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For the last eighty years the name and works of Count Péter Vay, an honorary bishop and the descendant of an ancient Hungarian aristocratic family, have vanished from common knowledge to such an extent that even his bibliographic data appear falsely and only very briefly in some of our older and contemporary dictionaries. Even his lengthy and bibliophile works such as *The Emperors and Empires of the East* (1906), *Eastern Art and Artistic Taste* (1908) and *On the Eastern Hemisphere* (1918) attract little attention when they surface in auctions organized by second-hand bookshops. It is strange, especially if the light of the fact that there were very few Hungarian writers whose books were translated into German, English and French within one and a half years following their publication. His diaries, which give a precise description of the domestic and foreign events and the main actors of the period between 1902 and 1918 and which resurfaced mysteriously in 1977, remain untreated in the Hungarian National Archives.

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Who was Count Péter Vay who participated in the celebrations commemorating the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign as one of a representatives of Pope XIII. Leo and who was one of the speakers of the Berlin Missionaries Conference after returning from his first trip to Asia? He travelled throughout the world on behalf of the Holy Sea, spent long periods of time in China, Korea, Japan, Indo-China and other Asian countries, the Near and Middle East, the United States and Central America between 1902 and 1904. He met and had discussions with Russian Czar Nicholas II, the Emperors of China, Korea and Japan, the leading statesmen of his age, including President Theodore Roosevelt.(1) As a missionary, he could always be found on ships transporting immigrants to the New World and among the coolies of Shanghai. He played an essential role in the establishment of new parish churches, monasteries and child homes, including Korea (in Tegu).(2) He relied on his knowledge of foreign languages and sound general education in his endeavours. He made every effort to learn as much as possible

and spread information about the countries visited, their social and political situation and problems. His reports were published in the leading magazines of the age and many of his analyses and conclusions did not lose actuality even in our days, affect as a prophecy. Besides these activities, he had enough time to study the culture and the art of the Far East. Even though some of his assessments and statements are debatable, the works of art he purchased on the request of the Hungarian government during his 1912 trip to the region were a substantial contribution to the Japanese collection of the Ferenc Hopp Museum in Budapest.

In the light of his activities, it is quite difficult to understand why his personality and career remains mostly unknown. Even his date of birth is surrounded by uncertainty. According to "The Life and Works of Hungarian Writers", written by József Szinyei in 1914, and "The Dictionary of Hungarian Travellers", written by Dénes Balázs in 1993, he was born on September 26, 1864 in Pest county-village Gyón. But Hungarian Archbishop János Csernoch sent a proposal on appointing Péter Vay an honorary bishop to King Charles IV on April 21, 1917 indicating September 26, 1863 as his day of birth. Following his death in 1948, Grand Provost at Pécs Dénes Mosonyi wrote that "he died silently at the age of 92" (which should mean he was born in 1856). In his response, the representative of the archiepiscopal office acknowledged that "I am preparing an obituary notice about Count Péter Vay.....I know nothing about this prelate."(3)

His most detailed bibliography comes from Cardinal Csernoch.(4) According to him, he was born on September 26, 1863 and became a priest on June 16, 1898 in Esztergom. He did not accept any positions within the church, "he devoted his life to the spiritual treatment of immigrants, he travelled frequently on ships carrying immigrants from Europe to America. He spent long periods of time in America, Japan, Korea and China." Count Vay returned to Hungary not much before the beginning of World War I and did pastoral work during the war. He was appointed by the Pope apostolic protonotar and was given the beneficiary abbacy of Vaskaszentmárton at diocesan Pécs by King Ferenc József I. in 1908. He donated his modest income from this position to charities (he wanted to renounce of his remuneration in 1929, but this was not accepted by the church authorities). In 1917, King Charles IV appointed Péter Vay honorary bishop of Skopje on the recommendation of Archbishop János Csernoch, "his majesty's youngest chaplain".(5)

According his diary Bishop Péter Vay led an active social and church life during the war and visited the Axis Power countries. He left Hungary after the end of the war and left the administration of his abbacy to Count Ödön Zichy, bishop of Pécs (and later archbishop of Kalocsa) and his secretary, Grand Provost Dr. Dénes Mosonyi. In 1924, he informed them that he was going from Vienna to Assisi. He settled and lived in there in the Capuchin monastery until his death on February 28, 1948.(6) Due to unknown reasons, he retired from church and public life and his missionary activities for the last three decades of his life. His reasons for

leaving Hungary are not known either. (No information about him for this years could be obtained from Assisi.)

