

## **Praise the Lord!** **Albert Szenczi Molnár, 1574-1633**

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Molnár means miller in English and, in fact, Albert Szenczi Molnár's father was a well-to-do miller in the market town of Szenc (Szencz according to contemporary spelling) in north-western Hungary; hence his full Hungarian name: Szenczi Molnár Albert. He was born in Szenc in 1574 and died in 1633 in Kolozsvár, Transylvania; his gravestone still stands in the cemetery of Házsongárd.

Molnár spent more than 30 of his 59 years abroad as student, writer and scholar, beloved and respected; yet, after his return to his homeland in 1625, he was ignored and died forsaken in poverty. Still, no one in the history of the Reformed Church of Hungary had such a lasting impact upon its theology, piety and congregational life as Albert Molnár. Moreover, Albert Molnár had a decisive influence upon the development of Hungarian poetical forms and the Hungarian language in general.

Molnár lived in the period of Hungarian history when the country was divided among three powers. Its middle part was occupied by the Turkish empire, the East and Southeast, Transylvania, was an independent principality, while the northern and western sector was under the rule of the Habsburg king. In his youth, Albert Molnár witnessed first the consolidation of the Reformation, then the rising Counter-Reformation and the struggle for religious freedom championed by the princes of Transylvania: Stephen Bocskay and Gabriel Bethlen; in his later years the Thirty Years War raged all over Europe.

Albert Molnár began his studies at the age of 10. We know the story of his life quite accurately, for he kept a diary together with a kind of scrap-book with greetings of teachers and friends—among them such personalities as Theodore Beza (Calvin's successor in Geneva), the astronomer Johannes Kepler and Prince Gabriel Bethlen. These, together with hundreds of his letters, have been preserved and published. Other valuable biographical data can be distilled from the

dedicatory prefaces to his printed books. These are written mostly in Latin. Latin was the international language of scientists, scholars and diplomats, even of merchants who engaged in international trade. The ten-year-old child had to learn to read, write and speak Latin at the same time he began to learn his Hungarian alphabet.

Incredible as it sounds, at the age of 12, Albert Molnár, together with some other youngsters and an adventurous tutor, wandered across the country in search for a new place to study. He landed at a place called Gönc. The fame of this place comes from its Reformed pastor, Gáspár Károlyi, the first translator of the full Bible into Hungarian (1590). At the time Molnár was in Gönc the work of translation, carried out by Károlyi and several co-workers, was in full swing. At a most sensitive age, Molnár lived in the atmosphere of scholarly excitement, in the world of books and dictionaries, and in the midst of great hopes that the Word of God would be made available to the people in their own language. Molnár later made a note in his diary that in Gönc he had listened to many heated discussions about theology and linguistics among Károlyi and his associates.

Having finished his primary education, Molnár entered the College of Debrecen to pursue courses in grammatics, poetics and rhetoric. The discipline of the school was very strict. Morning prayers were at 6 and there were classes until evening. Missing service in the chapel, skipping classes, galavanting in the city, excessive drinking, wearing too modern garments—all drew punishment: the stick or even incarceration. Spiritual food was aplenty, food for the body much less. The school was poor and the students even poorer: they ate when good-hearted citizens invited them to their table or gave pots of food and bread to the mendicants, the students going house to house begging for food.

Albert Molnár spent a year and a half in Debrecen and one record has it that he read every Hungarian book he was able to lay his hands on. The books had to be taken away from him to prevent him from neglecting his Latin. From Debrecen he returned to Gönc where he became the messenger who carried the manuscripts and the proofs of the first Hungarian edition of the Bible between Gönc and the printshop in Vizsoly. What an experience it was to see the printing press which, in a short time, produced 480 thousand sheets (the Bible was printed in 800 bulky copies)!

