strategies for Maintaining Power: Reflections on the Life of a Hungarian Aristocrat

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## ABSTRACT

The 16th century is one of the most significant periods in Hungarian history. The first decades were marked by fighting between the lesser nobility and aristocracy on the one hand, and the impotent royal power on the other. The Turks continued to present a threat from the South. In 1526 Louis II (1516-1526) had the unenviable task of presiding over the most famous defeat in Hungarian history on the field of Mohács. The battle was fought against the increasingly powerful Turks during their 1526 campaign. In the course of the battle numerous prelates, magnates and many thousands of Christian mercenaries lost their lives. Throughout the next decades the country split into three parts. Until 1540, the kingdom had two legally crowned sovereigns: John Szapolyai, a well-placed oligarch, who is considered to be the last national king, and Ferdinand I, a Habsburg prince and future Holy Roman Emperor.

The central figure of this chapter, Peter Perényi, was able to satisfy his legendary eagerness to gain more estates and power by negotiating with both rulers and continually changing sides. His vital importance was based not only on his position as the guardian of the crown but also on his estates. The king wanted Perényi and his companions to be a kind of guarantee of the loyalty of the aristocrats, both personally and as a result of the territorial and regional power that they possessed. The impact of changing sides on Hungarian domestic political life is an interesting phenomenon. Both rulers had to let the aristocrats change sides and excuse them for this; otherwise they would have lost them forever. Changing sides was a hazardous move, but it was a risk worth taking. However, these processes destabilized the country. In 1542 Perényi was imprisoned by Ferdinand I. He did not realize that Ottoman political tactics gave figures such as Perényi an important role. He could make the country, already torn into three pieces, even more divided, so that the Christians were not able to present a united front against their enemy. It was no coincidence that Perényi was arrested by the Habsburgs at the same time as others were imprisoned in Istanbul by the Turks. After the death of Szapolyai, there was no need for mighty, troublemaking aristocrats like Perényi and his companions.

Perényi appears as a dubious character in all historic works covering the period. After outlining the general situation and the most important parts of his career, the last part

of this chapter shows how the different backgrounds of historians have influenced the way in which they have interpreted and judged the political activities of this aristocrat.

*A Mohácsot követő zűrzavaros időszak szereplőinek megítélése bonyolult, csaknem lehetetlen feladatnak tűnik. Talán ez adhat magyarázatot arra, hogy eddig miért nem született igazán színvonalas tudományos biográfia a kor több kulcsfontosságú alakjáról, például Szapolyai Jánosról, Fráter Györgyről vagy jelen tanulmány főhőséről, Perényi Péterről sem. A dolgozat első két része a történelmi háttérrel és Perényi politikai pályájának legfontosabb állomásait ismerteti. Perényi Péter kiemelt fontosságát koronaöri tiszte mellett birtokai is biztosították; a két rivális király ugyanis nem csupán személyükben szánta a bárókat a főúri réteg hűsége zálogául, hanem az általuk birtokolt területi hatalom hordozóiként is. Perényi nagyon fontos családi kapcsolatokkal is rendelkezett. Apja egykor Szapolyai szövetségese volt a belpolitikai küzdelmekben. Édesanyja, Báthory Magdolna révén Báthory István nádort és annak főispán öccseit, Andrászt és Györgyöt nagybátyjaiként tisztelhetette. Felesége, Thurzó Margit, Thurzó Elek nővére révén e bárói családdal is rokonságban állt. Thurzó ráadásul szinte az egyetlen olyan főúr volt, aki nem ingott meg Ferdinánd támogatásában, ezért Perényi átállását közvetítőként is segítette.*

*Perényi Péter alakja természetesen minden a korszakkal foglalkozó történelmi műben feltűnik. A dolgozat utolsó része azokkal a jelentősebb recepciókkal foglalkozik, amelyekben a történétírók vagy történészek a legmarkánsabb portrét rajzolták a főúrról. Általában elmondható, hogy Perényi meglehetősen sötét színben tűnik fel a források lapjain. Szerémi György elsősorban éretlenségét és gögjét emeli ki, bár tudjuk, hogy ő hajlamos volt pletykákat is szinte kritika nélkül tényként kezelni. Forgách Ferenc sokkal hitelesebb forrásnak tekinthető, aki próbál az események mögé látni, indítékokat keresni, hiszen a történelem – bár Istentől függ – számára emberi cselekedetekből áll össze. Ha valaki rosszul cselekszik, azért romlott gondolkodása felelős, és emiatt Perényiről is kemény ítéletet mond: úgy véli, a főúr és a hozzá hasonlók (“ezek az undok szörnyetegek”) pártváltatásaikkal csak még nagyobb romlásba döntötték az országot. Istvánffy Miklós – akinek álláspontját a többek között rá is támaszkodó jezsuita történétíró, Katona István is “átvette” – művében ingadozó, következtelen lelkületű, kegybajhászó, hiú és kapzsi nagyúrként jelenik meg Perényi Péter, hiszen a szerző számára oly fontos értékek: a hazafiság, királyhűség vagy a jellemeszilárdság a főúrnál finoman szólva is “sajátos” értelmet nyertek, és Perényi még a katolikus valláshoz sem ragaszkodott. Budai Ferenc a 19. század első éveiben megjelent Polgári lexiconában az előbbieknél valamennyivel kiegyensúlyozottabb képet fest a főúrról. Hangsúlyozza a reformáció terjedésében betöltött szerepét, dicséri Perényi előrelátását katonai ügyekben, aki hasznos tanácsokat adott mind Buda 1541-es, mind 1542-es ostroma alatt, melyeket a fővezérek nem fogadtak meg. A folytonosan felmerülő állhatatlanságával kapcsolatban Budai azt is kiemeli, hogy bár Szapolyai halálakor nagy vendégséget adott, teljes örömet mutatott ugyan, de ezt követő átállása Ferdinándhoz már nem számít hűtlenségnek és hálátlanságnak, hiszen két évvel azelőtt maga is részt vett a váradi szerződés előkészítésében, és ez alapján egész Magyarországnak Ferdinándra kellett volna szállnia.*

