CHAPTER ONE

THE HOLY CROWN OF HUNGARY, VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

The reader at this point will certainly ask: how it is possible that a national relic of such great significance has never been properly examined in order to attain satisfactory conclusions [about its origin]. The answer is as contradictory as unexpected: precisely because such importance was attached to the crown; because it has been treated as the greatest national treasure.

Kálmán Benda and Erik Fügedi on the Holy Crown

The history of political ideas reveals continuities and unexpected revivals. Too frequently it proves premature to pronounce a political idea dead. A well-known example, which demonstrates that major political ideas hardly ever disappear without trace, has been the re-emergence of the natural law theory which had spent years in the doldrums while utilitarianism dominated political philosophy in Britain and America. Ideas whose impact is more limited and confined to a single national society could, likewise, unexpectedly revive after their apparent demise.

When over forty years ago the present writer, working towards his DPhil in Oxford, took up the doctrine of the Holy Crown of Hungary, he thought that the subject was of purely historical interest, or at least one without any direct relevance to Hungarian politics, present and future. The reason why this assumption looked obvious at the time was not even

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primarily because Hungary, as a part of the Soviet bloc, was ruled by communists who rejected and sneered at any political tradition of the old order, which they replaced. The reason went deeper: it was generally taken for granted, even by opponents of the Communist regime, that political traditions, like the ideas of the Holy Crown, however important they had been in past centuries, were closely tied to the institution of the monarchy that had irretrievably perished by the end of the Second World War. By 1945 the whole traditional social order that used to maintain the institutions of the kingdom was gone. It is true that even after 1945 some émigré groups of the displaced political élite, having escaped to the West from Nazi or Communist rule, cherished old political traditions including ideas about the Holy Crown. In the 1960s a Hungarian scholar, Charles d’Eszlary, published in France a three-volume history of the Hungarian political institutions from the Middle Ages, considered largely in terms of the Holy Crown doctrine (the doctrine was a late-nineteenth-century innovation, of which more later). He must have been a ‘last Mohican’. For the world at large, so far as it took cognisance of Hungarian constitutional matters, the doctrine was as dead as the dodo.

Yet, the reports of the death of the Holy Crown tradition turned out to be greatly exaggerated. Come 1989, Eastern Europe’s annus mirabilis, Soviet power in the region collapsed and, together with that, Communist rule. Hungary, like a few other former satellites, became a parliamentary democracy. There was no question of restoring either the monarchy or the old social order. And yet the Holy Crown, like that fabled Egyptian bird, the phoenix, miraculously came forth with new life. The revival, as in the past, touched on the visible St Stephen’s crown as well as the invisible crown of ideas. Further, what makes the revival notable is that, as so frequently in the past, the ‘crown question’ stirred up an unusually large amount of political dust. Indeed, at one point the Academy of Sciences

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4 I am informed that after 1945 the Law Faculty at the University in Budapest had on its noticeboard: ‘No dissertation will be considered on the law of rape [the Red Army had just run over the country] and on the doctrine of the Holy Crown’.

5 Even in Hungary not everybody changed their political beliefs after the War. I recall a meeting with an old fogy in Budapest in 1955 before his arrest, secret trial by the ÁVH and subsequent death in prison, who thought that the Russians would soon leave Hungary when a nádor (palatine) was elected and the monarchy restored after a plebiscite.


7 A perplexing case is Kim Lane Scheppele’s who writes that by moving the crown to parliament (see below) ‘it has become a symbol concentrating the dark passions of Hungarian conservatism, particularly those that move toward fascism’, ‘The Constitutional Basis of Hungarian Conservatism’, in East European Constitutional Review, 9 (Fall 2000), 4, pp. 51–57 (51).