

“THE BOATMAN OF THE DELUGE”

MIKLÓS WESSELÉNYI AND THE 1838 FLOODING OF PEST

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The most enduring influence of the 1838 flood is symbolic. In a time of crisis a member of Hungary's titled nobility made a decision to rescue needy souls, regardless of their social status. A prominent national figure manned a boat to save imperiled lives rather than simply occupy space on the national stage. Wesselényi's conduct during the flooding reflects the congruence between his thoughts and actions. His liberal principles were guiding forces of action which directed him in a time of trouble. At a time when his own life was on the line and when he was racked with bodily pains he opted not to focus on his own personal woes, but repeatedly rowed out into the watery darkness to rescue his fellow men.

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Prelude

Barely noticed amid the bustle of traffic along modern Budapest's Kossuth Lajos utca an aged memorial, its relief figures encrusted over with a dull green patina, rises above the busy street on the north wall of the Baroque Franciscan Church. Sculpted by Barnabas Holló in 1900 and placed on the church wall in 1905,¹ the piece depicts a boatman reaching out an oar to a small group of people huddled on the rooftop of a house inundated by water. Among the rescuees, some already in, some just outside the oarsman's flat-bottomed skiff, are shivering women clutching infants. Immediately under Holló's work are simple gilded letters, which spell-out the name "Wesselényi Miklós", and bear the March 1838 date of the flood, which submerged much of the city. The sculpture honors the rescue efforts of a Hungarian Reform Era politician, credited with saving nearly 600 city residents, whose lives had been imperiled by the flood.²

Baron Miklós Wesselényi was born into an aristocratic, though controversial, Hungarian-Transylvanian family.³ His early friendship with Count István Széchenyi (dubbed by Lajos Kossuth as "The Greatest Hungarian"), deeply influenced the young Transylvanian's political development. Together the two toured

Western Europe and mutually pledged to rejuvenate Hungary by their writings and participation in the nation's public life.⁴ Each wrote important political works containing their respective perceptions of national backwardness, proposed solutions to old problems, and attempted to awaken Magyar society. Széchenyi's *Hitel* [Credit] appeared in 1830; Wesselényi's *Balítéletekről* [About Prejudices] was finished in 1831, but not printed until 1834.⁵ By 1831 they had become estranged, and during much of their remaining lives maintained an often stormy relationship with periods punctuated by both respect and dislike.

In 1830 Wesselényi emerged on the Hungarian political scene and soon became a leader in the "ellenzéki" or opposition movement. He opposed forcible impressment of peasants in the Habsburg army, but called for land reforms, modifications of oppressive serf tenures and the equality of all citizens before the law. Influential Austrian officials, including Metternich, regarded him as a dangerous radical who was a ringleader in an anti-Habsburg conspiracy:

He [Wesselényi] is the leader of the pure revolutionaries and walks the well-recognized path of base European radicalism in its most virulent form. As such, he is deserving of every kind of punishment.⁶

On March 4, and May 5, 1835, criminal proceedings were filed against Wesselényi in Transylvania and Hungary. The first charged him with using a printing press to publish unauthorized reports of Transylvanian parliamentary debates. But he had been under Austrian scrutiny long before the press incident.⁷ The Hungarian indictment raised the more serious allegation of treason based on Wesselényi's speeches at the Szatmár county assemblies on November 10 and December 9, 1834. The core issue was whether or not he had accused the government of fleeing Hungary's nine million peasants.⁸ His basic theme was that past parliaments had repeatedly blocked passage of agrarian reforms while ignoring long standing injustices to the peasantry. In his speeches Wesselényi praised "our kings", who had urged Hungary's legislators to ease peasant burdens, but Hungary's noble dominated governments had failed to implement the sovereign's desires. Until the diet passed the reform legislation necessary to ease the burdens on the peasants, there was simply nothing for the king to ratify.⁹ The royal representative at Szatmár was offended by the speeches and demanded a retraction. This Wesselényi refused to give. But he did concede that not just the government, but "we [the Hungarian nobility] have also bled the peasantry and we still do."¹⁰ In neither speech did he criticize the king. The pivotal point was whether a speech that criticized a government statement was by definition a treasonous utterance against the king himself.¹¹