Tárczy Árpád, a sárospataki Teológiai Akadémia professzora 1930-ban írt székfoglaló értekezése még nála is pozitívabb képet fest Perényiről, kinek jellemét szerinte sokszor tendenciózusan felhasznált adatokból rekonstruálták, ezért az utókor egy része előtt eszményi, más része előtt pedig változékony, ingatag s önző céljai érdekében mindenre kész személyként tűnik fel. Álláspontja egyedülálló, Tárczy értekezéséből úgy tűnik, a főúr reformációban betöltött szerepe és a református iskola alapítása billenti igazán pozitív irányba cselekedeteinek mérlegét. Tárczy Árpád műve azonban felhívja a figyelmet arra, hogy a főúr jelleme bonyolultabb, mint azt néhány interpretáció láttatja, és nem helyes, ha csak csak a "jó vagy rossz ember" bipoláris rendszerében próbáljuk megítélni. Pálffy Géza több mint fél évszázaddal később *A tizenhatodik század története* című művében már sokkal elítélőbbben nyilatkozik az úgynevezett "harmadikutas jelöltekről", akik közül Török Bálint, Majláth István és Hans Katzianer mellett Perényivel foglalkozik a legrészletesebben. Véleménye szerint a leggátlástalanabb politizálás a birtokszerzéstől és hatalmi vágytól majd szétpukkadó Perényi Pétert jellemezte, akinek egyetlen dicséretre méltó cselekedete az volt, hogy Sárospatakon felépítette jól erődtített, reneszánsz lakótornyát.

Szekfű Gyula véleménye képviseli talán az "aurea mediocritas"-t, aki úgy véli, Perényinél a nemzeti és egyéni érdekek szinte naivan összekapcsolódnak. Perényi Péter szerinte a "rakoncátlan, királyt nem ismerő nagyúri típus egyik utolsó képviselője". Ő az egyetlen, aki Ferdinánddal szemben 1526 után is a Mohács előtti hangot használja. Pártváltoztatásakor feltételeket szab, melyekben országos és nemzeti vonatkozások mellett önző családi és személyi igényeket jelent be. Képes zálogba adni fiát, de kiszabadítása érdekében kocsisámra szed össze fiúkat és lányokat, hogy Ferencért cserébe felajánlja őket a töröknek. Szekfű nagy figyelmet szentel az 1542 tavaszán létrehozott a sárospataki ligának, melyre később részletesebben kitérek: ez királytalan magaslatokban mutatja be a nagybirtokosok hatalmát. Általában a főurat és kortársait dinamikus, hataloméhes, de mégis erkölcsös életet élő férfiakként láttatja. Kiemeli Perényi személyes hűségét és bölcs tanácsait Buda ostromakor.

Forrásaink alapján úgy tűnik, a "közvélemény" sokáig bármilyen negatívumot elhitt a kapzsinak és hataloméhesnek tartott Perényivel kapcsolatban, s a híresztelések nagyon is valós eseményeken alapultak. Természetesen hazugságok is keringtek róla, például Szerémi célozgatása arra, hogy Szapolyai meggyilkolásában részt vett, bár igaz, hogy a király halálhíre feletti örömet egyáltalán nem leplezte. Perényi saját levelei alapján csak a három részre szakadt ország érdekében próbált tevékenykedni, valójában azonban saját anyagi gyarapodását tartotta szem előtt. A "zavarosban halászva" jótalanul és erőszakkal elégitette ki "birtokéhségét", végső célját viszont nem érte el: nem sikerült magához ragadnia a hatalmat és királlyá koronáztatnia magát. Annak, hogy sokáig úgy érezte, álmai valóra válnak, az volt az oka, hogy a török politikai taktikában fontos szerepet szántak a hozzá hasonló alakoknak. Személye ugyanis még megosztottabbá tette az amúgy is részekre szakadt országot, és emiatt sem valósulhatott meg a törökökkel szembeni egységes fellépés.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Military defeat, a collapsing country, and two rival kings: Hungarian nobles had to face grave consequences after the battle of Mohács. The preservation and accumulation of power was just as important for the élite as reunifying the kingdom. The central figure of this chapter, Peter Perényi, satisfied his legendary eagerness to obtain more estates and power by negotiating with both rulers and continually changing sides, in the same way as most of his rank. Moreover, he dealt with the Turks and attempted to become a king. His importance was based not only on his family connections, but on his estates and position as the guardian of the crown. Perényi appears as a dubious character in all significant historic works dealing with this period. After outlining the general situation and the most important parts of his career, the last section of this chapter shows how the different backgrounds of historians have influenced the way in which they have interpreted and judged his political activities.

