

LÁSZLÓ KÁLMÁN NAGY

laszlo.nagy@uj.edu.pl

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

ORCID: 0000-0003-3650-588X

PATRÍCIA PÁSZT

patricia.paszt@uj.edu.pl

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

ORCID: 0000-0003-3785-2541

IWONA PIECHNIK

iwona.piechnik@uj.edu.pl

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

ORCID: 0000-0003-3235-8122

TWO UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF 1838 AND 1851 BETWEEN JÓZSEF TELEKI AND JÁNOS NAGY AS TESTIMONY OF THE EARLY ACTIVITIES OF THE HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The article presents two unpublished letters from 1838 and 1851 written by József Teleki to János Nagy, two prominent figures in the early history of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The letters now form a part of the Autographa Collection (*Sammlung Autographa*), a collection of manuscripts from the former Prussian State Library in Berlin, now held in the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow.¹

1 This publication was funded by the program Excellence Initiative - Research University at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow as part of the project "European Heritage in the Jagiellonian Library. Digital Authoring of the Berlin Collections".

KEYWORDS: Autographa Collection; Jagiellonian Library; Prussian State Library in Berlin; Hungarian Academy of Sciences; Teleki József; Nagy János

In the collection of manuscript documents known as the Autographa Collection (*Sammlung Autographa*) of the former Prussian State Library in Berlin, held in the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow, there are two letters from József Teleki to János Nagy, prominent figures in the early history of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. These letters have never been published before but are of great significance for conveying the spirit of the Hungarian Reform Era, initiated by the founding of the Academy and later interrupted by the Revolution of 1848.

THE HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

This most important Hungarian learned society was officially established in 1830² as the *Magyar Tudós Társaság* (Hungarian Learned Society), thanks to an idea by Count István Széchenyi, one of the greatest Hungarian statesmen. During a session of the Diet of Hungary (Hungarian: *Országgyűlés* ‘parliament, national assembly’) in Pozsony (today Bratislava) in November 1825, Széchenyi offered one year’s income from his estates to establish a society of Hungarian scientists for, in his words, “strengthening, spreading and promoting nationality and language”.³ Other Hungarian noblemen, such as Count György Andrassy, followed his example and also supported this commendable initiative with significant sums. In 1827, the national assembly legally approved the foundation of the Society; it started its official activities in 1830, when the Habsburg Emperor Francis II, who was also King of Hungary, accepted the statutes of the Society.

- 2 This was not the first initiative to create a Hungarian scientific society: In the 18th century Mátyás Bél and a number of other intellectuals tried to create such an association, but without success.
- 3 In Hungarian: „a nemzetiség és a nyelv erősítése, terjesztése és pallérozása”. See: *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia küldetése 2019*, <https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/hatteranyagok/Az%20MTA%20Kutatohelyeinek%20eredmenyei/20200107%20kuldetes.pdf> [Accessed September 5, 2024].

The board of the Hungarian Learned Society held its first meeting in Pozsony on November 17, 1830. Count József Teleki was elected as the first president, holding this position from 1830 until his death in 1855. The vice president was István Széchenyi. The secretary of the Society was Gábor Döbrentei.

The Society's first general assembly was held on February 14, 1831. Its organizational regulations were published in the booklet *A' magyar tudós társaság alaprajza és rendszabásai* (Pest, 1831). It could accept only 42 full members, 24 honorary members and an undetermined number of corresponding members. Its activities were divided into the following categories: linguistics, philosophy, history, mathematics, natural science, and jurisprudence. In 1840, the name *Magyar Tudós Társaság* was changed to *Magyar Tudományos Akadémia* (Hungarian Academy of Sciences).

The Society carried out successful work, for example, in the area of the spelling rules for Hungarian. It also published a dictionary of the Hungarian language, as well as several basic scientific works.⁴ Its library was gradually enriched; József Teleki was one of its contributors, who bequeathed his family's private library.

