SOME NOTES ON THE HOLY CROWN OF SAINT STEPHEN

By Gene Springer #1599

To the collector of Orders, Decorations and Medals of the period up to and including World War I, the major part of this insignia will in some way or other be connected with an Emperor, King, Grand Duke, Duke, Prince or other sovereign ruler. Republics were in the minority and emblems of kingship abound. Of these emblems, the greatest was the crown. Great and historic crowns existed in most of the countries of Europe, and in many other countries around the world. One of the most famous of the European crowns has been in the news recently. It is of course, the historic "Holy Crown of Saint Stephen of Hungary". One more chapter has been added to its long and varied history.

The Holy Crown of St. Stephen holds a unique position among great continental crowns, in that it has over the centuries become the absolute symbol of the state. Without it, Kings could not be crowned, they might appear to reign, but did not rule without it. It was for the Hungarians as it would be for us, as if the President of the United States tried to govern without the Constitution. Therefore over the years, he who held the crown, ruled. It is little wonder that for the last thirty years the Communist Government of Hungary has made repeated attempts to gain possession of this emblem. And now in order "to better relations between Hungary and the U. S.", President Carter has decided to do what none of his predecessors have done, that is to return this venerated object to Budapest.

The Crown is basically a circlet of green gold, decorated with rows of pearls on and bottom, between which are located large precious stones (mostly sapphires), which are separated from one another by eight enamelled plaques. This circlet is topped both front and back by semi-circular plates, that on the front portraying the figure of Christ the Pantocrator in enamel, and the one at the back the figure of Emperor Michael Dukas. Also decorating the top of the circlet in front are eight enamelled plates, four arched at the top and four triangular, each decorated with a fish-scale design in green and indigo enamel, each of these plates being topped by a precious stone. Across the back of the circlet at the top on each side of the plate of Michael Dukas are evenly spaced pearls on gold spikes. From behind the circlet rise two arches, front to back, side to side, which are decorated with enamelled portraits of the apostles and set with pearls and precious stones. These meet at the top at a large square plate bearing an enamelled portrait of Christ. From this plate rises the famous "leaning cross", a plain gold cross with bulbous terminations. The cap of the crown is lined with cloth of gold and suspended from the lower part of the circlet at each side and from the back are golden chains (cataseistae) terminating in tri-fold ornaments of precious stones.

As mentioned earlier, this crown has had a very long and checkered career. It is believed to have been made almost 1000 years ago for the coronation of the first Christian king of Hungary, Stephen. It is believed that part of the crown was presented to the newly converted King for his coronation in the year 1000 by Pope Sylvester II. The lower part of the crown is believed to have been sent to King Geza I by the Byzantine Emperor Michael Dukas about 1078. Others hold different views, but whatever the views, by the middle of the 15th century it was regarded that the possessor of the crown, and ONLY HE was the head of the Hungarian Nation. In fact, Hungary was not considered a "Kingdom", but rather a "Crowndom". The land owning magnates and people considered themselves to be "subjects of the Holy Crown".

This great relic and national symbol has had a most interesting and varied past. It was already called the "Holy Crown" by the reign of King Bela IV
(1235-1270), and was placed in the care of the Priors of Szedesfehervar and was kept in the Basilica of St. Stephen, which was the coronation church of Hungarian Kings. Pretenders to the throne were able to gain possession of it for short periods, one such being Ladislas, the son of Geza II. While others took it by force, and several times it left the country completely. The first such occurrence of the crown being taken out of Hungary was when the widow of King Bela took the crown with her to the court of the Emperor Frederick I. It was returned to Hungary during the reign of Andrew II (1205-1235) and remained until the early 1300's when Wenceslas, King of Bohemia was elected King of Hungary and removed the crown to Bohemia. It came back in 1309, but was removed again some twenty years later by the widow of Emperor Albert II who had also been King of Hungary. She removed it to Komaron, hidden in a cushion and there her son Ladislas Poshumous was born and crowned with the Holy Crown. But a year later the infant King and his mother were forced to flee to Vienna, during this flight the crown was disguised as a baby's roringer with a spoon inside and carried in his cradle among the bedclothes. In Vienna, the Queen pledged the crown to Emperor Frederick III for 2,500 Hungarian florins, and it was not until 1458 when the crown was redeemed, at the rate of 60,000 florins.

The crown stayed in Hungary until handed over to Ferdinand I, King of Bohemia and later Emperor who used it for his coronation in 1527. Following this, during the Turkish wars the crown fell into the hands of the Turkish Sultan, and was returned to his candidate for the throne, John Zapolya, but when John died, his widow sent it to Ferdinand for safekeeping in 1530. The crown then stayed in Prague until 1600 and was then returned once again to Hungary, there to remain until 1700 when Joseph II refusing to be crowned in Hungary removed it once again to Vienna. When Joseph's successor Leopold II came to the throne, he returned it to Budapest, where it remained in the Royal Palace from 1790 until the upheavals of 1848.

In 1848 the crown and other regalia was handed over by the Revolutionary Council of National Defence to Louis Kossuth, who before fleeing to Turkey, had the regalia buried in a chest in a marshy valley. There it remained until its location was reported to the Austrians in 1853, when it was recovered and returned once again to the Royal Palace at Budapest. Here it remained under special care of the Crown Guards until 1945. It was removed only twice before the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Once in 1867 for the coronation of Francis Joseph, and again in 1916 for the coronation of the last king, Charles. After the abdication of Charles, during the short lived communist government of Bela Kun, it was offered in 1918 to a British trading firm for 4,000 pounds. The offer was refused and the crown and other regalia remained under guard in the Royal Palace being removed only twice, once in 1928 and again in 1938 for display, until the end of World War II. At that time, the Regent Nicholas Horthy sent the regalia in a chest for safekeeping in Switzerland. On this journey, it was intercepted by American forces in Austria, and the Colonel of the Guard was forced to give the regalia to the Americans.

From that day until recently, the regalia (consisting of the Holy Crown, the Scepter, the Orb, the sword and Coronation Mantle) have been lost from view, and to the many inquiries in the last 30 odd years of the Hungarian government, the State Department had answered that "it knew nothing of the Crown, and would not discuss the matter." President succeeded president and with each new president, the Hungarian government again tried to gain control of the Crown. It offered to trade American spies for the Crown, but this also was refused, it offered treaties and trade concessions, but got nowhere. Finally with the election of Jimmy Carter, they succeeded, and January 6, 1977, Secretary of State Vance returned to Budapest the chest containing the regalia, which during this long period had been kept in the gold depository at Fort Knox. The Secretary of State, in ceremonies beneath the gilded dome of the Hungarian Parliament building, made plain that the Crown and other regalia were
THE HOLY CROWN OF SAINT STEPHEN: Rear View