The battle of Mohács was one of the most significant events in Hungarian history. On 29 August 1526, after a two hour fight, the Hungarians were annihilated: the king, both archbishops, five bishops and 24,000 men perished on the field. The sultan refused to believe that this pitiful array, the 25,000 ill-equipped men he had so easily overcome, could be the national army of Hungary. Advancing with extreme caution he occupied Buda, the capital, on 12 September but quickly returned to his own dominions. The Turks had no sooner left the land than John Szapolyai, *voivode* [governor] of Transylvania, assembled a diet at Tokaj on 14 October. On this occasion both the towns and the counties were represented. Since the tone of the assembly was violently anti-German, and John was the only conceivable national candidate, his election was guaranteed. However, his misgivings were so great that it was not until the beginning of November that he reluctantly allowed himself to be crowned at a second diet held at Székesfehérvár. John Szapolyai based his claim to the crown on the so-called Decree of Rákos (1505), in which the “orders” or “estates” (social groups holding political power: clergy and nobles) expressed that after the death of Uladislaus of Jagello, the king at the time, they would not accept a foreign ruler because alien dynasties prioritised foreign interests. The son of Uladislaus, Louis II, was born the following year, so the decree was not of practical importance at the time. By the time Szapolyai was crowned, a competitor had entered the field: Archduke Ferdinand of Habsburg. He claimed the Hungarian crown by right of inheritance in the name of his wife Anne, sister of the late king Louis II. In 1515, the Habsburg and the Jagello families made a dual marital contract agreeing that if the family line perished through Louis II dying without male issue, the Hungarian crown would transfer from the Jagellos to the Habsburgs.

Throughout the next decades, the country split into three parts: the northern and western areas belonged to the Habsburgs, the eastern region would soon form Transylvania, while Buda and the central area was left in Szapolyai’s possession. Surprisingly, in the 1530s the Turks were delighted with the loyalty of their vassal Szapolyai. They expected similar tribute and vassal-like support from the princes of ‘independent’ Transylvania.

They intended to advance to Vienna and beyond, but at this point, it was considered sufficient that their armies received safe passage and assistance in Hungary. While the Turkish army's passage westwards was relatively problem free, their military organization was so cumbersome that when they reached Vienna in 1529, they were unable to mount an effective siege and had to turn back. For 150 years Hungary was the bulwark of Christianity. The situation remained unchanged until the Ottomans occupied Buda Castle in 1541 when, by means of a series of forts built increasingly further to the north and east, they ensured protection for the flanks of any future advance in the region. The whole of the Great Plain, half of Transylvania and a few zones on the periphery of these passed into Turkish hands. Other areas had become the scene of military operations and were held to ransom first by one side and then the other, sometimes paying taxes three or four times over.

### THE LIFE OF PETER PERÉNYI

Peter Perényi was born in 1502. Through his father, the Palatine, his family rose to unprecedented heights<sup>1</sup>. After the death of Imre Perényi in 1519, Peter came into his inheritance as the *comes* [count] of Temes and Abaúj. He defended not only the castle of Temes in the south of the country, but the whole lower part of the Hungarian Kingdom. Moreover, another important consideration was that in 1526-27, as his father's successor, along with John Szapolyai, the count of Szepes, he guarded the crown<sup>2</sup>. According to Hungarian law, the legitimate ruler had to be crowned in Székesfehérvár by the archbishop of Esztergom (Gran) and with the Holy Crown of Stephen, the first king. Perényi took hardly any part in public life at this time. Before the battle of Mohács his name occurred only in estate affairs, when he was trying to satisfy his hunger for power peacefully<sup>3</sup>. He fought against the Turks at Mohács, and led the left flank of the army. However, after the battle, he occupied the castle of Patak in the north-eastern part of the country, taken from the widow of Pálóczy, the former count of Zemplén, who was killed on the battlefield<sup>4</sup>.

On 26 September, the sultan left Buda, and Szapolyai's party assembled the diet in Tokaj<sup>5</sup>. Perényi was present at the secret conference where the time of the king's election was decided<sup>6</sup>. On 11 November, Peter Perényi and archbishop Paul Várday together held the crown above Szapolyai's head. However, the new king left not only custody of the crown and the counties of Abaúj and Baranya to the magnate, who was already the *supremus capitaneus partium regni Hungariae inferiorum* (*Oberhauptmann der Niederlanden in Ungarn*), but Szapolyai made him the *voivode* of Transylvania too<sup>7</sup>. After the ceremony Perényi brought the crown to his castle in Füzér and put it in a safe place<sup>8</sup>.

The outstanding importance of Perényi was based not only on his position as the guardian of the crown but also on his estates. Perényi's family connections must also be emphasized: his father, Peter, was a leaguer of Szapolyai in internal affairs. Through his mother, he was related to the Palatine, István Báthory, and his uncles were both counts. With his wife Margit Thurzó's help, he also developed close connections with the

Thurzó baronial family as well<sup>9</sup>. This was especially important as Alexius Thurzó was almost the only Hungarian noble who stayed on Ferdinand's side throughout the decades and helped Perényi to change party. However, these processes destabilized the country, which is why some aristocrats (in 1542, even Perényi) later attempted to mitigate the detrimental consequences of general chaos by establishing alliances and leagues<sup>10</sup>.