This idea of establishing a learned society was part of an important mission to develop a sense of national identity. Professor József Sisa of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences writes: "The founding of the Academy is one of the most significant and symbolic moments of the Hungarian national aspirations that unfolded in the first half of the 19th century."⁵ The historian Tibor Ács adds: "The first generations of the Hungarian Learned Society worked for the nation's rebirth, to catch up with the progress of the world."⁶

Indeed, the session of the Diet of Hungary at which the idea of founding a learned society was first announced marked the start of a

4 See I. Gazda, *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia reformkori kiadványai 1831–1848*, Piliscsaba 1999.

5 J. Sisa, 'Az MTA Székháza', in: *Háttéranyagok – Magyar Tudományos Akadémia*, <https://mta.hu/hatteranyagok/az-mta-szekhaza-105350> [Accessed September 5, 2024].

6 T. Ács, '175 éves a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia', *Hadtudomány*, 2000, vol. 10/4, p. 5.

significant period in the history of Hungary, known as the *Reformkor* or 'Reform Era'. This ended with the Hungarian Revolution in 1848.

Thus, the Society played a key role in the revival of Hungarian intellectual life and the development of Hungarian language, along with the standardization of its spelling. Today, the tasks of the Academy of Sciences are: 1) "to unite and represent the Hungarian scientific community"; 2) "to preserve and nurture the Hungarian language, to take care of the nation's scientific and cultural heritage"; 3) "to contribute to creating the conditions for research and to represent the interests of Hungarian scientific research"; 4) "to be the custodian of scientific quality and scientific ethics"; 5) "to expand the international relations of Hungarian science, to display its results and to represent its interests"; 6) "to be the advisor of the nation"; and 7) "to convey the results of scientific research to society."⁷

COUNT JÓZSEF TELEKI (1790–1855)

Count József Teleki came from an old noble family in Transylvania. He studied law in Pest, as well as at universities abroad, in particular Göttingen. Later, he worked as a judge at the royal court, and more generally as a lawyer in the Hungarian Court Chancellery in Vienna. He also took part in the secular management of the Reformed Church in Pest and Sárospatak.⁸ The peak of his professional career was his appointment as Habsburg governor of the Grand Principality of Transylvania, a post he held from 1842 until 1848. His academic work focused on research into Hungarian historiography; his *magnum opus* was *Hunyadiak kora Magyarországon* (The Age of the Hunyadi Family in Hungary),⁹ published in 1852–1857, the last volumes posthumously.

7 *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia küldetése 2019*, <https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/hatteranyagok/Az%20MTA%20Kutatohelyeinek%20eredmenyei/20200107%20kuldetes.pdf> [Accessed September 5, 2024].

8 Sz. Czinege, 'Gróf Teleki József. Az Akadémia megalapítója', in: *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia elnökei és főtítkárai*, Budapest 2023, p. 26.

9 The Hunyadi family, whose seat was the Hunyad Castle (present-day Hunedoara in Romania), played an important role in Hungarian history, especially in the 15th century. Among its members was Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary and Bohemia.

As mentioned earlier, Teleki took an active role in the preparatory works for the establishment of the Hungarian Learned Society. Accordingly, on November 17, 1830, he was elected by the founders as a member of the Society's board, and then as its first president, a position he held until his death. As founder and benefactor of the Society, he and his family gave it not only financial support but also their library of 24,000 volumes, including a collection of manuscripts and medals. This laid the foundations of the great library of the Academy.¹⁰

JÁNOS NAGY (1809–1885)

János Nagy was a Catholic priest and a passionate linguist. In 1832, after completing his religious studies in Pest, he returned to Szombathely and worked not only as a priest but also continued his research in linguistics. In 1833, he won a competition in linguistics organized by the Hungarian Learned Society for his study on the word-forming and modifying roots of the Hungarian language¹¹ and immediately became a Provincial Corresponding Member of the Linguistics Department of the Society. He became a Full Member on September 7, 1838. Almost 40 years later, on June 8, 1876, he was made an Honorary Member. He also won a second award for a study on pure Hungarian roots.¹²