Although the indictments were issued in 1835, proceedings continued to drag on and by March 1838 Wesselényi's trial was still pending. But the strain weighed heavily on him and adversely affected his health. On October 18, 1837 Széchenyi

wrote that he had met with Wesselényi and that "... the poor devil looks as if he has already spent ten years in prison".¹² Wesselényi was also beset by physical problems. As a youth he was endowed with a robust physical constitution, but even before the trial his condition had deteriorated. Earlier leg pains flared up again. His kidneys were diseased (in his diary he mentions passing kidney stones). Like many other notables of his time, Wesselényi contracted syphilis, which some suggest caused his eventual blindness a few years later. He had become increasingly stout and could not move about as easily as he once did.¹³ By late 1836 Wesselényi decided that rather than simply wait for his trial to begin at Pozsony (the seat of government), he would move to Pest where he could be closer to some of his trial defense advisors.¹⁴

Located across the Danube opposite the historically more important Buda,¹⁵ Pest had experienced a major transformation. During much of the eighteenth century it was a small town with less than 400 houses, 8,000 citizens, and no major suburbs. By 1838 it witnessed significant growth with more than four thousand homes, rows of palaces, major government buildings and three new districts. No longer the neglected twin on the east side of the Danube, Budapest was becoming animated by a growing sense that the municipal center of gravity was shifting away from Buda and toward Pest.¹⁶ Mór Jókai, a major novelist of the nineteenth century, rhapsodically mused that 1838 Pest had become for Hungarians what Vienna was to Austria, London to England and Moscow to Russia. He wrote:

Hungarians feel a particularly sweet pleasure when they think of Pest. We long to visit Pest. We want to see youthful, lovely Pest, that budding bride of the honored veteran (*hadastyán*) Buda, with its charming rows of houses, its renowned public buildings, and so many attractions that a newcomer's five senses would be overwhelmed if he wanted to savor them all.¹⁷

The Winter of 1837–38 and the Danger of Flooding

The winter of 1837–38 was unusually severe in Hungary. Temperatures were lower¹⁸ and snow accumulations significantly higher than normal. By mid-December the Danube had frozen over. Later that month there was a sudden thaw followed by heavy new snows during the Christmas holidays. These December conditions caused an appreciable rise in the Danube's water level near Pest-Buda, and greatly increased the possibility of future flooding. In early January the Danube froze again, leaving a solid ice sheet all the way to the river bottom on the Pest shore. Then, in mid-January, nearly three feet of new snow fell on the ice-covered river. There were thaws in early February, storms on February 23 and 25, followed

by a new thaw by month's end.¹⁹ The melting ice and snow coupled with the new moisture exacerbated an already perilous situation. During the first week in March of 1838 the spring thaw began and ice sheets on the Danube started to move down river from Vienna toward Pest. On March 6, near the village of Kisoroszi near the northern tip of Szentendre Island in the middle of the Danube ice floes dammed the river course on the west side of the island, causing waters on the eastern channel to overflow. The Kisoroszi blockage also clogged the movement of upriver ice. Waters blocked on the western side poured over onto the eastern shore, flooding almost 25 miles of land including the small town of Vác a little north of Pest.²⁰

Even though some lower portions of Buda had been flooded earlier, the municipal authorities in Pest reacted slowly to the looming catastrophe. Only on March 6, 1838 after the flooding of Buda and Vác did the Pest authorities take belated, but woefully deficient, action. The city's public works department ordered that an earth and manure dike be built on top of the existing stone embankments on the Danube's eastern shore. However, the new earthen causeway extended less than 400 yards along the river and was only about two yards wide and about a yard and a half tall. Modern historians describe these belated measures as "ridiculously inadequate" in light of the impending peril.²¹

