

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE VISIT OF ALEXANDER FARKAS OF BOLON TO PENNSYLVANIA IN 1831

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ALEXANDER FARKAS (1795-1842), a Szekler (a people closely related to the Magyars and speaking Magyar) and a Unitarian from the County of Hármoszék in southeastern Transylvania, visited America in the fall of 1831. As a lawyer in Kolozsvár, the capital of Transylvania, Farkas had been the initiator of numerous economic and cultural projects designed to improve the life of his fellow townsmen. An ardent admirer of Count Stephen Szechenyi, the great Hungarian patriot who advocated the reorganization of Hungary's economic and political structure along Western European lines, Farkas wondered whether it was possible for a people to achieve happiness and prosperity through laws and institutions which they themselves had established, or whether the happiest men were actually those who obeyed the commands of some absolute authority.

In his own country, still feudal in many respects, political and economic power was exercised by a small landowning and urban aristocracy which concerned itself little with the needs of the peasant majority. It opposed change in economic as well as political institutions with the result that industrialization made little progress and Transylvania's development lagged behind that of the central portions of the Habsburg Monarchy. Another hindrance to its development was the ill-feeling and distrust which its four principal nationalities (Magyars, Szeklers, Germans, and Rumanians) and six churches (Calvinist, Lutheran, Unitarian, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Uniate) manifested toward one another. Farkas believed that he had found in America "the refuge of Freedom, of oppressed humanity, and of rights," a model society whose virtues he never ceased to emphasize to his country-

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men in reporting his travels. In fact, his journal resembles a textbook of political science from which Transylvania could study the workings of democracy.

In a little less than three months—between September 3 and November 23, 1831—he and his companion Count Francis Béldi made extensive tours of the states of New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, the District of Columbia, and of Quebec and Ontario in Canada. Farkas kept a journal, which he published in Kolozsvár in 1834 under the title *Utazás Észak-Amerikában* (Travels in North America). It was received so enthusiastically that a second edition was published the following year.¹ Farkas's detailed descriptions of American political institutions, of religious liberty, of the respect shown for the rights of the individual, and of the effect of the foregoing upon economic development provided reformers in his own country with a blueprint. His impressions, here translated into English, of three Pennsylvania cities—Erie, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia—were characteristic of the curiosity and admiration he felt for what he himself called the "American way."

After several weeks in Canada, he arrived in Erie by boat from Buffalo:

The city of Erie, in the uppermost angle of Pennsylvania, is favorably situated on the shore of Lake Erie and is the seat of the county of the same name. Except for a school and the county building there is nothing of particular note. What does strike the European traveller here is the fact that in this little city of barely 6,000 inhabitants a number of different religious sects have churches. It so happened that we arrived on a Sunday, and as I looked at the streets I was astonished to see the members of each denomination hastening to their respective churches with diligence, zeal, and true religious emulation. During services—three times a day—it is almost impossible to find anyone at home. This was all the more surprising to us, since in no state in America are there laws, prescriptions, or devices of any kind which compel a person to attend church. We may add to this other circumstances which according to the Eu-

¹ A third edition appeared in Kolozsvár in 1935 and a fourth in Budapest in 1943. The most complete biography of Farkas is by Elemér Jancsó, *Bölöni Farkas Sándor élete és munkássága* [The Life and Work of Alexander Farkas of Bölön] (Kolozsvár, 1942).

ropean mode of thought are inconceivable and lead to religious indifference and danger to the state: there is no state religion; all citizens regardless of denomination possess the same rights; there are more than fifty denominations; the clergy does not exert influence over civil affairs and is not a part of the state apparatus; and finally, every citizen may pass freely from one denomination to another and may establish such a sect as his convictions may demand. . . .