Nagy was a great scholar. On June 13, 1835, he received a doctorate in theology at the University of Pest. In 1836, he became Director of Studies and Chapter Chaplain at the priestly seminary in Szombathely. In 1839, he was appointed teacher of Oriental languages and biblical religious studies at the episcopal lyceum in Szombathely, while retaining the extraordinary position of Professor of Hungarian law.

10 J. Szinnyei, 'Teleki József gróf (széki)', in: *Magyar írók élete és munkái*, <https://mek.oszk.hu/03600/03630/html/> [Accessed September 5, 2024].

11 The study, regarded as outstanding, was later published: J. Nagy, 'A' magyar nyelv' szóalkotó, 's módosító ragainak nyelvtudományi vizsgálata', published as the first issue of *Nyelvtudományi Pályamunkák* I, Buda 1834.

12 J. Nagy, 'Tiszta magyar gyökök', published as the second issue of *Nyelvtudományi Pályamunkák*, Buda 1838.

Up until 1848, he actively participated in the linguistic work of the Society, including contributing to committees for establishing orthography and designing grammars and dictionaries of the Hungarian language. However, during the last years of his life he devoted himself more to his ecclesiastic functions.¹³

THE FIRST LETTER

The first letter from József Teleki to János Nagy was written on September 12, 1838. It bears the printed heading *Magyar Tudós Társaság* – that is, the abovementioned predecessor of today's Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

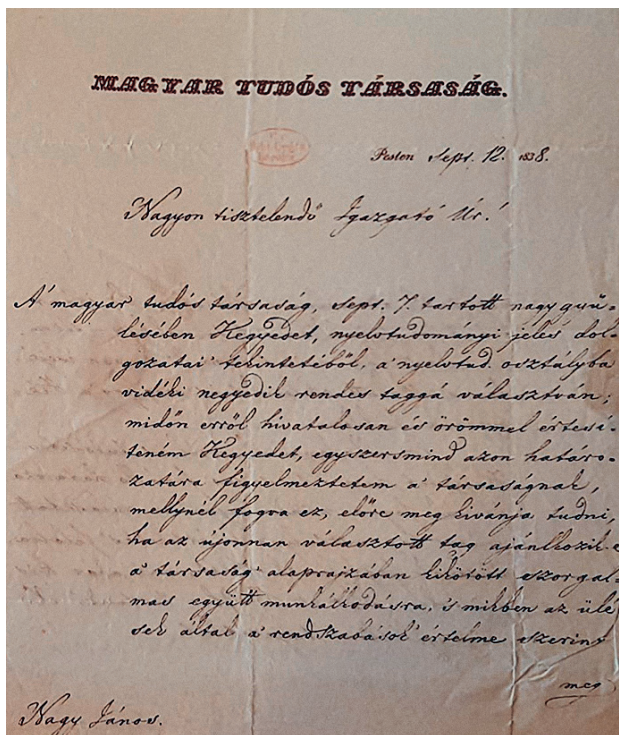


FIG. 1. The first page of the letter.

13 J. Szinnyei, 'Nagy János', in: *Magyar írók élete és munkái*, <https://mek.oszk.hu/03600/03630/html/> [Accessed September 5, 2024].

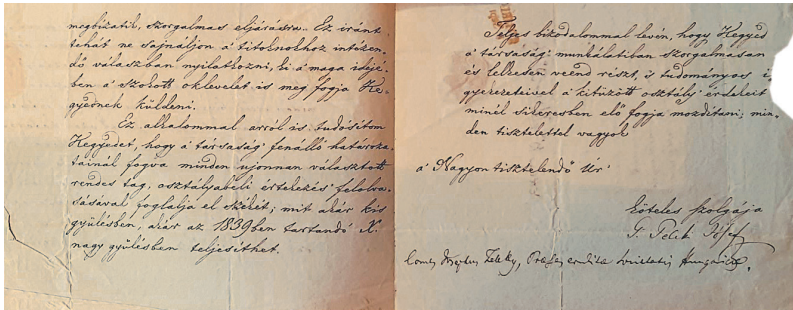


FIG. 2. The text on the second and third pages of the letter.

