

The Budapest Chain Bridge

Amelie Lanier, author of a book on the Viennese banker, Georg Sina, recalls the building of a landmark which links Sina to his arch-rival Salomon von Rothschild

*The pontoon
bridge across the
Danube, for
centuries the
only link between
Buda and Pest
(Duna Muzeum,
Esztergom)*



The building of the Chain Bridge which connects Buda to Pest is first and foremost connected with the name of Count Istvan (Stephen) Széchenyi (1791-1860), remembered today by his fellow countrymen as the “Greatest Hungarian”. His father Ferenc (Francis) had already distinguished himself by his patriotic convictions and deeds; his name is connected with the foundation of the Hungarian National Library, for example. At the beginning of his career, Istvan led the typical life of a Hungarian nobleman of his time: he joined the army and lived a lavish and rather superficial life in the palaces and ballrooms of Vienna and Budapest. But in the early 1820s he began to change his attitude towards society, under the influence of two people he came to know at the time: his future wife, Crescentia von Seilern, and the cleric Stanislaus Albach. The latter impressed upon Széchenyi the idea that God had chosen every man to fulfil a special task in life. Széchenyi’s love for Crescentia, whom he wanted to convince of his worth, led to his choice of a life’s work: to become the benefactor of Hungary by modernising it in every possible sphere and to raise it to the level of other, more developed European countries. His model was England, and this it remained till the end of his life.

Hungary's historical position

Through marriage the Austrian emperor's family, the Habsburgs, had had claims on Hungary since the death of the last Hungarian king, Lajos, in the Battle of Mohács, fought against the Turks in 1526, had led to the collapse of the Hungarian kingdom. Until the peace of Szatmár in 1711 – when the main allies of the last Hungarian claimant to the throne, Ferenc Rákóczi, acknowledged their defeat and with it the Habsburgians' right to the Hungarian throne – Austria exercised this dominion only in part of Hungary, mainly what is now Western Hungary and Slovakia. At this time, the capital (and the seat of the Palatine) of this Habsburgian rump Hungary was Pressburg, now Bratislava. After the defeat of the Turks, following the conquest of Buda in 1686 and the rout of Rákóczi's supporters, the Kuruc rebels, the whole of Hungary fell to the Habsburgs, though it retained its own feudal parliament and legislation. The formal autonomy of Hungary was acknowledged in the fact that the Austrian emperor was called 'king of Hungary' and his rule was exercised by a representative – usually a member of the Imperial family – the Palatine.

The Danube

At the end of 1820, Széchenyi had travelled west from his regiment in Eastern Hungary where he was serving as a cavalry captain, to attend the funeral of his father on the family's estate in Western Hungary, not far from Sopron. When he reached Pest, he was unable to cross the river.

The Danube often froze completely. In winter the ice was thick enough for people to walk across from Pest, the emerging commercial centre of Hungary, to the city of Buda, the traditional political and administrative centre of the country. Buda was then the seat of the Palatine of Hungary (equivalent to a Viceroy of Austria).

In summer the connection between Buda and Pest consisted of a pontoon bridge. Boats were moored side by side on the water and boards laid across them, joined together by thick ropes. The passengers who used this bridge had to pay a toll to the authorities of the two towns which maintained it. This type of bridge, then quite common all over Europe, was not without its disadvantages: when it was in use, it blocked the river. Ships wanting to pass up or downstream had to wait until the bridge was opened at regular intervals in order to proceed with their journey. As steam-driven ships started to appear on European rivers and coastlines it became clear that this would be a severe and growing nuisance in the future.

But the much more important disadvantage of this kind of bridge lay in the fact that, when the Danube started to freeze in autumn or when the ice broke in the spring, the bridge could not be used. Ice floes broke loose and floated down the river, making it very dangerous to cross by boat. In effect, there were two lengthy periods each year when communication between the two towns was impossible or at least extremely unreliable. This state of affairs sometimes led to disagreeable surprises. One famous incident occurred in 1800 at the time of the marriage of Joseph, then Palatine of Hungary and brother of the Austrian Emperor Francis. More than a thousand guests from Pest who had crossed the river on the ice were trapped for several days in Buda when the ice began to break up in the night.

Széchenyi arrived at a time when the ice floes made the crossing of the river extremely dangerous. He had to search for days to find a fisherman willing to risk his life (in exchange for a considerable sum of money) to take him to the other side. It is said that, while crossing the Danube between the ice floes, Széchenyi decided that a fixed bridge had to be built here.