Soon the sixteen-year-old Molnár proceeded to the town of Kassa to become tutor to a burgher's son. Here he saw a Latin-German dictionary. Teaching his Hungarian pupil Latin, how he wished he had a

Latin-Hungarian dictionary! But Molnár wanted to study not to teach. So he decided to go to Wittenberg, Germany, to the cradle of the Reformation. Just like that. Students, in those times, travelled by the "apostles' horses", that is: on foot. There were no hotels, either. But that was no problem. When evening came he would knock at the door of the village pastor or teacher, who would gladly welcome him: the itinerant student was a source of news, a kind of "living newspaper." For the student such visits meant not only supper and bed but also the opportunity to make precious contacts, to secure sponsors to help him in his studies.

Albert Molnár was 16 when he left his native country. It took him five weeks to make it to Wittenberg. In his loneliness he was miraculously comforted: the first man who spoke to him in the foreign city greeted him in Hungarian; he was another student from the home country. But Wittenberg was Luther's city, while Albert Molnár wanted to hear the Reformed interpretations of God's Word. This set him out westward, to the center of Reformed theology, Heidelberg. He must have been an expert wanderer; just look at the map: he made it in 13 days from Wittenberg to Heidelberg. His next place of study was Strassburg where, at the age of 21, he received his bachelor's degree. (The wreath of laurel is still in his scrap-book.) In the time span of eleven years he attended eight different schools. Today we would call it school-hopping; then, it was the sure sign of financial hardship. Also, the desire to hear the best teachers.

Now Albert Molnár could have returned to Hungary to assume a pastorate. But he wanted to acquire still more knowledge and a master's degree. Not in Strassburg, however. First, he had no money. Even for his wreath of laurel he had to give a promissory note for two silver pieces. But the greater trouble was theology. In the continuous struggle between Lutherans and Reformed, the Lutherans gained power in Strassburg. To take holy communion in the Reformed way, Molnár used to go to a small neighboring community, Buschweiler. When he was found missing in chapel in Strassburg at Pentecost communion in 1596, he was asked where he had been. He promptly admitted the reason of his absence. Equally promptly he was forced to leave. It was done in a roundabout way: *he* had to ask permission to be dismissed. Molnár wrote that since he would rather follow the peace of his conscience than the faith of the city, he wanted to leave. The pious answer was that he would not be held back against his conscience. Before leaving the city he went to church where the pastor

was just attacking the Reformed teaching. To Molnár's great satisfaction—as he noted in his diary—lightning struck the church.

The direction now was southward and the goal Geneva, the city of Calvin. Well armed with letters of introduction, Molnár called on Theodore Beza, the saintly old successor of John Calvin. Molnár was graciously received and as the old man offered him white bread and wine he pointed to the picture of Calvin on the wall: "This is my father in Christ." Albert Molnár, the 22 year old wanderer from Hungary, was quite certain that Calvin was also his father in Christ.

The next project was Italy: all the great reformers had seen Rome, Albert Molnár could not miss it either. With all the suspicions of a Calvinist but with all the curiosity of a humanist he visited "papist" shrines; he zig-zagged through Italy like a modern American tourist (only he saw more of it). In Rome he was accorded brotherly hospitality by students of the Collegium Hungaricum, in an (as we would call it today) ecumenical spirit.

Back in Heidelberg (mostly on foot) he did not have a copper penny to his name. So he went around hunting for benefactors, collecting a gold coin here, a silver there. In Heidelberg the plague was raging which was a great help to Molnár: many of the professors and students fled the city so there was room for him in the college. But when they returned he was put out. On Easter Sunday of 1597 he spent the day in church; when the doors were locked he went to the local pastor for help and advice. He got 5 pennies to buy supper . . . All through these years it was a precarious existence: when he went to bed at night he did not know if he would have dinner the next day and as he ate his dinner he would not know if he would have a bed to sleep in that night. He rose at 4 in the morning and chanted hymns in Hungarian, German, Latin and Greek; and he prayed, in tears, because he would not give up. Amidst starvation and uncertainty he would pursue his studies and this in such a brilliant way that all his teachers would praise him and would give him emphatic letters of recommendation.

In 1599 Molnár decided to go home—but just for a visit to find new patrons and to see his dying father. For he had great plans and he followed them through to the last letter. After having secured two wealthy sponsors, burghers from Nagyszombat and Kassa, he returned to Germany.