On March 13, while ice still blocked the Danube flow on the western side of Szentendre Island, recently melted waters and sheets of ice, which had broken off from the upriver ice dam, pushed against the eastern Danube shoreline at Pest. Pressed by the massive force of water and ice, the recently constructed earthen dike held for only a few hours before it was breached. By evening the waters burst the levee and flowed into the heart of Pest. Another embankment, which was to protect southern Pest, also gave way, causing additional flooding in the southern city districts.²² Large floating ice chunks also threatened to block at least one of the Danube channels passing next to Csepel Island south of Pest, raising the specter of additional floods caused by downstream damming. Once the flooding began significant portions of the city were covered from the 13 through the 18 of March.

The Pest Flood of March 1838

March 13: The Flooding Begins

Like many other residents of Pest, Wesselényi was curious, but initially not overly fearful, when melting Danube ice floes began to move near Pest.²³ During the afternoon of March 13, he and other onlookers observed that the ice accumulations were quietly beginning to drift downstream.²⁴ Later that afternoon Wesselényi learned that the ice had shifted again, but stopped and people were walking on the ice. Around five o'clock the waters rose again behind the ice dam

and began to pound against the eastern shore of the Danube, first rising to the top of the stone embankments and then flowing through and over the new dike. At first Wesselényi was not too troubled by the breach because he felt that as the water and floes moved southward the river would recede without major damage. Confident that the situation had stabilized, Wesselényi went to the theater.²⁵

However, during the performance Wesselényi learned of flooding in the city center and immediately left the theater. As he approached the river bank he saw water pouring through the earthen embankment and flowing toward central Pest. Hurrying to his residence, he saddled a horse and rode back toward the flooded areas. By the time he arrived at the market square, the waters were already streaming toward and had begun to cover Váci street (near the spot of the present Holló monument). Soon the waters had risen so high that they touched his horse's stomach as it waded along. Leaving the city center, Wesselényi continued his ride through Pest's Teréz and József districts. Although he observed flooding in a number of places, he thought the waters had begun to ebb. And after midnight he returned to his residence, believing the worst was over.²⁶

March 14–16: High Water Mark of the Flood

Wesselényi had scarcely fallen asleep during the pre-dawn of March 14, when his servant awakened him with news that waters were lapping at the gate of his house. He was also told that the Soroksár dam south of Pest had ruptured. Alarm bells had begun to peal and citizens awakened to discover that much of the city was flooded. Despite his physical ailments, Wesselényi immediately threw himself into rescue efforts. About five o'clock in the morning he began walking toward the city hall where he heard there were rescue boats. En route he waded through frigid waters which at times reached his neck. By the time Wesselényi arrived at the middle of the city, his clothes were frozen. To his great disappointment he learned that no rescue boats were at the city hall. Chilled and barely able to return to dry land, he finally came to a friend's home where he changed his icy clothing, warmed his shivering body and briefly rested. Despite throbbing leg pains sometime near seven o'clock Wesselényi went out into the city again.²⁷

Between seven and eight that morning, he found a flat boat [*ladik*], which he and a companion, Senator Havas, rowed into the flooded areas of central Pest. The two paddled up and down streets in the heart of the city, including some of the areas where Wesselényi had ridden his horse just a few hours earlier. They began their rescue work, taking stranded people from inundated parts of the city's core to safer places on higher ground. All during the morning Wesselényi tried to persuade Havas to take the flat-boat toward the suburbs where the low flood plain, high population density and poorly built homes all combined to imperil many of