Perényi's importance was also shown when Ferdinand I, elected on 17 December 1526 in Pozsony (Pressburg/Bratislava), wrote him a long letter on 15 January 1527. Ferdinand called the magnate into his camp and promised not to punish him<sup>11</sup>. In March 1527, however, Perényi attended the diet of Szapolyai in Buda, but soon decided to change party<sup>12</sup>. As was common in this period, material interests influenced his decision. Negotiations had started prior to the diet and Perényi had made up his mind months before the Habsburgs' military operation began in July. We must take into consideration that the hopes placed in Ferdinand vanished when the Habsburg king retreated, so common sense may also have played a role in Perényi's decision. In addition, Perényi's switching of sides happened so secretly that Szapolyai only realised what had happened when Perényi carried the crown to Székesfehérvár, where Ferdinand of Habsburg was crowned in November 1527<sup>13</sup>. The magnate was confirmed in his previous offices, and also obtained the castle of Patak and its accessories from the rival king<sup>14</sup>. (John Szapolyai had donated Patak to Perényi almost a year before, on 11 November 1526)<sup>15</sup>. On 11 March 1528 Perényi was again promoted to Transylvanian *voivode*<sup>16</sup>. However, he soon realized that Ferdinand was not able to assume absolute rule, waiting for the help of his brother, Charles V, and finally leaving the country. Meanwhile, Szapolyai's deputy, Laski, achieved results with the sultan, who demanded to meet Szapolyai personally when the king returned from Poland in November 1528.

In spite of the warning, Perényi did not join Szapolyai, and on 18 August 1529, when the king concluded an alliance with the Turks, Perényi decided to escape from Siklós to Patak with his family. To reach Patak, they had to cross the country and the Perényis were eventually captured. Suleiman had Perényi renew his oath of allegiance to Szapolyai before taking them to Buda and handing them over to the king<sup>17</sup>. However, Perényi did not join Szapolyai again. Although the king had demonstrated his good will by releasing the magnate without punishing him, Perényi's pride must have been offended by being treated as a donation. He retreated for several months before suggesting secret conferences between the two camps again. The noblemen of both sides gathered together on 6 March 1531 in Babolcsa and two weeks later in Bélavár<sup>18</sup>. Perényi openly took Szapolyai's side, but privately he told his supporters that he knew how to get rid of the king<sup>19</sup>. Those present decided to convene a *congregatio generalis* [general assembly] by 18 May 1531 in Veszprém, but both kings tried to frustrate these plans<sup>20</sup>. Szapolyai and Ferdinand were both afraid that if they did not acknowledge the noblemen, they would support a third candidate to the throne: Perényi. They prohibited their followers from taking part in the diet, and eventually not even Perényi attended<sup>21</sup>.

As these so-called 'kingless assemblies' were unsuccessful, Perényi allegedly sent a delegate to Suleiman, asking the sultan to take him under the supremacy of both kings,

in exchange for which he would swear allegiance to the Turks<sup>22</sup>. Another embassy was also established where both King John and Perényi sent commissaries so that the sultan could settle the conflict between them<sup>23</sup>. From then on, he stayed on Szapolyai's side, and he abandoned his ambitions for unity. In the summer of 1531, he went on pilgrimage to Loreto, Italy, but his main purpose was to negotiate with Venice<sup>24</sup>. In June 1532 the sultan wanted to march against Vienna across Transdanubia. Perényi visited Suleiman in his camp near Mohács, but was unexpectedly caught again and carried to Belgrade<sup>25</sup>. As he was not willing to cede Valpó and Siklós to the Turks (they were two important parts of the Hungarian border defence system), he was obliged to send his seven-year-old son, Ferenc, to the sultan to secure his release<sup>26</sup>. Perényi renewed his oath to John once more and stayed loyal to both clients until the death of Szapolyai<sup>27</sup>.

By 1536, King John took the idea of a peace seriously. In spite of Ferdinand's continuous attempts to lure him to his party, Perényi decided to appear neutral between the two rival kings. In fact, he contacted the French king and Suleiman so that if the two sides came to an agreement with each other, he could become king of Hungary<sup>28</sup>. It also became known that Szapolyai himself deterred Perényi with empty promises, telling him that when he died childless, Saint Stephen's crown would pass into his hands, and supposedly Fráter György would have sworn to that<sup>29</sup>.

Perényi continued to press for the liberation of his son and became involved with the peace negotiations between the two kings. He kept up an intense correspondence with Thurzó and Laski<sup>30</sup>. Consultations were held in Rozgony. A one-month suspension of arms was first discussed, urged by Fráter György and Perényi. A time and place for the next meeting was agreed. Several possible settlements were considered but as the delegates had to stay in continuous contact with their kings, another location was chosen. In December 1537, Perényi, Fráter György and archbishop Várday (the representatives of Szapolyai), and archbishop Wese and Vels (the representatives of Ferdinand) met in Perényi's castle in Patak<sup>31</sup>. The meeting lasted a week, but the delegates could agree only to extend the suspension of arms<sup>32</sup>.

