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Sicily on the columns of *The Times* a special correspondent of war – Ferdinand Éber

The year of 2007 is the bicentenary of the birth of the legendary Hero of the two worlds, Giuseppe Garibaldi. His fight for the independence of Sicily and for the Italian Unity are well known as well as the primary rule of the Hungarian Legion which took part in the battles beside the famous General. In the present article I try to focus the attention on the description of the Sicilian expedition of Garibaldi made by a Hungarian journalist of the most prestigious British newspaper, *The Times*.

"Another phase of the quick revolving history of the war for Italian unity and independence is over. I myself, who am on the spot, and by no means a sceptic either in the cause of nationalities or in the genius of Garibaldi, think now and then that I am dreaming, so wonderful is the progress of the resurrection of a people. I can only compare it to the growth of the aloe, which for years drags on its existence humbly close to the ground, and which seeds up all at once from amid its straggling leaves a tall powerful stem, which bursts into flower in a night, filling the air all around with its fragrance."[1]

This is the way how the article, sent from Messina, on the Italian war, published by *The Times* on August 16th 1860, starts. In the 19th century *The Times* was the most important mouthpiece of the English Press, defined also "the sixth power of Europe", and its correspondents and journalists were the best experts in political, economical and diplomatic questions. In 1860 the British public, just like the European one, thanks to the great diffusion of the newspaper, received news on the war of Garibaldi for the liberation and independence of Sicily, directly by a "special correspondent" who was among the Thousand.[2]

To write this article – together with the many others composed by this extraordinary reporter during the whole enterprise of Garibaldi – was not an English man, but a Hungarian one, Ferdinand Éber, a political emigrant described by Carlo Adamoli, a soldier in the army of Garibaldi, "a silent gentleman with ice-blue coloured eyes". He was 35 years old when he took part beside Garibaldi at the war for the Italian Unity. He had to leave his country, just like his many other fellows, after the tragic repression of the Hungarian revolution in 1849. Fortunatelly, he find refuge in London where he earned some money giving private lessons of piano and literaure. He had studied at the Accademy of Oriental Studies (Orientalische Akademie) in Wien where he had acquired the necessary knowledge to be an expert in the politics and culture of the Middle East, he spoke, besides Hungarian, English, French and German, also Arabic and Turkish. He became an appreciated correspondent of *The Times* in 1854 after having sent to it an article analyzing the situation of Great Britain in the Crimean war. Éber was recruited by the paper and was sent first to Greece and from there to the Ottoman Empire. The director of *The Times,* Mowbray Morris, wrote in a letter to one of his correspondents in Wien on the 3rd of March, 1854: "Our man goes to Greece tomorrow. His name is Éber, a Hungarian writing and speaking English as well as I do."[3]

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[1] *The revolution in Sicily*, "The Times", 14 agosto 1860, p. 8. OSZK.

[2] *The Times* published its articles without the signature of the journalist just indicating them as "from our special correspondent" or "from our own correspondent".

[3] *History of The Times* vol. II., London 1939, p. 169.

In fact, Éber was sent to the Crimea in order to inform the readers on the field operations from the camp of Omer Pasha before Balaclava. The Pasha soon made him a colonel and his experience in the war signed him a lot. He remembers it with bitterness in a letter written to Mrs White: "If I ever had children I would teach them to think of the Crimean war as the biggest possible insult which should never be pronounced."[4] After the end of the Crimean war Éber was stationed for a couple of months in Constantinople and travelled a lot in the Middle East. At the end of April, in 1859, when the war in Italy against the Austrian Empire began, Éber was *The Times*'s principle correspondent with the Sardinian forces. After the armistice of Villafranca he returned to England for his holiday, but shortly after he was again in Milan. He received a letter from Morris who, eager to inform for first his readers on the insurrection of the 3rd and 4th of April in Palermo, signed to Éber his next work: "I should like you to visit Sicily and let us know what sort of thing this new insurrection is."[5]

This is how his adventure at the legendary Hero's side in Sicily began. Perhaps the third of what was thought of as Italian territory and a half of the Italian people lived within the Kingdom ruled by Victor Emmanuel in the spring of 1860. In early May Garibaldi led a seaboard expedition from Genoa to Sicily where the revolt was going on.