the mostly working class residents living there. Havas insisted, however, that the boat remain in the center of the city where many influential political figures lived. Throughout the morning the two boatmen went from one politician's home to another asking whether or not the legislators needed assistance. Wesselényi became increasingly frustrated, feeling that interests of those who most urgently needed help were being subordinated to those who did not. But their efforts were not all in vain as they were able to rescue a number of people seriously threatened by the flooding.²⁸ Wesselényi was distressed that so few of his acquaintances and almost no nobility or younger gentry were taking part in finding flood victims. At one point he saw a member of the Csekonics family and Count Aurél Dessewffy riding together in a boat. Wesselényi assumed they were looking for flood victims and asked where they had been working. He was shocked when Csekonics replied he was merely seeking a stable for his horse. By noon many rescue boats were moving along the submerged inner-city streets and Wesselényi had finally succeeded in persuading Havas to take the boat toward the József district.²⁹

As they rowed toward the suburbs, passing near the Széna market (now Kálvin tér near the National Museum) they continued to pick up and take to safety additional unfortunates imperiled by the waters. They continued toward Üllői Street, rowing in the direction of Wesselényi's lodgings, traveling by way of streets with small houses where people were gathered on rooftops hoping to be evacuated. Sometimes only moments after those rescued had been taken into the boat the house disintegrated into the rising waters. As he neared his own lodgings, Wesselényi ruefully observed that the water was halfway to the top of the gate and the center of the building's rear wing had collapsed.³⁰

Not long thereafter an alarm sounded from the József district and Wesselényi hurried the flat-boat in that direction. His arrival there was also timely since many of the small, poorly constructed houses had already begun to crumble into the waters. During that awful maelstrom he and Havas were able to retrieve many folk who were precariously perched atop roofs. But the crackling and crashing of obliterated homes, clouds of dust rising above the turbulent flood, and the screams, moans and bellowing of those already in or threatened by the deluge combined to create a scene of devastating horror.³¹ Criss-crossing the water-engulfed streets of the Józsefváros district near and behind the National Museum the boatmen were able to save large numbers of people endangered by the rampant flooding. Generally proceeding northward in the direction of Kerepesi (now Rákóczi) Street and then west along that major avenue until its intersections with Síp and Fűzfa Streets, Wesselényi and his companion continued to load water-soaked refugees into the boat and to drop them off on dry land. The two boatmen took turns rowing and steering their little craft until about five o'clock in the afternoon, when an exhausted Havas decided he needed to rest.³² But Wesselényi returned to the crumbling ruins, skeletons of houses and frigid waters. While unloading a group of

flood-stranded people, Wesselényi observed Albert Prónay, Pest County's administrative chief, smoking a pipe and looking down at the devastation from his balcony. When Wesselényi angrily yelled up at him, "Are you just going to stand there and smoke your pipe?" an embarrassed Prónay joined the relief endeavors. As twilight descended the skies darkened, a thick fog settled in and a large snow-storm ensued as blackness descended on the city.³³

Wesselényi wrote that he had never experienced a more horrible evening than that of March 14, 1838. The scene was a nightmare of too many people contending for too few places on the boat. Crashing buildings, ruins of gutted homes, floating furniture, moving chunks of ice, uprooted trees and other obstacles made progress very difficult along the clogged narrow lanes. In front of, behind and on either side of his boat one building after another collapsed. Time and again, rescue was impeded by structures that had already fallen, or which threatened to disintegrate into the freezing waters. The clattering din, an unloosed bedlam of frantic, desperate screams and hoarse wails for help all filled the heavy night air. For every ten needed acts of aid Wesselényi wanted to give, he was able to offer only one. He saw hundreds in immediate peril, but was able to help only a fraction, leaving others dangling in the jaws of death. With regret he had to limit places in the boat to women and children, leaving fathers and husbands behind.³⁴