National and social aspirations for the bridge

Széchenyi's vision extended beyond the simple building of a bridge linking Buda with Pest. Firstly, he planned that it would create a real capital for Hungary by making the two towns unite and grow as one. Secondly, it would unite the country and create a consciousness of Hungary as a nation. People would extend their feelings of belonging beyond their own village, town or county. They would start to feel responsible for things happening in other parts of Hungary. They would be able to move around more freely and frequently in the country they lived in, acknowledging it as their own. For this reason in general Széchenyi considered the building and maintenance of roads and railroads and the development of steam boat transport the most important challenge of his political career. The bridge was only a part of his imagined system of 'means of communication'.

*The chain bridge,
designed by William
Tierney Clark,
completed and
opened in 1849
(Duna Múzeum,
Esztergom)*

The third and final purpose was to introduce taxation of the nobility. In other parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire, taxation of the nobility had been introduced during the reign of Maria Theresia, but for a number of reasons she decided not to impose it in Hungary. The Hungarian nobles clung jealously to this privilege and defended it at all costs. This exemption also extended to tolls, even to the tolls on the traditional pontoon bridge.

The financial planning for the bridge was based on the payment of tolls on its use - tolls to be paid by everyone, without regard to origin or rank. After years of lobbying, Széchenyi succeeded, in 1836, in persuading the Hungarian Diet to pass a law stating that, exceptionally and only on this bridge, the nobles would also have to pay a toll.

The financing of the bridge

The move to establish a future return on investment in the shape of tolls was necessary in order to attract a businessman willing to undertake the financing of the bridge through the medium of a joint stock company. This was the first real joint stock company in Hungary, founded in 1838, and only after it came into being was a law on joint stock companies passed in the Diet in 1840. The man who organised the company was a Viennese banker of Greek descent, Georg Sina.¹

Széchenyi probably turned to Sina because he thought he had more interest in the prosperity of Hungary than the Rothschilds or other Viennese bankers. Sina, being a Christian, had been elevated to the Hungarian nobility, which gave him the right to buy land. By the beginning of the 1830s he had already accumulated large estates in Hungary. Furthermore, at this time he was the sole supplier of Hungarian tobacco to the Austrian Tobacco Monopoly.²

Széchenyi may have judged the Rothschilds – possible alternatives to Sina – to be too close to Metternich and the Austrian government. Metternich placed great trust in Salomon: after all they were both Germans and Salomon had acted as something of a personal financier to him. But Metternich's feelings towards Hungarians was well known: he resented their legal and political autonomy.

Of other prominent Viennese bankers, Geymüller was already in decline, and therefore perhaps less willing to invest in anything substantial. Arnstein and Eskeles had been Széchenyi's bankers at one time, but had once turned him down when he asked for credit. The feudal laws of Hungary protected the debtor against the creditor, enabling them to delay indefinitely the repayment of a debt and even the payment of interest. This led to a series of abuses by Hungarian noblemen (though in complicity with some Austrian politicians and various suspect characters), to the detriment of Austrian creditors. The Arnstein and Eskeles banking house had itself been involved in some of these manoeuvres and therefore did not choose to risk its reputation further by giving credit to Széchenyi. After a passionate protest he was finally granted



Count István
Széchenyi
(1791-1860)

credit, but the affair gave him cause for thought. It may have been this episode which led him to write his book *Hitel* (Credit), which appeared in 1830. It also, no doubt, persuaded him to take this new business to Sina's bank.

These four banking houses had exclusive access to state loans and credit from the National Bank. All other bankers in the Empire depended upon them in one way or another, as did those in Prague. There was really no-one who could rival them. In Budapest, apart from Jews, there were Greek bankers and others of German nationality, but most of them managed only very small businesses. Many of these businesses were probably not completely legal, being often connected to smuggling, usury and the issue of or trade in papers of doubtful value. Samuel Wodianer and Moritz Ullmann (the initiator of the Hungarian Central Railroad, and a fierce enemy of Sina) were perhaps a little bigger than the others, but their eventual ascent into the ranks of powerful merchants and infrastructural investors was owed to Rothschild in the case of Ullmann and Sina of Wodianer.

In 1836 or 1837 Salomon von Rothschild could not have known that Georg Sina would later, in 1840, complain bitterly to Széchenyi in a private letter that, "never would I have undertaken the building of the Pest-Ofen bridge if you had not persuaded me to do it ..." ³ Rothschild was evidently convinced that he had been excluded from a profitable enterprise and began to intrigue, lending his support to some of the many enemies of the project in Hungary. The Jewish banker Wodianer, from Pest, was his special ally and he and several other businessmen from the town contracted another architect to provide a lower estimate than Széchenyi had secured from his chosen architect. (As it later turned out, both costings were far removed from reality). In the end Sina could only resolve the situation by granting a portion of the stock to Wodianer and Rothschild, thus giving them a share in the enterprise. Each took a participation of a sixth of the total stock capital of 5 million florins, equivalent to about half a million pounds sterling.