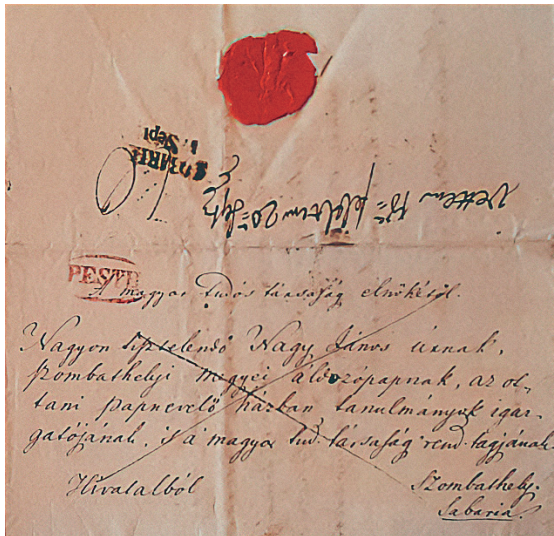


FIG. 3. The address (fourth page).

Magyar Tudós Társaság

Pesten Sept. 12 1838

Nagyon tisztelendő Igazgató Úr!

A' magyar tudós társaság Sept. 7. tartott nagy gyűlésében Kegyedet, nyelvtudományi jeles dolgozotai tekintetéből, a' nyelvtud. osztályba vidéki negyedik rendes taggá választván; midőn erről hivatalosan és örömmel értesiteném Kegyedet, egyszersmind azon határozatára figyelmeztetem a' társaságnak, mellynél fogva ez, előre meg kívánja tudni, ha az újonnan választott tag ajánlkozik-e a' társaság

alaprajzában kikötött szorgalmas együtt munkálkodásra, 's mikben az ülések által a' rendszabások' értelme szerint megbízatik, szorgalmas eljárásra. Ez iránt tehát ne sajnáljon a' titoknokhoz intézendő válaszbán nyilatkozni, ki a' maga idejében a' szokott oklevelet is meg fogja Kegyednek küldeni.

Ez alkalommal arról is tudósítom Kegyedet, hogy a' társaság' fenálló határozatainál fogva minden ujonnan választott rendes tag, osztályabeli értekezés' felolvasásával foglalja el székét; mit akár kis gyűlésben, akár az 1839ben tartandó X. nagy gyűlésben teljesíthet.

Teljes bizodalommal levén, hogy Kegyed a' társaság munkálatiban szorgalmasan és lelkesen veendő részt, és tudományos igyekezteivel a' kitűzött osztály' érdekeit minél sikeresben elő fogja mozdítani; minden tisztelettel vagyok

a' Nagyön tisztelendő Úr'
köteles szolgálja
G[róf] Teleki József

Comes Josephus Teleky, Profes eruditae Societatis Hungaricae

English translation:

Hungarian Learned Society
Pest, September 12, 1838
Very Reverend Director!

The Hungarian Scientific Society, in its great meeting held on Sept[ember] 7, elected you as the fourth Regular Member of the Provincial Department of Linguistics in view of your distinguished works in linguistics; I am pleased to inform you of this officially and with great pleasure, and to remind you that the Society wishes to know in advance whether the newly elected Member offers himself to the diligent cooperation stipulated in the Society's regulations, and to diligently proceed in the matters in which he is entrusted by the meetings in accordance with the spirit of the rules. Therefore, do not hesitate to express your opinion in the reply to be addressed to the Secretary, who will also send you the usual certificate in due course.