Finally, at about seven o'clock in the evening, after twelve hours of incessant, nearly uninterrupted work, a drenched and exhausted Wesselényi returned back to the Prónay residence. His cohorts insisted that he get out of the boat, eat and rest for a few hours at a nearby inn. After arranging for new rescuers (which included Prónay's secretary and the tutor for Prónay's son) Wesselényi begrudgingly complied. But by ten o'clock that night he was again aboard a boat heading out into the blackness. He continued to guide the boat through the narrow Síp, Fűzfa, Kis Diófa and Nagy Diófa, Nyári, Kis Kereszt and Nagy Kereszt, and Kis Mez Streets in the József district. (Some of these narrow streets intersected the major arterial road, which now bears Wesselényi's name.) Progress along the flooded, cramped roads was impeded by all kinds of obstacles, which made movement of the boat increasingly difficult. In facing these challenges, Wesselényi went first toward the more remote streets, where he felt the danger was greatest. As earlier he was often unable to provide places in the boat for all those in peril. But he tried to calm the fears of panic-stricken souls left behind, promising them that he would return as soon as he was able. With relief, gratitude and some satisfaction, Wesselényi noted that all to whom he had given his promise to return were later rescued by himself or by others.³⁵ After midnight he returned to the inn and rested a few hours.

Széchenyi's diary also contains an entry for March 14, 1838, which noted in part:

People are rowing through the streets in boats. ... I am feeling better ... Guests should be coming for dinner, but no one can go out. The waters continue to rise. The Kappel house is threatened with collapse. ... Wesselényi worked through the entire night. It is snowing.³⁶

At five o'clock in the morning of March 15, Wesselényi resumed rescue work with the aid of a rowboat he had obtained from the tutor of Prónay's son. As he rowed through the city he was annoyed by the number of empty boats he saw in the less badly damaged inner city, while almost no boats were to be found in the gutted József district.³⁷ As morning dawned, an awful panorama unfolded. Where just days earlier there had been workers, shopkeepers, families and bustling commerce, evidence of the catastrophe was everywhere. Many areas were under water and numerous houses had tumbled or were flooded to the rooftops. Plaintive cries for help still filled the air. Parts of furniture, family portraits, bedding, weaponry, animal corpses, and what was left of washed away gates, fences, doors and roofs all floated through the remains of the city. When the human moans subsided, the mournful yelping of stranded dogs permeated the air.³⁸

Attempts to rescue victims were fraught with pathos and peril. As he neared one house Wesselényi heard anguished pleas for immediate help coming from the back of that building. Unfortunately, waters had risen nearly to the top of the entry arch so that it was impossible to get the boat under the archway and come close enough to save the unlucky inhabitants. One of his most unforgettable experiences took place on Práter Street. A roof had been ripped off a house, but it was still temporarily held in place by some trees. More than thirty stranded people were jammed on that precarious roof line, while nearby a comparable group huddled on top of the roof of a gutted porch. Each group was in immediate danger, but Wesselényi's boat could barely hold thirty people. After first filling his boat with women, infants, younger children and elderly people from both places, Wesselényi tried to row the packed boat away as quickly as possible so he could then return for the others. However, the flat-boat became stuck in the courtyard of one of the houses and could not be freed for nearly a half an hour. With the cacophony of despairing cries in the background, he frantically tried to move the disabled craft. Finally, he was able to free it, and as Wesselényi was rowing the first group to safety, he providentially chanced upon another boat and sent it to rescue the others.³⁹

Wesselényi tells of both heroism and meanness by people who experienced the flood. He writes of decent people who braved exhaustion and danger in order to rescue those in dire conditions. But he also describes scoundrels who ignored desperate pleas of the needy and those who were motivated solely by a desire for gain. Some stole the meager remnants of the flood victims' possessions. While unloading a group of people near the Ludoviceum, Wesselényi was accosted by five men who told him that the boat he was using belonged to them. He frantically pled that

he needed the boat for further rescues, but the five refused to budge. Not wanting to create a public row Wesselényi reluctantly debarked. Later he learned that the “owners” were likely thieves, as in that area there had already been confrontations between owners and extortionists, who forced the owners to surrender their skiffs.⁴⁰

In addition to physical devastation, the calamity also wreaked emotional havoc for some. Széchenyi’s diary entry for March 15, 1838 describes his despondency:

After what was for me a restless evening, I wakened to a more dreadful day. The water continues to rise. At about one in the afternoon Countess Erdődy took our family out for awhile. ... After I returned home, Crescentie [Széchenyi’s wife] calmly curled her ringlets. ... A house near the Derras collapsed at three o’clock in the afternoon. There is ... gigantic turmoil.