In February 1538, Wese travelled alone to Nagyvárad (Grosswardein/Oradea) and made the secret peace of Nagyvárad which divided Hungary between the two competitors. By this treaty Ferdinand retained Croatia-Slavonia and the five western counties with Pressburg and Esztergom (Gran), while Szapolyai kept the remaining two-thirds with the royal title<sup>33</sup>. Nobody wanted to make the agreement public. When news arrived that the Turks were preparing to come to Hungary, both parties feared that they were planning an action against Szapolyai. In the summer of 1538, circumstances made it necessary for Szapolyai to call an assembly at Kolozsvár/Cluj in Transylvania. Perényi was also invited<sup>34</sup>. The king was disappointed in his hopes for armed resistance. Ferdinand did not send enough troops to help Szapolyai, who decided to pay for the peace. On 18 September 1538, the orders came together in Kolozsvár/Cluj and they promised to help Szapolyai. In addition they asked the king to obtain the liberation of Perényi's son, who was still in captivity<sup>35</sup>.

After the Turkish menace passed, Szapolyai got married. His bride, Izabella, was brought from Poland to Hungary by Perényi and other noblemen<sup>36</sup>. At that time Perényi was seriously intent on changing party. On 3 July, however, in a long letter, he asked Thurzó to help him to switch political sides, and presented demands that served his future<sup>37</sup>. On 7 September he contacted Ferdinand again and in his memorandum he repeated his demands regarding his captive son and also Queen Izabella<sup>38</sup>. His conditions were met, and, after the death of Szapolyai in July 1540, he was no longer bound by his oath. On 12 September he swore fidelity to Ferdinand<sup>39</sup>. When King John died, the estates of Hungary elected his new-born son, John Sigismund, king. This was in direct violation of the peace of Nagyvárad/Grosswardein which had formally acknowledged Ferdinand as Szapolyai's successor, whether he left male issue or not. Ferdinand rewarded Perényi generously: he obtained new estates, the income from several mines, his possession of Patak was confirmed, and he acquired the offices of chancellor and captain general<sup>40</sup>. After Perényi's switch to the Habsburg side, he openly supported Ferdinand and pressed for the implementation of the Treaty of Nagyvárad/Grosswardein<sup>41</sup>.

Perényi was present at the first unsuccessful siege of Buda. In May 1541 Ferdinand sent 20,000 Hungarian, German and Czech soldiers to the castle under the command of Wilhelm Roggendorf, to take it from the party of the widow Izabella. Before Roggendorf arrived, Perényi blockaded the town. On seeing the Turks drawing closer and the besiegers failing, he retreated to Eger<sup>42</sup>. Meanwhile, the commissary of Ferdinand was conducting negotiations with Fráter György, who was willing to execute the Treaty of Nagyvárad. As a result, on 29 December 1541, the Treaty of Gyalu was concluded. The unifying of the kingdom became important again. However it was only possible when the Turks were finally forced from the land. In 1542, Ferdinand and Perényi's forces again started to besiege Pest next to Buda, under Joachim Brandenburg's command. They wanted to regain the town that was currently occupied by the Turks<sup>43</sup>. From then on, Perényi avoided military tasks. On 14 February 1542, he and several aristocratic families formed a league. The members of the alliance promised to defend each other, without undermining their loyalty to the king<sup>44</sup>.

Perényi remained an active politician, calling the orders to Ónod on 18 May 1542, and then, by 4 June, to Eger. However he could not avoid his destiny: he had made too many enemies over the course of the years. The Venetian delegate wrote on 11 September 1542 that the bishop of Eger wanted to convince Ferdinand that at least twenty aristocrats must be beheaded, "to save the country", although his motive was to regain possession of the bishopric Eger, that had been captured by Perényi earlier<sup>45</sup>. In a letter dated 5 October 1542, Ferdinand commanded his delegates to calm everybody about the arrest of Peter Perényi<sup>46</sup>. The letters dated 16 October 1542 said that Perényi was trapped and imprisoned in Vienna and in Wiener-Neustadt<sup>47</sup>. Despite the efforts of the orders and his family, Perényi was only released early in the year 1548, and died soon after. Many rumours circulated about him. He was charged with making pacts with the enemy and betraying the country.

Perényi's fate is tragic, because he was unable to recognize that he was only a part of the wider political fabric. He could satisfy his eagerness to gain more estates and power

in an illegal and violent way, but could not achieve his final aim of becoming king. For a long time he felt this aim was realistic. Ottoman political tactics allowed figures such as Perényi an important role. He could make the country, already torn into three pieces, even more divided, so that the Christians were not able to present a united front against the enemy. It was no coincidence that he was arrested by the Habsburgs at the same time as Valentinus Török and Stephen Maylád were imprisoned in Istanbul by the Turks. After the death of Szapolyai, there was no need for powerful aristocrats.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Péter Perényi's contemporary, the Catholic priest Szerémi, mainly asserted his immaturity and arrogance. However, we know that Szerémi was open to prejudices and treating gossip as fact. It is also noteworthy that, born after 1480, he chose to stay on Szapolyai's side after the battle of Mohács. Moreover, after the king's death he continued to serve his son, John Sigismund. When Szerémi wrote his memories in around 1545, he condemned Perényi as a man who had betrayed his sovereign several times and painted a dark portrait of the aristocrat<sup>48</sup>. Ferenc Forgách is a much more reliable source<sup>49</sup>. The bishop of Várad wrote a comprehensive and trustworthy work. His character sketches were generally dark but critical and fairly accurate. Born in 1535, he was also able to draw on oral sources. Forgách tried to explain events, to find and reveal motives. The question that occupied him was: who was responsible for the terrible situation in Hungary? Forgách believed that history depended on God but was established by human actions. Immoral thinking was responsible for immoral acts so he judged Perényi strictly: the magnate and his companions were beasts who ruined the country by their changing of allegiance<sup>50</sup>.