His first dream to come true was a Latin-Hungarian dictionary. (We may recall how Molnár, as a young tutor in Kassa, wished there had been one.) In six months the work was ready for printing. Easy to

say it now, but we must think what enormous difficulties he had to cope with. Molnár's dictionary was the very first one of its kind. He could take a dictionary in Latin to pick the words but he had to find the Hungarian equivalents himself. It was not only the problem of finding them, many he had to create, describe, explain. The work, ready in 1604, had become the precursor of all Hungarian dictionaries written since. It was the private enterprise of a thirty-year-old wanderer-scholar whose only motivation was to raise the cultural level of his country and to link it to Western culture.

In those times there were no publishers, only printers. The authors had to pay for the printing of their works. How could one get money for this purpose? By dedicating the book to a wealthy sponsor, a king or a prince, a city or a college. The money thus obtained would cover the cost of printing and the livelihood of the author as well. There were no royalties, the author would receive about 25 copies he could sell. The rest of the copies would be sold by the printer as part of the cost of printing.

With his dictionary Molnár had a great idea: dedicate it to Emperor Rudolph! The dedicatory letter had to be printed in advance and bound in the book. Then the author would present it, taking the chance if the sponsor would accept it or not. There were many disappointed authors indeed!

Albert Molnár had to go to Prague to see the Emperor. So he made his way to Prague on foot, logging along copies of the dictionary. He was well armed with letters of introduction to both scholars and officials in the imperial court. The greatest of them came from Johannes Kepler, the famous scholar and the Emperor's astronomer. Through Kepler's mediation it was easy to get into the Emperor's presence: the dictionary was graciously accepted and Molnár was given 50 florins—quite a sum considering the state of the imperial treasury.

Kepler and other new friends in Prague made sure that the news of Molnár's acceptance by the Emperor travelled all over Europe's academic community, so that this sponsor of high standing should prompt others to follow suit. Still, the greatest gain for Molnár was Kepler's friendship. Kepler closed one of his letters with these words: "God provides for his people in such turbulent times; love me . . . your faithful friend, Johannes Kepler."<sup>1</sup> It is not hard to imagine what it meant to Molnár: there was the imperial mathematician, the Emperor's personal astronomer, the world-famous scholar, and here

was a young Hungarian scholar-to-be, without position or status—and the great man called him his friend!

His success with the dictionary prompted Molnár to pursue his second dream. The Reformation favored congregational singing and Hungarians loved to sing. Yet, the hymns available somehow could not gain popularity—neither the music, nor the words. Molnár's idea was to translate the biblical Psalms as they had been set into poetical form by the men from Geneva: Beza and Marot with the music of Bourgeois; in other words; the Geneva Psalter. Molnár did not know French but he had heard these Psalms sung in Geneva and he sung them himself in the German version. He wrote: "I want my Hungarian people to weep with these Psalms just as they weep in Basel." It took him 99 days to complete the job. He followed the German version but a French pastor helped him compare them with the French original. Molnár created a masterpiece. Since the first edition of 1607 there have been more than a hundred printings of these 150 Psalms in Hungarian and in the course of 360 years hardly any linguistic or poetic changes were made: they are being sung today exactly as then. Thus the best critic of his work has been the Hungarian Reformed congregation, and it is not hard to predict that as long as there will be Hungarian Reformed Psalm singing in the churches the people will "raise their hearts to God," "praise the Great Shepherd" and "proclaim His mercy" as interpreted by Albert Molnár.

At this time Molnár just left the city of Altorf, where he had studied for a while and had been tutoring at private homes. His favorite professor, Konrad Rittershausen, wrote these words in his letter of recommendation: "Albertus Molnár was an exile because of his love for knowledge, not to forget his homeland but to gather knowledge and experience in order to be capable to serve there later."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Molnár had still other plans to serve his Hungarian nation from Germany. To realize them he found a new, mighty sponsor in the person of Maurice, the Elector of Hessen, himself a scholar, a patron of literature and higher learning. Molnár must have had a winsome personality and also the ability to present his projects very convincingly. When he was presented to the prince he was invited to join the prince's family on a boat trip at the end of which he was dismissed with a letter to the rector of the University of Marburg with the order to give Molnár free tuition, room and board as the prince's gift.