It could be almost superfluous to mention that many journalists and writers reached the camp of Garibaldi (e.p. Alexandre Dumas, Jessie White Mario and Maxime Du Camp, just to remember the most famous names). But, meanwhile, they were only eyewitnesses of the events, Éber soon became an active part of them.[6]

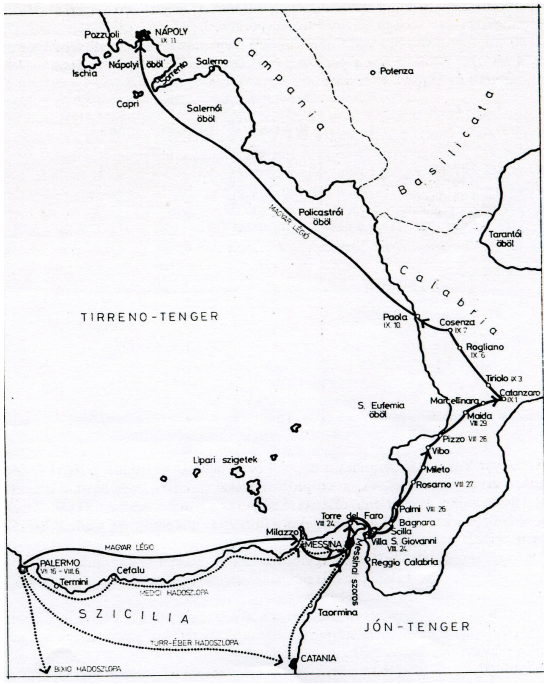
The first report on the revolt, entitled *The Insurrection in Sicily*, sent from Messina, on the 23rd of May, was published by *The Times* on the 6th of June due to the communication difficulties. Éber entering the harbour of Messina describes the city with these words: "every one of us looked out anxiously for the coast of Sicily, as if the races of an insurrection could be seen, like the eruption of a volcano, from afar. The idea which one involuntary connects with a country in insurrection is that of stir and movement, the impression on the contrary, was that of dead lethargy."[7] Great Britain, considering its important commercial activity on the Mediterranean Sea, had many interests in Sicily, most of all in the sulfphur mine commerce and for the English trade, Messina was the most important town in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Éber underlines this fact mentioning also that in 1859 "as many as 276 British vessels cleared out here".[8] He gives notice also of the change in the behaviour of the Neapolitan guards and police authorities who were smiling at the strangers and did not treat them, as in the past, like enemies. "The wonderful civilty of these Cerberuses impressed me more than anything I saw afterwards to the same effect. It showed a consciousness of their doom and a general demoralization which I should scarcely have expected."[9] He stops in Messina just for two days because he had planned to go to Palermo where the revolt was on. He arrived before Garibaldi so he was able to inform the General on the exact position of the Neapolitan troops and he could advise him to

[4] Éber to Mrs. White, Eupatoria, 1st of May, 1855, Hungarian National Archives (hereinafter HNA), Éber papers R 25, doument 80.
[5] Morris to Éber, HNA, Éber papers R25, document 703.
[6] Magda Jászay, *Il Risorgimento vissuto dagli ungheresi*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2000, p. 221.
[7] *The Insurrection in Sicily*, "The Times", 6 June 1860, p. 7.
[8] Ibidem.
[9] Ibidem.

attack the city through Porta Termini because, in his opinion, this Porta was ill defended. "Close to the Porta Termini – as he describes it to the readers of The Times – is the Vecchia Fiera - the old market place. This was the first point where Garibaldi stopped. One must know these Sicilians to have an idea of the frenzy, screaming, shouting, crying and hugging; all would kiss his hands and embrace his knees. There is a semi-Oriental laissez-aller about them, which only produces fits of activity scarcely equal to the moment."[10]

Garibaldi and his Thousand had landed at Marsala, and Palermo fell on the 26th of May. Éber sent a full account of the landing and of the capture of Palermo giving such a vivid description that another Hungarian political emigrate living in London, Francis Pulszky, said that "his letters still odoured of gunpowder".[11] *The Times*, indeed, sold 5,000 more copies that day.[12]