The unconditional 'Habsburgist' Istvánffy and Katona, the Jesuit historiographer who relied on his work, describe Perényi the same way: hesitating, illogical, vain and greedy<sup>51</sup>. He did not care about values crucial to the anti-reformationist Istvánffy, namely patriotism and royalism. Moreover, Perényi also turned his back on Catholicism. Both authors examine the situation in detail. Their works and rich sources are still vital in studying the history of the 16th century.

In his *Lexicon*, published in the first years of the 19th century, Budai claimed that although Perényi threw a huge feast after learning the news of Szapolyai's death, his switching of allegiance was neither betrayal nor ingratitude, since two years before, the magnates had taken part in the negotiations of the peace of Várad, and according to the contract, Ferdinand inherited the throne of Szapolyai<sup>52</sup>. The tone of this work is quite different from previous ones: Budai emphasized Perényi's role in expanding the Reformation, being the first Hungarian magnate who disseminated Luther's ideas. He spoke highly of Perényi's foresight in military matters, because the magnate gave useful pieces of advice when besieging Buda in 1541 and 1542, although the commanders-in-chief did not follow it.

In the 1930s, Árpád Tártsy, a professor of the Reformed Theological Academy of Sárospatak, presented a positive image of the magnate<sup>53</sup>. He pointed out that the

reconstruction of Perényi's character is often based on preconception. Although he tried to write *sine ira et studio*, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the role the magnate played in the expansion of the Reformation ensured a positive evaluation from Tárchy. He emphasized that Perényi's personality was more complicated than some interpretations describe and that he cannot be judged in "black and white" terms. Tárchy characterized Perényi as a young man well aware of his fortune and intelligence. He regarded Szapolyai as a protector, although the magnate may have appeared too short-tempered, foul-spoken and quick to anger. Tárchy emphasized that there were older and more experienced men among those who left the side of Szapolyai. He argued that Perényi is accused of making friends with the Turks from his own free will when in fact, he acted under pressure. Tárchy said that in getting involved with the negotiations between the two kings, Perényi changed from a young, irresponsible magnate into a mature aristocrat, primarily worried about his country. When he gave his son to the Turks, he must have expected him to be returned quickly and not to lose him forever.

The opinion of Gyula Szekfű may represent the *aurea mediocritas*<sup>54</sup>. Publishing between the two world wars, he had experienced living on the frontier of two world powers. Szekfű argues that national and individual interests combined almost naively in Perényi's decisions. He asserts that Perényi was one of the last representatives of the unruly aristocrats who did not respect any kings. He was the only one to use the term 'general' before the battle of Mohács, even after 1526. When changing side, Perényi named terms. His conditions included both national issues and selfish personal matters. He pledged his son but collected dozens more boys and girls to offer to the Turks in exchange for Ferenc. Szekfű paid special attention to the Sárospatak league, established in 1542, because this alliance shows the big landowners swearing to protect each other, and giving little weight to royal authority. He notes the personal loyalty and sagacious advice of Perényi at the sieges of Buda, and describes Perényi and his contemporaries as dynamic, eager men, still leading a good life.

In 2000, Géza Pálffy, chief of the younger generation of Hungarian historians, declared that Perényi was the most immoral of the magnates who changed parties<sup>55</sup>. According to Pálffy, who tries to re-evaluate early modern Hungarian history without the exaggerations of national romanticism, Perényi's only worthwhile deed was building the renaissance donjon in Sárospatak.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Palatine*: a court title of the highest rank, a special representative of the sovereign, e.g. deputy in the absence of the king; I. Nagy, *Magyarország családai czímerekkel és nemzékrendi táblákkal*, Budapest 1987-88. pp. 226-233.
- <sup>2</sup> I. Brodaries, *Igaz leírás a magyaroknak a törökökkel Mohácsnál vívott csatájáról*, Budapest 1983, p. 10.
- <sup>3</sup> Hungarian State Archives (MOL) DL 89132, DL 72185, DL 89137, DL 72195, DL 89153 MOL DL 57948, DL 57949, DL 72213, DL 47647 etc.