On this occasion I should also inform you that, in accordance with the resolutions of the Society, each newly elected Full Member takes his seat by reading a class thesis, which he may perform either at a

small meeting or in the X. great meeting to be held in 1839.

I have full confidence that you will diligently and enthusiastically participate in the work of the Society and will promote the interests of the assigned class as successfully as possible by your scientific endeavors; I am, with all due respect,

the Most Reverend Sir,
Your obliged servant
C[ount] József Teleki

The letter is addressed as follows:

A magyar tudós társaság elnökétől
Nagyon tisztelendő Nagy János úrnak,

Szombathelyi megyei áldozópapnak, az ottani papnevelő házban
tanulmányok igazgatójának, 's a' magyar tud. társaság rend. tagjának

Hivatalból

Szombathely
Sabaria

English translation:

From the President of the Hungarian Learned Society
To Very Reverend Mr. János Nagy

Priest of Szombathely County, Director of Studies at the seminary
house there and a member of the Hungarian Learned Society

From office

Szombathely
Sabaria

This letter is significant due to the fact that, in it, János Nagy is informed of his election as a Full Member of the Society. It is important to note here the strict adherence to the Society's rules of operation and attention to the legality of its work.

The Latin note under the letter is in a different hand from that of the letter and was probably added by a librarian.

THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE TWO LETTERS

The year 1848 marks the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution, a turning point in the history of Hungary and its struggle for inde-

pendence and national identity. Many academics took part in this freedom movement, including acting as members of the interim Hungarian Government. As the Academy was considered by the Austrians to be an ally of the liberal reformist opposition, the autonomy of this learned institution was severely restricted at the time.¹⁴

And after the fall of the Revolution in 1849 all activities of all associations were forbidden due to the state of emergency. According to Tibor Ács, the defeat left its mark on the life of the Academy and brought tragedy to the individual lives of many of its members.¹⁵ Teleki was already very ill at this time, yet he did not forget his main objectives; as early as January 1850, he sent a circular letter to the members of the Academy urging them to continue their scientific research and work.¹⁶ However, many of them were either in prison, in hiding or had been forced to flee. When Teleki lost his political functions (especially as the governor of Transylvania), he devoted himself to unceasing scientific work and the intellectual development of his nation. He very clearly believed that continuous work on the language and the promotion of the Hungarian culture would bring good results in the future.

Meanwhile, Baron Karl von Geringer was appointed by the Habsburg government as the plenipotentiary commissioner for civil affairs in Hungary. He knew that several members of the Academy had been involved in the War of Independence and that the Academy's assets were being spent on revolutionary purposes. There was a danger that he would dissolve the Academy or paralyze its operations. However, Count György Andrassy, one of the four original founders of the Academy, tried to have it resume its work – and, fortunately, Geringer trusted his loyalty, so he was willing to allow it. Nevertheless, Geringer wanted to investigate its operations during the Revolution and its current state, and to report on the

14 Z. Fónagy, J. Pótó, *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia története*, Budapest 2018, p. 2.

15 T. Ács, '175 éves a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia', *Hadtudomány*, 2000, 10/4, p. 5.

16 A large part of this letter is printed in the book: M. Szentgyörgyi, *Célkitűzések és reformtörekvések a Magyar Tudományos Akadémián: 1831–1945*, Budapest 1973, p. 45.

actions to be taken. Under these conditions, Andrásy managed to establish the Committee to be composed of members of the Academy, and in March 1850 Geringer appointed the members with Count György Andrásy as the chairman, allowing them to hold small meetings in order to prepare their report, which eventually stated that the Academy had not exceeded its rights in 1848 and 1849. In May 1850, Count Teleki was allowed to return to the Academy, and on June 10 a 'short meeting' of the Academy was held after a break of almost a year. At the next weekly meeting, Teleki was already presiding.¹⁷ And the Academy began to work normally.