Éber, as it is well known, had also a second charge in this insurrection. He, like his other compatriots in the army of Garibaldi, operated first of all for the Hungarian case, the liberation of his country from the Habsburg oppressor. In a letter to Klapka, he explains the importance of his role at the newspaper because with his articles he could change the public opinion in the favour of Garibaldi.[13] *The Times* was a pro-Austrian paper and, in fact, during the Hungarian revolution it had refused to publish the letters sent from his English correspondent who sympathized with the Hungarians.[14] Éber knew that Lord Palmerston cultivated anti-Austrian feelings and that the director of *The Times* was a friend of him. It is significant to know that Lord Palmerston had called on the journalist twice in 1859 in order to ask him on the Hungarian affairs. Therefore Éber considered Lord Palmerston as one of the curcial figures who could help the Hungarians against the Austrian oppressor.[15]



[10] *The Insurrection in Sicily, "*The Times", 8 June 1860, p. 10.
[11] Francis Pulszky, *Életem és korom*, vol. II., Budapest 1882.
[12] Éber to Klapka HNA, Klapka papers R 294.
[13] Éber to Klapka, HNA, Klapka papers R 294.
[14] *History of "The Times", op. cit*.p. 114.
[15] Éber to Klapka, Milano, 1 Dicember 1859, HNA, Klapka papers R 294.

Hence, in 1860 Éber had also a political mission because he was working also for the Hungarian National Committe and his task was to help the organization of the Hungarian Legion. This is the reason why, later in June, Éber did not hesitate too much when Garibaldi asked him, or better say "forced"[16] him, to accept the command of the Second Brigade even if it caused a great financial loss to him because Morris did not let him to take any other tasks but that of the correspondent.[17] "If you desire the fame of a patriot and liberator, - writes Morris in a letter to Éber - and choose to fight for Italy in the service of Garibaldi – do so – but at least be candid and say what you are about, and do not leave me is a state of uncertainty. I want information, not for myself, but for the use and service of the paper. It is a correspontent's duty to give this information. […] This cannot go on – and I must call upon you to make *your* election between "The Times" and your other masters whoever they may be. We cannot have half a service." [18]

The 15th Division of the National Army was composed of two Brigades, the first was commanded by Colonel Bixio and the second one by Colonel Éber, who was not an official soldier but a diplomat, however, he was an expert at military theories, he also published two important booklets[19] on this subjet, and had a great experience in combatting.

The articles are full of enthusiasm and the public opinion of Great Britain was getting more and more favourable of the case of Garibaldi maybe also thanks to these passionate accounts. In fact, Lord John Russell (who had defined Garibaldi as a "gent out of law")[20] referred to the King of the Two Sicilies, Francis II, that he must act according to the will of the public opinion, as to say cannot do anything in order to maintain the Bourbons' rule in Sicily.[21]

Éber always tries to give a precise and detailed description on everything happening in Palermo, introducing often his discourse with the topography of the Mediterranean city. The arrival of Garibaldi, according to him, changed the nature of the insurrection in Sicily because only he was able to hold together the different *squadre* of *piccioti*. In order to offer an idea on the people of Palermo the description made by Éber seems quite rude: "I must say – as he writes it - the Palermitans are scarcely up to the mark. They are all well-intentioned, but they are distressingly indolent. There is no initiative or activity on their part, and their own occupation seems to be to invent and spread romours. Above all, horses and cavalry seem to be the nightmare of the Palermitans, and few seem to think that they ought to do something for themselves. The only thing which they do spontaneously is to cry "Evviva" and promenade the streets for news and

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[16] In a letter to Klapka Éber says that Garibaldi literally forced him to accept the new role after that István Türr fell ill. Éber to Klapka, Messina, 20th August 1860, HNA, Klapka papers R 294.

[17] "The best reply I can give to your letter of the 15th is this - you were sent byThe Times to Sicily to attend the military expedition to that island, to report its proceedings and to keep us informed upon all matters of public interest occurring there. To perform that duty efficiently and impartially it was obviously necessary that you should undertake no other, and that you should preserve a perfectly independent position. […] Since you prefer our service to that of Garibaldi, prove your preference by resigning at once your command and freeing yourself completely from every other tie but ours." Morris to Éber, HNA, Éber papers R25, doc. 724.

[18] Morris to Éber, HNA, Éber papers R25, doc. 786.