Building the bridge

The condition of the river at this point demanded the use of a suspension bridge with just two supporting pillars. Any other construction would have required more pillars, between which the ice floes would be caught, forming a natural dam and causing flooding of the towns. After major flooding in Pest and Buda in 1838 it became clearer than ever to everyone that only a suspension bridge would be suitable here.

The architect chosen by Széchenyi and contracted by Sina was an Englishman, William Tierney Clark. Clark had built three other suspension bridges in England, the Hammersmith Bridge and the Marlow Bridge on the Thames, and the Norfolk Bridge in Old Shoreham across the Adur. The only one of these to survive in its original state is the Marlow Bridge, the others having been replaced by bridges with greater transport capacity.

The bridge was built between 1840 and 1849. In 1848, Széchenyi collapsed mentally and from then on never again appeared in public. The last stage of the construction took place during the revolution of 1848/49, under extremely difficult circumstances. Twice it was in danger of being blown up and it was damaged in the fighting. The construction was supervised by a Scotsman, Adam Clark, who later married a Hungarian



Salomon von
Rothschild
(1774-1855)

and stayed in the country. It was his achievement that the bridge was saved from destruction, and he, together with Sina and representatives of the Austrian Army, opened it shortly after the conquest of Buda and Pest when large parts of the two towns, mainly Pest, were in ruins:

“The Baron Georg Sina arrived here yesterday and, with his Excellency the Commander in Chief Baron Haynau and a tremendous suite accompanied by the Civil Governor Baron Geringer and the other authorities passed over and opened the Bridge today at 12 o’clock. There was no other ceremony and I must say it was with rather a sorrowful heart that I looked on all the strange faces and thought of how different matters would have been had our good and noble friend Count Széchenyi been spared to us ...”⁴

Thus the first bridge over the Danube was inaugurated. In the end it did fulfil most of the aspirations Széchenyi had vested in it, and it contributed to the unification and the dynamic development of Budapest. Nevertheless, the bridge was a huge financial burden. The stock did not sell well, so a vast amount of the cost, which far exceeded initial estimates, had to be borne by the three main entrepreneurs, Sina, Rothschild and Wodianer. Although initially Rothschild and Wodianer had forced their way into the enterprise, Széchenyi and Sina had good reason subsequently to be more than satisfied with their participation. For a while Rothschild and Wodianer shared the losses with Sina. The bridge only began to be profitable in the 1860s, years after the deaths of Salomon (1855) and Sina (1856). But, though the original privilege, granted to Georg Sina stated that his company could keep the tolls from the bridge for 87 years, the Hungarian government eventually opted to buy it and Simon, the son of Georg Sina conceded the arrangement. The bridge was nationalised in 1870. The collection of the tolls went on into the 20th century. The Chain Bridge still stands, the oldest bridge on the Danube. On the Buda bridgehead, a commemorative stone records its construction.

In the reign of King Ferdinand V, Count Istvan Széchenyi raised the idea of connecting the cities of Buda and Pest with a chain bridge. To realise this enormous task, the great patriot joined forces with Baron Georg Sina, who made a contract with Archduke Joseph, Palatine of Hungary and leader of the national deputation. This contract was ratified under the statute 39/1840. By virtue of this, Baron Salomon Rothschild and Samuel Jozsef Wodianer of Capriora also joined the enterprise. The construction was executed over ten years according to the plans of the English engineer, William Tierney Clark and his deputy, Adam Clark. The bridge was inaugurated for public traffic on 21 November 1849. May God bless this work, and may the memory of its founders never be forgotten in this country.

Amelie Lanier is a freelance researcher and historian based in Vienna. She is the author of Das Kreditwesen Ungarns im Vormärz (1995) and Die Geschichte des Bank- und Handelshauses Sina (1998).

NOTES

1. Amelie Lanier, *Die Geschichte des Bank- und Handelshauses Sina* (Peter Lang, 1998).
2. He owed this position to a man in the Austrian administration friendly to him. Later he lost the monopoly.
3. Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), Manuscript Department, K (Széchenyi Estate) 174/96.
4. Adam Clark’s letter to William Tierney Clark is to be found in the Kiscelli Museum in Óbuda.