THE SECOND LETTER

The second letter from Teleki to Nagy was written in October 1851. It proves Teleki's determination to develop the Academy and its research for the good of the Hungarian nation.

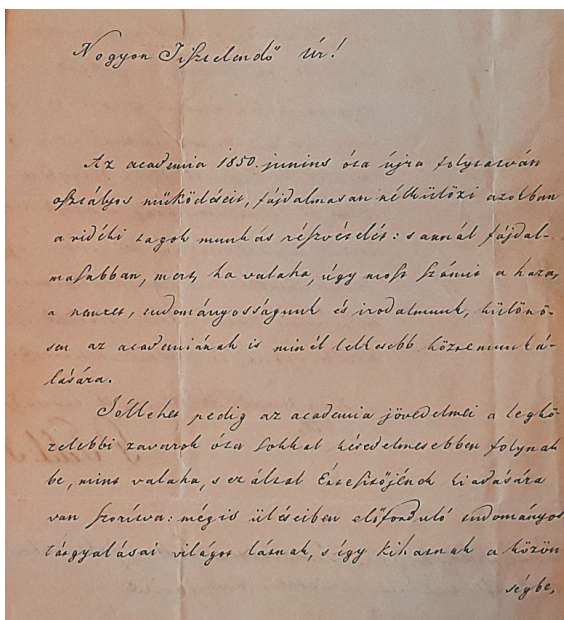


FIG. 4. The text on the first page of the letter.

17 M. Szentgyörgyi, *Céltitűzések és reformtörékvések a Magyar Tudományos Akadémián: 1831–1945*, Budapest 1973, p. 46, 49.

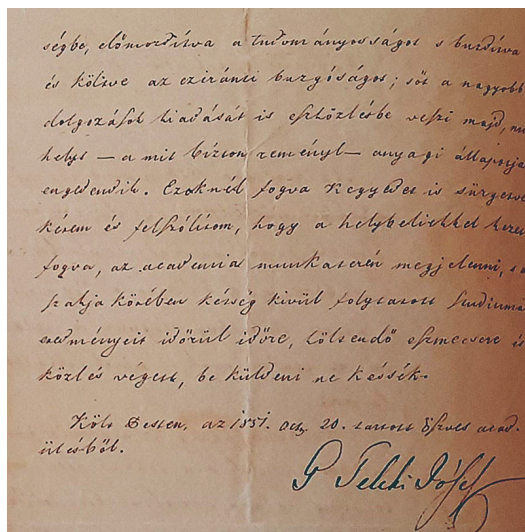


FIG. 5. The text on the second page of the letter.

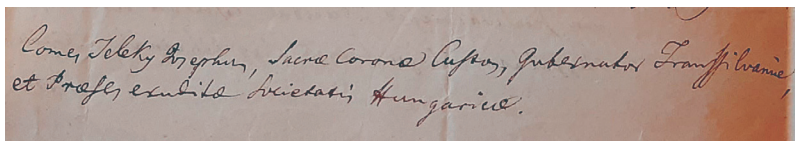


FIG. 6. An additional note in Latin below the text.



FIG. 7. The address of the letter (fourth page).

Nagyon Tisztelendő Úr!

Az academia 1850 junius óta újra folytatván osztályos működéseit, fájdalmasan nélkülözi azokban a vidéki tagok munkás részvételét : s annál fájdalmasabban, mert, ha valaha, úgy most számít a haza, a nemzet, tudományosságunk és irodalmunk, különösen az academiának is min él lelkeesebb közremunkálására.