In Erie I went into several churches without knowing to which denomination they belonged and without being able to discover this from the worship service. I did not have time to hear every minister's sermon in full. What did arrest my attention everywhere was the fact that these illegal sects (to speak in European terms) possessed full churches and devout members. These people were well aware of the great differences in religious matters between us and them and asked sympathetically whether there had been any change in the Old World. I heard this in the churches also, where several ministers concluded their sermons with this entreaty: "Lord, preserve religious and political freedom among us. Give strength to our far-off brethren that they may possess these things for themselves and that they may obtain those rights which are Your gift [to me]."²

From Erie, Farkas made a short trip to Ohio and then returned to Pennsylvania to visit Pittsburgh. After noting the advantageous position of the city on the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers and the "other gifts which nature has lavished upon this place—the iron, hard coal, and salt which lie hidden in the bosom of enormous mountains—," he concluded that "Pittsburgh was created to be wholly a manufacturing city."

After the War for Independence Americans quickly discovered this favorable location and its riches. Native and European artisans flocked here to settle, and in a short time the population had grown as follows: 1800—1,565 inhabitants; 1810—4,768; 1820—7,242; 1825—12,542; 1830—17,000.

Besides Americans, English, Scottish, Irish and many other nationalities accounted for the increase, but this diverse population is already completely Americanized.

² Bölöni Farkas Sándor, *Utazás Északamerikában* (Budapest, 1943), pp. 165-168.

Each man in the name of freedom will revere that country where the law does not separate men into different classes and where everyone enjoys the same rights as he did that of his childhood and will the more quickly learn its language and alter his name and become completely assimilated.

Pittsburgh does not resemble the pleasant, cheerful, pristine appearance of other American cities. It reminds one rather of Manchester and Birmingham in England. Coal smoke hanging perpetually over it, the houses and the huge factories pouring forth smoke, the press of carts bearing all sorts of merchandise on the streets and the river banks, packing and unpacking going on everywhere, the clanging of the iron foundries and the factories constitute the daily scene here.

In every factory we saw steam power plants being used, and, we were told, England possessed no city where steam power was used in performing so many different kinds of work. Among other factories we went through a bakery where a steam-powered machine kneaded dough made from flour, which the same machine had sifted, and finally cut it into small round pieces out of which they made crackers. In seven factories the foundry workers used only steam-powered machines. There were eight rolling mills which rolled iron from nine furnaces into sheets and various kinds of round and angular bars. In ten factories, where steam-powered machines were used, nothing else was produced except iron nails—eighteen tons per day. This method of making nails is entirely American, not an old invention. Besides the above there were several saw-mills, flour mills, wool-spinning mills, combing mills, glass cutting mills and numerous others, in general all with steam power plants.³

From Pittsburgh Farkas traveled to Washington and Baltimore and thence by steamboat to Philadelphia, where he found lodging at the Mansion House.

Many travellers assert that Philadelphia is the most beautiful city in the world. I had heard this exclusive attribute given to so many other cities that although I imagined Philadelphia to be very attractive, I still could not have believed that after a ten-day stay I would have to acknowledge that it is indeed one of the most beautiful of cities. We spent the first day walking the streets

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-189.

and visiting the most noteworthy places. The more we saw the more my wonderment grew, and I began to imagine myself strolling in classical Rome or Athens.

The plan which William Penn followed when he laid out this city in 1682 is the most original and perhaps the first used in the founding of a city. . . . On a site measuring almost two English miles between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers 634 streets of equal width crisscross one another in straight lines running north and south and east and west and everywhere making uniform quadrangles. The middle of these streets was paved with bricks and the larger ones were macadamized. The footpaths stretching in two lines were curious and singularly handsome and for the most part of white marble or granite. The householders compete with one another to keep them neat, as if they were the parquet of some magnificent hall. The majority of the houses are of white marble or granite, and there are shiny brass hand-railings on the stone steps leading up from the street to the houses. The exquisite taste of the buildings and the uniform handsomeness which one encounters everywhere give inexpressible pleasure to the eye.

