THE ETERNAL BODY: THE BIRTH OF THE PANTHEON OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN BUDAPEST

INTRODUCTION

For many decades, the Pantheon of the Labor Movement situated in the Kerepesi cemetery of Budapest used to be regarded by the then ruling Hungarian communist party as one of its principal commemorative constructions. Nowadays the building stands abandoned. On the one hand, while the era of the communist politics of history seems to be over for ever, this is precisely why the monument may seem familiar to us with its megalomaniac attempt in the history of the re-interpretations of the national past. On the other hand, this monumentality is just what renders the story of the Pantheon distant and unfamiliar: what could be the origins of this obsession towards the dead?

The memorial, as we know it today, gained its form in 1959 by the inauguration of its most significant and architecturally the most monumental part: the mausoleum of the labour movement. The mausoleum itself consisted of different elements. Its central building was the mausoleum proper containing urns of cremated corpses; it was completed by six pillars designed to commemorate those who were buried outside the cemetery; a row of honorary graves, considered to be the most prestigious burial site for those who were not cremated, was situated in front of the central building. A plot by the side of the mausoleum was opened to receive the remnants of less significant persons, while four other plots and a so-called “heroes’ plot” were counted among the parts of the Pantheon of the Labor Movement as well. Although the mausoleum had been inaugurated in 1959, the final shape of the Pantheon was the result of an ongoing process that lasted until the middle of the 1960s: partly because of construction works, and also because of the re-burial of corpses in order to attach them to the Pantheon. In its final form the communist pantheon in the Kerepesi cemetery consisted of approximately 500 tombs. Apparently, the ultimate purpose of the creation of the Pantheon was to gather the graves of all significant communist personalities in one place in order to form one outstanding site of cult and memory.¹

The idea of a martyrs' sepulchre derived from the classical communist period that preceded the outbreak of the popular anti-Stalinist revolution in Budapest on 23 October 1956. Remembering the martyrs was an important issue in the communist party even before the establishment of the dictatorship. The Hungarian Communist Party organized a commemoration for its wartime martyrs on 27 July 1945 where the idea of their re-burial and provisional sepulchre was raised, followed by the proposal of a memorial site for communist martyrs a year later, in the Spring of 1946. A list of victims that highlighted the role of communist resistance fighters during the war was established while the five communist martyrs of the period between 1919 and 1944 were to receive a common grave and a honorary re-burial. A competition for a Martyrs' Sepulchre was advertised in 1947. Nonetheless its winning work was not appropriate to be raised in a cemetery, and the National Propaganda Department renewed the competition on 13 July 1948. The leadership of the Hungarian Workers' Party proposed on 18 January 1949 - soon after its eventual take-over in 1948 - that a common sepulchre for five great martyrs of the party together with the victims of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 should be raised. The submission did not specify the names of the five great persons, but stressed that the monument ought to occupy a busy public square in a proletarian district. The memorial was to be bestowed in the cemetery in a separate plot with statues of a man's height. The decision provided a four weeks deadline to accomplish the construction work and János Kádár and György Marosán were appointed as the responsible persons for supervision. The building of the martyrs' sepulchre was considered a task of party propaganda in order to diminish the widespread ignorance of the communist martyrs. The party leadership planned to issue an album commemorating 145 fighters of the movement in autumn 1950 and the following April (1951) the Institute for Party History was instructed to elaborate a proposal concerning the commemoration of a few heroes and martyrs of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic. Although the attention of the party was to cover a wide range of martyrs and even the sepulchre was planned to include various periods, the monument was never realized before 1956, the year of the anti-Stalinist revolution.

The actual construction of the burial site began after 1956 with the very practical and pressing problem of the Hungarian communist party to find an appropriate place for the communists who died during the revolution of 1956. The party leadership considered these persons the great heroes of the nation, therefore decided to bury them in the Kerepesi cemetery, which was, and still is today, the most prestigious par excellence national site of burial. This cemetery

4 MOL 276/86/14.
5 MOL 276/54/26.
6 MOL 276/86/73.
7 MOL 276/86/75.