- <sup>4</sup> M. Istvánffy, *Historiarum De Rebus Hungaricis Liber*, Libris XXXIV. 1685. Lib. VIII. p. 52., Brodaries 1983. cit., p. 44., Gy. Szerémi, *Magyarország romlásáról*, Budapest 1979. p. 120. etc. Szerémi, *Magyarország* cit. p. 195, MOL Kam. lvt. Lymbus I. s. f. 2. 97-102. MOL DL 82732: the last will of Pálóczy.
- <sup>5</sup> V. Fraknoi, *Magyar országgügyi emlékek 1526-36, or 1537-45 (MOE)*, Budapest 1874-75. 1526-36. p. 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Bunyitai, Karácsonyi, Rapaics, *Egyháztörténelmi emlékek a magyarországi hitújítás korából. (ETE)*, Budapest 1902-1906, I. n. 279., p. 289.
- <sup>7</sup> *Supremus capitaneus partium regni Hungariae inferiorum (Oberhauptmann der Niederlanden in Ungarn* i.e. Captain general of lower Hungary. Voivode - Governor. ETE cit., III. n. 340., p. 323.
- <sup>8</sup> Szerémi, *Magyarország* cit. p. 140.
- <sup>9</sup> G. Barta, *Konzolidációs kísérlet Magyarországon a mohácsi csatavesztés után*, in "Századok", 1977, 4, p. 641.
- <sup>10</sup> J. Bessenyei, *Ferdinánd király és a magyarországi arisztokrácia*, in "Történelmi Szemle", 2003, 45, pp. 93-107.
- <sup>11</sup> Á. Tárczy, *Perényi Peter magatartása, különös tekintettel pártváltozásaira*, Sárospatak 1930, p. 7.
- <sup>12</sup> MOE cit., 1526-36. p. 125-128.
- <sup>13</sup> MOE cit., 1526-36. p. 143.
- <sup>14</sup> ETE cit., I. n. 343., p. 342.
- <sup>15</sup> M. Détszy, *Sárospatak vára*, Sárospatak 2002. p. 33.
- <sup>16</sup> MOE cit., 1526-36. p. 217. Bethlen says (p. 104.) that he was promoted only in 1528, but earlier studies confirm that Ferdinand promoted him on 4 November 1527, after he was crowned.
- <sup>17</sup> Istvánffy, *Historiarum* cit., 1685, Lib. X, p. 11, Tárczy, *Perényi* cit., p. 12.
- <sup>18</sup> MOE cit., 1526-36. p. 313.
- <sup>19</sup> MOE cit., 1526-36. p. 317.
- <sup>20</sup> J. Bessenyei, *Enyingi Török Bálint*, Budapest 1994, p. 48, n. 65 (the letter of Peter Beregi to Ferenc Dobó, MOL M. Kamara A. publ. (e142) Fasc. 20. n. 56. Buda, 26 April 1531).
- <sup>21</sup> MOE cit., 1526-36. p. 325.
- <sup>22</sup> J. Zermegh, *Rerum gestarum inter Ferdinandum et Ioannem Hungariae reges commentarius ad editionem Amsteladamensem anni MDCLXII. Recognitus. Observationes suas addidit Carolus Andreas Bel*, in J. Schwandtner, *Scriptores Hungaricarum veteres ac genuine*, 1, 3, 1766-68, pp. 403-404.
- <sup>23</sup> Tárczy, *Perényi* cit., p. 21.
- <sup>24</sup> ETE cit., II, n. 182, p. 210.
- <sup>25</sup> Zermegh, *Rerum gestarum* cit., Lib. II., pp. 406-407; M. Sztáray, *História Perényi Ferenc kizabadulásáról. Perényi Peter élete és halála*, Budapest 1985, p. 189.
- <sup>26</sup> ETE cit., III, n. 340, p. 323.
- <sup>27</sup> Istvánffy, *Historiarum* cit., 1685, Lib. XI, p. 118.
- <sup>28</sup> MOE cit., 1526-36, pp. 594-595, and Sztáray, *História* cit., pp. 112-113.
- <sup>29</sup> I. Katona, *Historia Critica Regum Hungariae stirpis Austriacae*, Claudiopoli [Cluj] 1797, p. 807-809. During the last six years of John's reign (1534-1540), under the guidance of the Paulician monk, Fráter György or George Martinuzzi (the last great statesman of old Hungary), his kingdom enjoyed stability and prosperity given the difficult circumstances of the period. Martinuzzi held the balance exactly between the emperor and the Porte.
- <sup>30</sup> Á. Károlyi, *Adalék a nagyváradi béke s az 1536-38. évek történetéhez*, in "Századok", 1878, p. 820.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 823.