The new project was the Bible. The first full translation of the Hungarian Bible published in 1590 was bulky, very expensive and

unavailable on the book-market. Molnár wanted a Bible small in size, easily to be handled, cheap enough to be accessible to the public; he also wanted to correct the many typographical errors made by the non-Hungarian printer. And Molnár did it again: a greatly revised version, nicely printed. The first two editions yielded 3,000 copies. There was one more obstacle to overcome: it was the age of the Counter-Reformation and the Bibles had to be smuggled into Hungary. The Bibles were packed in barrels and marked as "other merchandise." The shipments got through because Molnár soon received letters telling him of the joy that the Word of God could now be read by the common people.

The Elector Maurice spoke many languages, even some Hungarian. The reason for this was that on the maternal line he was a descendant of the Árpáds, the royal house of Hungary, through—as we call her today—St. Elizabeth of Hungary (her grave is still visible in Marburg). Maurice wanted to learn the language well and so he commissioned Molnár to write a book of Hungarian grammar.<sup>3</sup> Again he produced a work usable up to this day; and again a first of its kind. It contained sections on phonetics, spelling, grammar, syntax, etc. It is acknowledged that these works, the dictionary, the psalms, the Bible, the book on grammar, had a codifying effect on the Hungarian literary language.

Now Molnár really could have returned to Hungary to take a regular teaching position there. As a matter of fact, he had an invitation to be a teacher at Sárospatak. His friends and benefactors in Hungary pleaded with him in many letters to come home and utilize his knowledge to the benefit of his "own poor people." But Molnár first wanted to get married. He was 35, after all. He did not have much experience with women ever since years earlier he fell in love with the daughter of a glass merchant's widow in Heidelberg—at first sight—but was rejected. Reason: how could an itinerant student support a family? Result: Molnár had a nervous breakdown complicated by some strange illness which left him unconscious for days; delirious, he thought his friends to be angels and devils fighting over him. It may have been a mild form of the plague.

Now, at last, he married the daughter of a professor in Marburg, Kunigunda Wildpetter, a young divorcée whose former husband, also a teacher, had run away and turned to Judaism. She was granted a divorce on the grounds of desertion. There was a big wedding in Oppenheim.

They returned to Hungary in 1612 where Molnár became the chaplain at the court of one of the country's richest aristocrats, the Count Ferenc Batthyányi. But he did not stay long. Maybe his family couldn't adjust to village life, maybe Molnár had no experience for the pastorate, or maybe it was his new dream: to establish a Hungarian print-shop where he could publish books for his people. After some delay, he made his way to the court of the great Prince of Transylvania, Gabriel Bethlen. He was presented to the Prince in Fogaras on February 14, 1615. Bethlen promptly offered him a professorship at the college in Gyulafejervár. But this was not what Molnár wanted and he humbly rejected the offer by saying that his family was afraid of the possibility of Turkish attacks. Bethlen understood and dismissed him by writing these words in his scrap-book: "Stimulus dedit aemula virtus."

They returned to Germany, to Oppenheim. Here, he first became choirmaster, then headmaster of the city school. It wasn't a high position but it meant a secure livelihood. He knew the city, he had many friends, several of his books had been printed here. At the age of 43 he looked forward to a quiet life. Everything changed, however, when he received Prince Bethlen's great commission: translate into Hungarian the chief theological work of John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Molnár welcomed this beautiful opportunity. Hungarian Reformed theology was based on Calvin's interpretation but only through mediation, not through direct study. The knowledge of the *Institutes* was needed for both the theological consolidation of the Reformed church and the defense against the attacks of the Counter-Reformation. This is why a Hungarian translation was so necessary. In the course of his work, completed in 1624, Albert Molnár also laid the foundation and created the Hungarian theological language. Simultaneously with the work on the *Institutes*, Molnár translated and published a book of sermons by the famous German preacher Scultetus and a small prayer book for the use of pious women.