[19] *A honvédelmi szervezésről*, Pest 1868, and *Az őszi gyakorlatok és a honvédség*, Pest 1871.

[20] Alfredo Zazo, *La politica estera del Regno delle Due Sicilie nel 1859-1860,* Tip. Ed. A. Miccoli*,* Napoli 1940, p. 290.

[21] Idem. p. 324.

gossip. It is in such moments that you see of what stuff a population is made, and certainly that of Palermo is not of the stuff of which heroes and martyrs are made. Instead of throwing themselves into the houses nearest to the points occupied by the enemy, they run about the streets discouraging each other." [22]

The Neapolitan fleet bombards heavily Palermo from the bay and causes grave damages everywhere. As Éber notes, all the civilized nations – English, French, American, Sardinian, Austrian - had representatives of their fleets on the spot to witness the bombing and offering refuge on their board to their subjects. "The different squadri of the insurgents – informs us the Hungarian journalist – took up positions all round the chain of mountains which encloses the bay. It was one of the finest sights you could see when their fires blazed up at night and mingled their red glare with the pale light of the moon. They were watched by the inhabitants like the holy fire by the Parsee."[23]

Thanks to his contacts and to his great diplomacy Éber gets the news from first hand, he takes part in the meetings at the headquarters and he is in touch with the foreign consuls too. "This irregular warfare" means also irregular army and Éber invites his readers to the camp of the Nizzard and to unite with these brave soldiers. "*The long marches and countermarches, rains, fights, and sleeping on the ground had made almost every one worthy to figure in a picture by Murillo, with all those grand Sicilian mountains, not unlike those of Greece, forming a background such as no picture can reproduce.*"[24] But his great ability as a journalist is seen when he presents the people on the streets and their feelings in those fervid days. "*An epic poem could be written about what the 1,062 Italians and five Hungarians did in Sicily during these 20 days; how they fought, how they marched, how they bore fatigue. If every Sicilian was ready to do the thousandth part of what they did, there would be no more fighting required.*" Evidently, Éber includes also himself when he speaks about the five Hungarians in the battle of Palermo.



Ferdinand Éber in 1862.

[22] *The Insurrection in Sicily*, "The Times" 9 June 1860, p. 9.
[23] *The Insurrection in Sicily*, "The Times" 8 June 1860, p. 10.
[24] Ibidem.

After the taking of the capital city of the island, Garibaldi decides to continue his march throughout Sicily. It is possible to follow this great adventure on the pages of *The Times*: "You must have a good map of Sicily to find out where I am. – writes Éber after leaving Palermo - The interior of Sicily has at all times the credit of being the most unmanageable part of the island - wild, poor, uncultivated; and this is not an opinion entertained alone by foreigners, but it is one which you hear constantly repeated by people who have large property in the island. I have seen but a small portion yet, but at every step hitherto things become better instead of worse, and in every respect." [25] His poetical attitude and love for beauty clearly appear when he speaks about the internal part of the island. "As for the scenery, it is the finest you can imagine - a continual succession of magnificent valleys and grand mountain slopes. For wherever there is a river near everything lives with an exuberant life – the cactus, the aloe, the vine, the fig and almond trees, with flowers such as no hothouse can produce, roses and oleanders in full bloom. The towns and villages, like eagle's nests are perched up high, and secure from malaria, which infests all the lowlands, and from hostile attack. Verily the interior of Sicily is preferable in every respect to the towns of the seacoast."[26]