It is now ten at night. Towards five o’clock this afternoon the water began to recede a little ..., but afterwards it rose again ... and it is rising still.

The house in which we are staying is [supposed to be] immune from splitting apart, and as yet there is no sign of its collapse. How will all this end ...? This may be Hungary’s fatal wound. Tomorrow ... if I am still alive ... Altogether I feel all of this weighing heavily upon me. In other words, I am frenzied. Oh God, into Thy hands I commend my spirit!⁴¹

Later that day, Wesselényi rowed toward the Károlyi mansion. Count Károlyi had already taken his family to Buda, but several hundred people had been left behind and were frantic as the waters continued to rise. In addition, the Károlyi archives, containing some records which were a half a century old, were in immediate danger and the archivist could find few to help him save the documents. Wesselényi arranged for a boat to transfer the writings to safety. He finally found another boat, rowed under the manor gate and arrived at the house’s main staircase where he was able to evacuate a number of people, including a young mother, who had given birth to a child only a few hours earlier.⁴² Drenched, enervated and suffering from various physical ailments, Wesselényi rested awhile. He changed his soaked clothing and then collapsed in weary slumber. About an hour later he wakened, but could not secure another boat until the following morning. By midnight of March 15, the waters reached their high point, nearly thirty feet above the usual level on the Pest shore.⁴³

Wesselényi arose early on the morning of March 16, but was delayed because the boat he ordered had again failed to appear. By the time he found a replacement and rowed into the city, he discovered only a few people left to rescue. Satisfied that most of the work had already been accomplished, for the first time in three days Wesselényi ate a quiet meal with his children and their governess. Later that morning he heard that panic had erupted near the Curia building where hundreds

had flocked for safety. People were terror-stricken, yelling that the structure was about to fall. Wesselényi jumped into a boat and sculled in front to assure the frightened people that the building was not in danger of collapsing. But those inside and a few nearby soldiers were not comforted. Indeed, some of the latter yelled back that even if the Curia was not falling in the water, it was on fire. Cooler heads observed that the “fire” was simply steam evaporating from the roof in the warm mid-day sun.⁴⁴

That same day, a wet and mud-splattered Wesselényi was effusively thanked for his efforts by a formally dressed Austrian General Brettfeld [Bretfeld or Brattfeld], who pressed himself against Wesselényi’s soggy clothing and threw his arms around the baron’s neck. This public display of gratitude greatly pleased the witnesses who saw it; but while moved by Brettfeld’s show the “persecuted Wesselényi” noted:

I had already heard that my name was being passed from mouth to mouth, and that I have become an object of popular benediction. Knowledge of that respect is much higher praise to me than that which I gained today [from the General].⁴⁵

In retrospect, Brettfeld’s warm demonstration of appreciation stands out in almost grotesque contrast to the subsequent actions of other governmental authorities, who brusquely ignored Wesselényi or thrust him aside once the crisis had passed.

After steadily rising for two-and-a-half days, during the late afternoon or early evening of March 16, the Danube waters gradually began to recede and by night-fall had already lowered several feet.⁴⁶ That evening Wesselényi again rowed into the city to search for people still awaiting evacuation. Near Kerepesi Street he observed that waters had receded so that boats could go places they could not reach earlier, and that some parts of the city were no longer inundated. But a pelting storm and the night’s blackness made further work treacherous so that sometime after midnight he returned home.⁴⁷