It was history's irony that while working on this translation, in Heidelberg, the city was besieged and finally taken by the mercenaries of Tilly (1622) and Molnár was not only robbed of all of his belongings (except his books) but also tortured for money. He did not want to stay in Transylvania for fear of the Turks and now, in the West, he suffered all the miseries of war.

Now he felt that he had completed all his plans: to Hungarian theologians he gave Calvin's *Institutes*, to those who wished to visit

Hungary a Hungarian grammar, to Hungarians who wanted to study Latin a dictionary, to the faithful people a handy Bible, sermons and a prayer-book, and to the congregation a book of Psalms fit to be sung at worship. At this time it was he who wanted to go home. Together with his family he arrived at the court of Prince Bethlen, now in Kassa, in 1625. With the exception of brief intervals, he had spent 34 years abroad—it was time to repatriate.

We know very little of his last years. His diary stopped and no letters are extant from this period. For a short while he was supported by Prince Bethlen; he was probably schoolmaster in Kassa. In 1629 he appears in Kolozsvár. This was after the death of the Prince and we can safely assume that Molnár was hoping to receive a gift from the Prince's legacy—not so much money but a position. There was nothing in the Prince's will for Molnár. From several contemporary remarks we know that from this time on he lived in poverty; abandoned and forsaken, he died in 1633. He was the victim of the plague.

Why was he forsaken? We can only guess. The best conjecture is that Molnár, the modern scholar, Western-oriented, who followed what today we would call a "liberal" interpretation of Calvin's theology, just did not find his place in his own church and country ruled and dominated by István Geleji Katona, the Reformed bishop, rigidly orthodox in theology, cruelly authoritarian in church government. Knowing Molnár, he would not compromise—so there was no job, no support, and there were no sponsors. A single sponsor happened to send him money in 1630, a rich nobleman, Ferenc Darholcz, for whom he translated a book about "The Supreme Good".

At the time of his death contemporary scholars wrote such epitaphs: "Germany gave him assistance, his homeland only exile;" "the only thing Transylvania gave him was his grave."<sup>4</sup>

We could well call the life of Albert Szenczi Molnár a tragic one. He himself, however, never complained, only prayed to God to help him in his endeavors. He chose this kind of life. Instead of returning home after the customary few years of study and getting settled, he continued his life as an itinerant scholar tiring his body and eyes, as he wrote it in his diary. Why? He gave the answer himself, a hundred times always the same: "Spending time at the famous academies among great teachers I am not after knowledge to bring worldly riches; I desire knowledge so I can help the most people in our suffering homeland."<sup>5</sup>

The life of Albert Szenczi Molnár did not end in 1633. He was consumed by the fire of the Spirit only to shine through the centuries

like a comet. He loved his Lord with heart and talent. No better words can be found to characterize his life than his own as he translated the 150th Psalm:

Az Úrnak nevét dicsérvén,  
És minden lelkes állat  
Dicsérje az nagy Urat,  
Dicsőség Istennek, Amen.

(Praising the name of the Lord,  
Every being with a soul  
Praise the great Lord.  
Glory be to God, Amen.)

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Some of Szenczi Molnár's works are not extant any more. We know only from his other works that they had existed. On the other hand, many of his works as well as some of the books and articles listed below can be found in North American libraries with a good collection of Hungarian material.

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- \_\_\_\_\_, "Zur Geschichte der Faust-Sage in Ungarn. Gesang des Albert Molnár" [Concerning the history of the Faust-Saga in Hungary. The song of Albert Molnár]. *Acta Litteraria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* Vol. 4, Nos. 1-2 (1963), pp. 3-16.

Turóczi-Trostler, József. "Szcenci Molnár Albert Heidelbergben" [Albert Szcenci Molnár in Heidelberg]. *Filológiai Közlöny* Vol. I, Nos. 1-2 (1955), pp. 9-18 and 139-162.

The 400th anniversary of Szcenci Molnár's birth was marked by the appearance of commemorative articles on him in Hungarian periodicals all over the world. Significant of them, and used in the preparation of this study, were the following:

Pávich, Zsuzsánna. "Szcenci Molnár Albert, 1574-1634," *Református Egyház*, Vol. XXVI, No. 7 (July 1974), pp. 145-148.