- <sup>32</sup> ETE cit., III, n. 218, pp. 204-205.
- <sup>33</sup> F. Bethlen, *Erdély története I. 1526-1538*, Budapest-Kolozsvár [Cluj] 2000, p. 168.
- <sup>34</sup> MOE cit., 1537-45, p. 45.
- <sup>35</sup> MOE cit., 1537-45, p. 50.
- <sup>36</sup> Zermegh, *Rerum gestarum* cit., 2.T. Lib. II p. 413. and Istvánffy, *Historiarum* cit., Lib. XIII, p. 147. o
- <sup>37</sup> ETE cit., III, pp. 457-463, n. 472.
- <sup>38</sup> ETE cit., III, pp. 485-487, n. 493.
- <sup>39</sup> Tárczy, *Perényi* cit., p. 33.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>42</sup> F. Bethlen, *Erdély története II. 1538-1571*, Budapest - Kolozsvár [Cluj] 2002, p. 72.
- <sup>43</sup> F. Budai, *Magyar ország polgári históriájára való lexicon a XVI. század végéig*, Nagyvárád 1805, p. 89.
- <sup>44</sup> ETE cit., IV, p. 6, and *Magyar történet*, pp. 193-194.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, p. 96.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, pp. 99-101.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, pp. 103-104; A. Szirmay, *Notitia Historica Comitatus Zempleniensis*, Buda 1804, p. 63. E. Hösch, K. Nehring, *Austro-Turcica 1541-1552. Diplomatische Akten des habsburgischen Gesandtschaftsverkehrs mit der Hohen Pforte im Zeitalter Süleymans des Prächtigen*, Munich 1995, *passim*.
- <sup>48</sup> Szerémi, *Magyarország* cit.
- <sup>49</sup> Forgách cit.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 319-320.
- <sup>51</sup> Istvánffy, *Historiarum* cit., *passim*; Katona cit., *passim*.
- <sup>52</sup> Budai, *Magyar* cit., *passim*.
- <sup>53</sup> Tárczy, *Perényi* cit., *passim*.
- <sup>54</sup> Szekfű cit, *passim*.
- <sup>55</sup> G. Pálffy, *A 16. század története*, Budapest 2000.
- <sup>56</sup> MOL (Hungarian State Archives) Kam. Lvt. Lymbus I. s. f. 2. 97-102. l.

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## SOURCE

This deposition was recorded in 1577 when an investigation began into the Perényi estate. Unusually, the text was recorded in Hungarian, so it is also valuable for linguists.

"1. Vekey Janos nemes ember hetven eztendős, megh eskwtht es hiti szerent ezt valla, hogy Paloczi Antal zolgaia volt akkoron, mikor Paloczi Antal az mohacsi hadban ment volt. Az előtt harmadnapval hivata engemet es monda nekem, menj el the az Thaar zekerevel Aniachköben es azt hagia nekem, hogy sem eyel se napval le ne szálljak az leveles ladarul, migh Aniachköben nem juttok, es enis utannad megiek, ugymond, harmadnap magam, es az leveles ladakat rakasd az toromban való botban az fölső varban, es onnan ugy induljak uramval Palóczi Antallal az mohaczi hadban, es Paloczi Antal ott vesze az mohaci hadban. Es azt is tugia, hog' Paloczi Katalin aszony fiai, Chiaboli Imreh es Raskay Sigmond, Istvan es Mihali birtak az mohac hada utan mindenestöl az egez Paloczi joszogot, az az Patakot, Uyhelt, Cheket, Dedest, Aniachköth, Zolnokot, Helmezcet, Zemplint, Palochot, kyvalkepen Cheket, Kys faludot, Iesztrebet, Imreget, Szwürmeg es Kysuylakot, Körtvelest, Radot, Sziniert, Nagy kewest, Helmezcet, Kys kewest, Zolnakot, Ricziet [...] es hogy onnet haza iöttünk, az mohaczon valo veszedelemből, ennekem Chiaholi es Mogiorosi Jonos ugy adak az uyhely dezsmassagot, es mykor az deszman voltam, hatth ugj Prini Peter tizenhat forintval Sokliosrul es Uyhelben megh szalla az remeteknel, es az Uyhel polgarok haza menenek ayandekal, es monda Prini Peter az polgaroknak: no, io polgarok, uratok ott veszet. Azert ne fellietek, mert Istennek segitsegeből en akarom gondotokat viselni. Es mondanak az polgarok: megh zolgalliuk Nagysagod mint kegielmes urunknak, de megh az my előby urunknak Attia fiai kezeben vagiunk, addigh sehoiva nem mozdulhatunk. Es mond Prini Peter nekyek: no, legietek vesztegselg cziak polgarok, nem sokaygh lesztek eo kegiek alatt. Es hogy az polgarok onnet haza jövenek, azonnal megh beszellig ezeket nekem. Ez vallatas leott Pwnkösd hovanak 13 napian, es azutan Prini Peter birta."<sup>56</sup>

“1. John Vekey, 70 year old nobleman, stated under oath that he served Antal Pálóczy, when he went to war on the field of Mohács. Three days before his departure, he called for me and told me to go to Ajnácskő by cart and commanded not to get off the mailbox [a wooden case for keeping letters] day and night, until I got there. He said he was going to follow me on the third day, and commanded me to hide the mailbox in the tower of the upper castle, then accompany him to Mohács. He lost his life there. He (the villain) knows that after the battle of Mohács, the Pálóczy estate [the names of the settlements are listed] was possessed by Katalin Pálóczy and his sons, Imre Chaholy, Zsigmond, István and Mihály Ráskay. When we came home from the battle, Chaholy and János Mogyorosi gave me the tithes of Újhely, and when I levied the tithe, Peter Perényi arrived from Siklós with 16 fl. [floreni, forints], and stayed at the hermits' place. The citizens of Újhely presented a gift to him, and then Peter Perényi told them: 'your master is dead. But do not be afraid, because I am going to take care of you with the help of God.' And the citizens said: 'we are going to serve you as our master, but as long as we are in the hands of our former master's kinsmen, we can not move.' And then Peter Perényi told them: 'stand quite still, citizens, you will not be in their hands for a long time.' And as the citizens came home, they told me all these things.”