What prompted Count Péter Vay to devote such an intense attention to Korea in his first book, "The Emperors and Empires of the East" and other works, articles and letters? The answer, which makes the reprint of his work after a hundred years necessary, comes from the author himself: "Korea is the least known country of East Asia, knowledge about it and its people is incomplete." "Korea is one of the most interesting parts of the world (7) and it would be hard to imagine a more beautiful place on Earth. Korea is the most captivating part of East Asia" - he wrote in his work "On the Eastern Hemisphere".(8) Unfortunately, his words remain valid even today, Korea is the least known Far Eastern country in Hungary. It is unbelievable that what he wrote in 1906 remains true in these days: "Korea is in the phase of rebirth. It is full with tension and contradictions", "Circumventing the normal way of progress, they are acquiring the modern achievements with great steps."(9)

He devoted distinguished attention to Korea for two reasons. As a bishop, missionary and traveller, he regarded Korea and its people as the most receptive for Christian missionary work, "I was the first to speak about Korea's importance during the 1905 Berlin Missionaries Conference" since "who knows Korea is impressed by their religious attitude."(10) "Christian soul is the most obvious in Korea" - he wrote to Gyula Benczur, a famous Hungarian painter in his letter dated December 1, 1902 from Seoul.(11) He returned to Korea later as well: "Finally, I am heading for Korea again, where I will have the opportunity to lay the foundations of an asylum. I will establish this asylum from my income from literary works, it will be a modest cultural institution, at least in the beginning, but I am convinced that it has a great future." - he wrote in a letter from Tokyo on April 14, 1907.(12)

Another important reason behind his interest in Korea was that he was aware of Korea's role in international situation, power relations and political struggles of the age. He wrote that he had spent three years in Asia, "which made understanding and feeling of the colonial and overseas situation easy for me."(13) "Being here, we can fully appreciate the world political significance of the region."(14) He had another statement which is still valid: "In Fusan (today's Pusan), ..... there is the end station opposite the pier, and the luxurious international coaches from Paris, Berlin and St. Petersburg arrive at this point, as I predicted it in the past. Fusan has really become the end station".(15) Today, indeed, on the way to the unification of the two Koreas, one of the main stages could be the linking of the railway networks of the North and the South, the creation of a trans-Korean railway for a transcontinental traffic from Paris to Pusan.

The emotions towards and sympathy for Korea are obvious in each of Count Péter Vay's works. He proudly wrote to Gyula Benczur that "I am the first Hungarian to have travelled across this country." A few days earlier, on November 27 and 29, 1902, he wrote into his diary that "Korea opens up new horizons for me every day", "I find it difficult, very difficult to leave the country, its special nature and magic has had a great impact on my emotions."(16)

Count Vay resided in Korea during the country's most difficult period of history: in 1902, 1907 and 1912, that is after the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95 and the Russian-Japanese War in 1904-05. Both wars were fought on Korean soil for Korea and ended with Japanese victory. Japan occupied it and declared it to be its protectorate in 1905. In 1910, it finally annexed Korea and merged it into the Japanese empire. Count Vay could follow the events for a decade, he had ties to the main actors and the victims. He was in Seoul when Japanese Governor-General Prince Ito Hirobumi forced the Korean Emperor to resign: "the overthrowing of this unlucky Emperor during the merciless minutes during which I was present"(in Seoul). "I will never forget this horrible July night, the battle on the streets and the massacre of the Korean forces, these moments will be remembered by all those who witnessed these events."(17) Bishop Vay knew Prince Ito Hirobumi, who was later murdered by a Korean patriot in 1909, well. "The relentless Governor-General, who might have been a good Japanese patriot, was a merciless and heartless person who died because of the crimes he committed against the Korean people." - he wrote in his lengthy notes.(18) He gives a good description of the political situation in "The Emperors and the Empires of the East". Even though he tends to acknowledge some of the positive aspects of Japanese modernization, he summarizes his opinion in "On the Eastern Hemisphere" as follows: "despite their power and strict control, the Japanese could never retain control over this country permanently.....who knows the present Japanese attempts to transfer Korea may well lead to the reemergence of national pride. Koreans are superior to the Japanese conquerors and it cannot be ruled out that after acquiring the achievements of Japan, following its ambitious example, Korea will regain its sovereignty, again".(19)