Besides private dwellings almost 200 public buildings and churches enhance the beauty of Philadelphia and in the architecture of almost every one there is something worthy of notice. The most handsome is the Bank of the United States built in a pure Greek style and modelled after the Parthenon in Athens. . . . Of a like style are the buildings of the Girard Bank, made of granite with a portico of six Corinthian columns, and the Bank of Pennsylvania with Ionian columns. . . . In the center of the city stands the old State House, where Congress held its sessions before the removal to Washington. In one of its rooms the Declaration of Independence was adopted in 1776 and then from the present foyer proclaimed to the people. The building has great historical significance and is the object of profound veneration. . . .

Business and politics monopolize the attention of other American cities, but Philadelphia has sought honor in the dissemination of knowledge and the establishment of philanthropic institutions. He who does not see it in person cannot imagine the noble rivalry, the self-denial, and the innumerable sacrifices which Philadelphians from the beginning have dedicated to public enterprises. Philanthropy seems to be inborn, for people seem to compete with one another to offer up their possessions for the establishment of this or that institution. Each day we

visited several, but it would require weeks to give due attention to all of them. There are over 160 societies alone engaged in the dissemination of useful knowledge, aid to the poor and sick, and the promotion of other causes for the common good. Several societies provide assistance to immigrants and other newcomers and support businessmen and artisans' associations.

There is an equally large number of societies for the furtherance of religion and morality. In addition to one such society in every church, there are twenty-five general interdenominational societies whose purpose is to spread true religious and moral ideas and education and to distribute books of the greatest use, notably the Bible.

In Philadelphia the various branches of learning are most faithfully patronized. It seems that this city is the training-ground of scholars and the cradle of learning. Perhaps nowhere else is the love of books so fashionable. In addition to the library which almost every home possesses and the large and small collections of schools, associations, and societies, there are sixteen public libraries with 64,000 books open to all citizens. There are also numerous newspaper-reading rooms. Almost fifty newspapers and periodicals are published in the thirty-two printing houses here. Foremost among the scientific institutions is the American Philosophical Society founded by Franklin in 1743 with its celebrated library and natural history and other collections.

Most of these learned societies concern themselves with education. Nowhere perhaps do people treat this question from the philosophical point of view more energetically and more successfully than in Philadelphia. These societies, however, do not limit themselves to theory, but have achieved remarkable results in everyday life as well. Besides devoting much attention to the renowned higher schools where all the disciplines are regularly taught, they take special care to see that every child in the city knows at least how to read and write. The societies have generously supported education for the poor, and according to information published in 1831 in that year alone 5,083 children received free instruction.

What must above all else arouse the interest of the foreigner concerning these learned and beneficent institutions is the fact that they were founded and are maintained not through the urging and support of the government but by the zealous efforts and voluntary contributions of their members. This could not but leave a deep impression upon the thoughts of a European writer,

and yet this is the result of simple principles of law. The American government interposes itself [in the affairs of its citizens] only to protect the rights of every individual in accordance with established law and entrusts to the citizens themselves the arrangement and enjoyment of their affairs as they think best. The government allows every single individual the broadest possible freedom of action and not only guards the fruit of his labor, but grants him the right to use it as he sees fit.

Farkas gives brief factual descriptions of the Philadelphia Museum, the Waterworks, and a Quaker service and then sums up his impressions of the city:

Many travellers have made the same observation that Philadelphia is a Quaker city and that the strict moral character of the Quakers profoundly affects social life and impresses upon it a certain cold uniformity. In the course of our short stay it was impossible for me to become acquainted with the intimate aspects of family life, but this much I did find to be true that he who seeks only the sensual pleasures, the glitter of the salon, and the charm of high society to be found in a large city will soon become bored in Philadelphia. Philadelphia is most assuredly not the place for amusement. However, he who takes pleasure in intellectual pursuits will find unlimited satisfaction here.⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-242.