Jóllehet, pedig az academia jövedelmei a legközelebbi zavarok óra sokkal késedelmesebben folynak be, mint valaha, s ez által Értesítőjének ki adására van szorítva : mégis üléseiben előforduló tudományos tárgyalásai világot látnak, s így kihatnak a közönségbe, előmozdítva a tudományosságot s buzdítva és költve az eziránti buzgóságot; sőt a nagyobb dolgozások kiadását is eszközösbe veszi majd, mihelyt - a mit bízton reményl - anyagi állapotjai engedendik. Ezeknél fogva Kegyedet is sürgetve kérem és felszólítom, hogy a helybeliekkel kezét fogva, az academia munkaterén megjelenni, s a szakja körében kézség kívül folytatott studiumai eredményeit időről időre, költendő eszmecsere és közlés végett, be küldeni ne késsék.

Költ Pesten, az 1851. Oct. 20. tartott öszves acad. ülésből.

G[róf] Teleki József

Comes Teleky Josephus, Sacrae Coronae Custos, Gubernator Transilvaniae et Profes eruditae Societatis Hungaricae

English translation:

Very Reverend Sir!

The Academy, having resumed its departmental activities since June 1850, is sorely lacking the working participation of its Provincial Members: and all the more sorely because, if ever, now, the homeland, the nation, our science and our literature, especially the Academy, need a more enthusiastic contribution.

Although, in the hour of the nearest disturbances, the income of the Academy is more delayed than ever and the Academy is forced to limit the publication of its Bulletin: nevertheless, the scientific discussions occurring in its meetings see the light of day and thus have an impact on the public, promoting science and encouraging and fueling the zeal for it; and it is even preparing to publish larger works as soon as its financial circumstances permit, as it hopes. I therefore urge you to join hands with the local members, to attend

the Academy's workplace, and not to delay in sending in from time to time the results of your studies outside your profession, for the purpose of the useful exchange of ideas and communication.

Written in Pest, from the joint academic session held on Oct. 20, 1851

C[ount] József Teleki

The letter is addressed as follows:

Nagyon Tisztelendő

Nagy János Prof[essor] és M[agyar] acad[émia] rendes tag Úrnak

Szombathely

Stein am Anger

In English:

Very Reverend

Mr. János Nagy Prof[essor] and H[ungarian] Acad[emy] Full Member

Szombathely

Stein am Anger

The letter is written in a different hand than Teleki's, as can be seen from his signature - maybe the hand of his secretary. The letter is not written perfectly, as the very first word is misspelled: *nogyon* instead of *nagyon* (the transcript gives the standardized spelling). The dignified language of this letter is similar to that of the first letter, for example, it uses the archaic pronoun *Kegyed* 'thy grace'. The Latin note under the letter is in the same hand as the Latin note in the first letter. The address gives the German name of the city (*Stein am Anger*) in addition to its Hungarian name (*Szombathely*), although its Latin name was given in the first letter (*Sabaria*); this may be indicative of the political atmosphere in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg Empire at the time.

CONCLUSION

Both of the letters from József Teleki to János Nagy in the Autographa Collection in the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow provide

important information about the functioning of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and its work in the rebirth of the Hungarian nation, the cultivation of its heritage and the development of its language during the difficult period of the Hungarian struggle for independence. Reading them against the backdrop of Hungary's turbulent history provides a glimpse into the ambition, hard work, fortitude and strong will of the Hungarians. These letters in particular reveal the intellectual character and deep patriotic attitude of their sender, József Teleki, but they also allow us to feel the atmosphere and spirit of the era at key moments in Hungarian history. Both letters are a perfect complement to Mária Szentgyörgyi's excellent book describing the history of the Academy mainly through letters to and from its members.¹⁸

LITERATURE

Analyzed letters from József Teleki to János Nagy

Box 172, letters under the signature mark "Teleki, Josef, Graf" of the Autographa Collection (*Sammlung Autographa*) of the former Prussian State Library in Berlin, kept in the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow.

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18 M. Szentgyörgyi, *Célkitűzések és reformtörekvések a Magyar Tudományos Akadémián: 1831–1945* [Objectives and reform efforts at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: 1831–1945], Budapest 1973.

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