Count Péter Vay gives first time in Hungarian a detailed description about the mysterious and "unknown" Korea in "The Emperors and Empires of the East", where he arrived by ship on November 14, 1902 from China. He gives a thorough description of Korean history and the origins of its people and language.(20) His description contains some false statements, but he is right in pointing out the two most pressing problems of feudal Korea: the ongoing political struggle between parties ("as between Montagues and Capulets or Yorks and Lancasters") and the great-power struggle for Korea between China and Japan: "both have attempted to isolate the country from the outside world." He warned several times that the struggle has been replaced by Russian-Japanese rivalry in Korea and he felt its signs during his trips to the countryside and during his stay in the capital.(For example, in unimportant that time port Masan). He gives a detailed account of his meetings with Emperor Kojong, the crown prince, ministers and diplomats and the Korean situation in general. "Revolution in the capital" - he writes about the bloody November 1902 riots of the people of Seoul. He devotes a separate chapter to

describing the traditions and customs of the people and illustrated them with own photographs and own watercolours of ethnographic value. His description of the countryside are captivating, as are the descriptions of Korean habits. He is good at noticing changes and comparing them with the positive and negative legacy of the past. He summarized his experiences before leaving Korea as follows: "Chosen is between the unclear past and a dubious future, a victim to its internal struggles, exposed to enemies and conquering armies, exploiting colonizers. Can it find protection elsewhere than in her moral and spiritual strength and Christian belief? It can be given to her only by the Almighty." (21)

Despite his archaic style and wording, Bishop Péter Vay's book, after a century is an interesting piece of work even today. His personal; voice makes understanding the old-new Korea easier and helps to clear up the unfounded misunderstandings in connection with the country. His work clearly demonstrates his missionary commitment, clear political vision and his sympathy towards Korea and Korean people.

His predictions about the Asia-Pacific region in general and Korea in particular are stunningly true after as much time as one century: "Who can foresee the influence that will be brought about by the transformation of North Asia on the people of the world? ....when the main workplace and arena of the world will no longer be the Atlantic Ocean, but the Pacific region, then Asia and Amerika, Canada and Siberia will play a key role."(22) "I have always been convinced that Korean people and Korea have an important role to play in the future" - he wrote in 1914, one of the gloomiest periods of Korean history.(23)

This was Count Péter Vay's message in the eve of the 20th century for the 21th century, which has made his predictions a reality. According to an Eastern saying, every creature leaves something valuable behind after his death: a tiger leaves his fur, but the man can only leave his name for the posterity. Let it happen to the literary heritage and and the name of Count, Bishop Péter Vay, our forgotten compatriot.

### Footnotes

1. Gróf Vay A. Peter: Amerikai Naplókivonatok Utijegyzetek Levéltöredékek (American Diary and Travel Notes, Letter fragments), Budapest, Szent István Társulat (ed.) 1910.,pp.74-76. Nach Amerika in einem Auswanderer-Schiffe (Das innere Leben der Vereinigten Staaten), Berlin, Gebrüder Paetel (ed.),1908., pp.246 - 255, ".....hatte ich mit Mr.Roosevelt eine sehr lange Unterredung".

2. Gróf Vay Peter: A keleti féltekén (On the Eastern Hemisphere), Budapest, Franklin Társulat (ed.), 1918. "... in Taigu..the new seminary had just done, and the home for children-orphans was built on my resources (p.315).

3. Primási Levéltár (Archiepiscopal Archives),Esztergom, Index 1948. 2674/1948.April 9.

4. Ibidem, Index 1917. 2110/1917.April 20.

5. Ibidem,

6. Ibidem, Index 1948. 2674/1948.April 9., and Episcopal Archives, Pécs, Letters of Grand Provost Dénes Mosonyi, September 1924.

7. Gróf Vay Péter: Kelet császárai és császárságai ( Emperors and Empires of the East), Budapest, Franklin Társulat (ed.) 1906., p.23.

8. A keleti féltekén, p.314.

9. Kelet császárai és császárságai, p.25.

10. A keleti féltekén, pp.314 - 315.

11. Országos Széchényi Könyvtár (Hungarian National Library Széchényi),Vay Péter's correspondences, 1925/64. to Gyula Benczúr,

12. Ibidem, 1927/37. to dr.Elek Lippich,

13. Ibidem, 42/7. to Gyula Pekár, from January 19.1919.

14. Ibidem, 1927/37, to dr.Lippich Elek,

15. A keleti féltekén, p.314.

16. Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian National Archives), Gróf Vay's Diaries, 1902.

17. Vasárnapi Újság (Sunday Newspaper), Vol.56..No.45. October 31. 1909,pp.935-936.

18. Ibidem

19. A keleti féltekén, p.315.

20. Bishop Vay had mentioned in a footnote that "he had hoped to write a detailed and larger book on Korea's history on the basis of archive documents and materials of scientific institutes" but because of the lack of the support of then Minister of Culture and Education in Hungary this his plan failed.

21. Kelet császárai és császárságai, p.362.

22. Ibidem, p.8.

## **Fendler Karoly. Count Peter Vay Bishop (1863-1948) - a forgotten Hungarian traveller in Korea**

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23. A keleti féltekén, p.319.