Csomasz Tóth, Kálmán. "Négyszáz év halhatatlanság" [Four hundred years of immortality]. *Theológiai Szemle*, 1974, nos. 9-10, pp. 272-276.

The Hungarian literary monthly, *Kortárs*, dedicated its August, 1974 issue to the anniversary of Szcenci Molnár's birth. It contained essays and poems by Géza Feja, Sándor Weöres, András Sütő, György Somlyó, Jenő Kiss, Magda Szabó, László Király, András Fodor, Aladár Lászlóffy, Domonkos Szilágyi, Ferenc Szemler, Lajos Létay, Sándor Kányádi and Géza Páskándi. There is also an editorial in this issue concerning the anniversary.

The weekly of the Hungarian Reformed Church, *Reformátusok Lapja*, also dedicated an issue to the memory of Szcenci Molnár (XVIII/37, September 8, 1974). The issue contained articles by Kálmán Újszászy, Endre Zsindely, Béla Takács, György Szőnyi, Imre Telegdi and a poem by János Bódás. Telegdi's article "Szenctől Kolozsvárig" [From Szenc to Kolozsvár], was continued in nos. 38 and 41 of the weekly (September 15 and October 6).

## NOTES

1. A passage from Kepler's letter, quoted by Hargita, "Magister harmonicus," p. 246.
2. Rittershausen's letter of recommendation, dated November 1, 1606, in Dézsi (ed.) Szcenci Molnár's *Diary, Correspondence* . . . p. 441.
3. Concerning the Hungarian ancestry of the Elector Maurice, see Szcenci Molnár's dedicatory preface to his bible translation, in the appendix to the text-edition by Béla Stoll *op. cit.*, p. 470; concerning the Hungarian language study of Maurice, see Szcenci Molnár's dedicatory preface to his *New Hungarian Grammar, ibid.*, pp. 472-478.
4. The two epitaths, the first by John Henry Bisterfeld, the second by John Henry Alsted, both professors of German origin at the college of Gyulafejervár, Transylvania, quoted by Gábor Tolnay, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
5. In Szcenci Molnár's dedicatory preface to the *Psalterium Hungaricum*, in Stoll's text edition, p. 14.



## The Lyrical Poetry of Sándor Petőfi\*

Joseph A. Batori

The lyrics of Petőfi prove the rule of all great lyrical poetry: they encompass three worlds. The poet's personal inner life; the concrete exterior scene in which he lives; and the realm of ideas, the spirit of the age are the elements blended in all lyrical poetry. But, although the blending of these three elements forms the unity of a lyric, one or the other will receive greater emphasis. No matter which poet we consider in the vast spectrum of the Hungarian lyric of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these three factors strike us. Petőfi's great forerunner, Mihály Vörösmarty, as also his great follower, Endre Ady, wrote their poems under the impact of their inner world and the spirit of the age. Thus, their poetry became the powerful expression of the age in which they wrote but, at the same time, was a telling demonstration of the individual humanity, sensitivity and receptivity to the external truths of the great poetic figures. The lyric of Vörösmarty is philosophical; the lyric of Petőfi presents everyday episodes often crystalized into an experience that is deeply moving through its artistic quality and presentation of universal human truth; in Ady, the emotional impact of the external world, seen through the prism of a possibly overly-sensitive soul, becomes a wondrous, lasting experience.

In what does Petőfi's originality lie? Precisely in what numerous insignificant critics of his day objected to: that he sings of the simplicity of his parents' home, of every day cares, of his own honest and exemplary life. They objected to his practice of using scenes of family life, of the life of the village and the *puszta*—seemingly insignificant events—and especially, that his poetry was always based on specific images imprinted on his memory. But Petőfi's individuality, his varied images and metaphors, his love of humanity, his patriotism and love

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\*An address delivered at Trinity College, Washington, D.C., on the opening of the Petőfi Memorial Year (1973), by the late Rev. József Batori. Translation © Enikő Molnár Basa.