The passionate article, occupying four columns, was sent from Caltanisetta and was published on the 16th of July. Éber is impressed by the beauty of the places they passed through. The inhabitans of the island and the customes of the Sicilians could seem strange to his readers, especially when Éber speaks about religion and superstition. "For you must know that – as he says – St. Michel of Caltanisetta is a powerful saint, and that if Palermo was taken it was owing to his co-operation. The sacristan of the cathedral, and after him the whole population affirm that every night during the fight the saint disappeared, to their great fright and distress. How could anyone doubt about who took Palermo?"[27] He, as a great traveller, had visited many countries and knew very well the Middle East[28] and stationing in the city of Caltanisetta he remembers some Arabic lanscape. "Here I am in the very heart of Sicily, the capital of the interior, about equidistant from Palermo, Catania, and Girgenti. Decidedly the more I see of Sicily, the more I am inclined to class it with those countries where "all, save man, is divine"."[29] The similarities between the Sicilians and the Arabs are so numerous that Éber underlines it again in another article dated on the 19th of July. "More than one-half of the towns have their Arab names preserved, though corrupted, Marsala, Calatafimi, Alcamo, Caltanisetta etc. Every farmer or little well-to-do man in town and country rides about on his mare, with his gun across the saddle, just as you meet them in the East. The mule-driver who accompanies the caravan laden with sulphur still urges on his animals with the well-known "Bzz" of the donkey-boy of Egypt. "[30] He understands the many roots the Sicilian have and consideres them great masters in sweets like their African cousins. The dishes reminds him of those eaten under a date tree or a sycamore. "When you meet a woman in the street she will cover her face as hurriedly, and perhaps more so, than a woman of the East. You find the same reverence for race

[25] *The Insurrection in Sicily*, "The Times", 10 July, 1860, p. 12.
[26] Ibidem.
[27] Ibidem.
[28] Lajos Lukács, *A magyar politikai emigráció 1849-1867,* Kossuth könyvkiadó, Budapest 1984, p. 117.
[29] *The Insurrection in Sicily*, "The Times", 16 July, 1860, p. 6.
[30] *The Insurrection in Sicily*, "The Times", 19 July, 1860, p. 9.

and blood as among Arabs, the same solidarity of family, espousing a quarrel and doing their utmost to have the last word and the last blow."[31]

The march was trying for the force composed of young volunteers and they were obstacled also by the terrible heat of the Sicilian summer. The military skills of colonel Éber are evident in the organization and in the command of the Brigade. Abba[32] notes in his famous book that Éber divides rationally the march, according to the Indian style as he refers to it in one of his articles, in the hours of the daybreak and sunset. The column arrived to Messina on the 7th of August. The city became a strategical point for further military operations on the continent so the army of Garibaldi stopped for a couple of days in Messina, in fact, Éber sent not less than seven articles from this city to *The Times*. He describes the position of the troops in the article published on the 14th of August; "If we succeed in establishing ourselves strongly on the point of the Faro, we have, at the same time, bridged over as it were the channel which separates us from the continent, and have acquired a base of operations from which we can go across to any point on the southern and eastern coast."[33]

As Éber is one of the commanders he is very much in touch with Garibaldi and brings his readers into the private life of the General. "He lives at the Royal Palace, close to the villa, the little ornamental garden in the main street. As usual, leaving the larger apartments to his suite, he retired into a small corner room, which forms his bedroom, study and private room. He had just finished dressing when I entered. Coffee and some biscuits were ready for breakfast on a small table encumbered with papers. Welcoming me with a hearty shake of the hand, he continued walking along the room, then stopping, he asked me, "Do you remember the "Carme della Morte" di Ugo Foscolo?" On my confessing my ignorance he began to recite it to me, giving all the emphasis of which those sublime verses are capable. Having finished we sat down to have some coffee, talking of poetry and the superiority of versi sciolti over rhymes."[34]

Éber believed, as well as his compatriots, that the passage to the continent was just the first step in a trionfal march on Rome and on Venice. Once the Austrian Empire entered into war with the Italian forces, new prospects could be possible for the Hungarian political emigrates. Things did not go as the soldiers hoped for. Éber, resigning after the battle of Volturno, left the army of Garibaldi and sent a letter to his General on the 29th of October: "Mio Generale, essendo uno de' vostri militi vi prego di accordarmi la mia dimissione dal momento che voi vi ritirate dall'armata meridionale".[35]

His adventure and the Sicilian expedition of General Garibaldi with the Thousand were immortalized on the columns of *The Times*.

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[31] Ibidem.

[32] Giuseppe Cesare Abba, *Da Quarto al Volturno. Noterelle di uno dei Mille,* Feltrinelli Milano 1949, p. 111.

[33] *The Revolution in Sicily,* "The Times", 14 August, 1860, p. 3.

[34] Ibidem.

[35] Cit. by Magda Jászay, *op. cit.,* p. 224. Éber to Garibaldi, Caserta 29 October 1860, Archives of the Institute of Risorgimento – Roma, packet 43, n. 47/1.