March 17–31: Aftermath and Reconstruction

March 17–19

From March 13 to 16, Wesselényi was primarily concerned with saving flood-threatened lives. That work was largely self-directed and unsupervised by government officers. But thereafter, public officials began to play increasing roles in reconstruction and relief plans. As civic administrators took greater control over flood-related efforts, Wesselényi’s role, active at first, rapidly declined. At least part of the reason for the decreased activity was the government’s concern about

his further visible involvement in light of the forthcoming trial.⁴⁸ While Wesselényi was anxious to assist in rebuilding the city, a number of leaders resented or were suspicious of him, in part perhaps because the flooding brought to light a number of inadequate measures which had failed to protect the city from foreseeable consequences of the deluge.⁴⁹ The king's highest representative in Hungary, the Palatine [*nádor*] did not actively direct reconstruction plans, although as a symbolic gesture his son attended some meetings. The Palatine's Council was more active and named capable Count József Lónyay as overseer of flood relief, with Count Aurél Dessewffy as his aide.⁵⁰

On March 17, Wesselényi met with Lónyay and others to ask for additional men (horsemen, engineers and soldiers) and boats to rescue a few people who were still stranded in the city. Lónyay promptly granted this request. With this additional manpower and eight new boats, Wesselényi was able to extricate thirty people, some of whom had waited for hours, neck-deep in water, while hoping to be saved. Thereafter, Wesselényi met again with Lónyay, asking for (and receiving) permission to wind up the rescue work.⁵¹ That evening an exhausted Wesselényi returned home, his body was wracked by pain and enervated by stress. But he was kept awake much of the night by an upset stomach, apparently caused by drinking water from a contaminated well.⁵²

On the morning of March 18, Wesselényi went to the county building and met again with Lónyay. The immediate challenge was how to distribute food and supply shelter to the stricken city's inhabitants. Wesselényi believed mere gratuitous hand-outs would stifle initiative and self-respect. He was also concerned about the closely related issues of unemployment, city cleanup, and flood reconstruction. Ultimately they reached a compromise. At first, everyone would receive food and, where needed, temporary shelter. Military officers in Pest would supervise the flood debris removal. Those who lost jobs or homes, but who could work, would help with the clean up under direction of the soldiers. When the free food distribution ended, those who could not find work might still be fed and get temporary housing, if they continued to help rebuild the flood-scarred city. Those who worked would receive not just sustenance, but a reasonable wage as well. Yet if one could not work, he or she would still receive food and other necessities of life without cost.⁵³

Wesselényi also worked with Dessewffy in formulating a draft of a flood relief bill to be signed by the Palatine. Both Wesselényi and Dessewffy believed the proposal was urgent, but other local officials regarded the matter with less concern.⁵⁴ That same day the Palatine's son, Archduke István (Stefan) came to the county building to meet with Lónyay. Spotting Wesselényi, István warmly praised him for his rescue work during the recent floods.⁵⁵ Despite this public effusion, once the immediate danger was over, István was instrumental in excluding Wesselényi from further significant participation in the reconstruction work. Two weeks later,

Wesselényi was at the Ludoviceum at the same time as István and his wife, but they moved away in order to avoid meeting him.⁵⁶

The floods damaged not just Pest but nearby downstream towns as well. The small settlement on Csepel Island south of Pest was also inundated. Wesselényi recommended that a steamboat and several smaller boats be sent there to rescue stranded people and bring supplies. Dubraviczky, the royal vice lord lieutenant [*alispán*], lukewarmly agreed, but requisitioned no steamboat and only four smaller ferries. Once the relief expedition was sent to the island, he told Wesselényi not to have further involvement in the Csepel project. Feeling that his further participation might hinder the Csepel relief effort, Wesselényi distanced himself from it.⁵⁷ On March 19, 1838, Wesselényi again went to Pest's county hall, met with some local officials about flood relief and continued to work on the draft bill for the Palatine. That evening Wesselényi's churning stomach pains resumed, accompanied by a nearly convulsive pain in his side.⁵⁸

March 20–22

On the morning of March 20, Wesselényi persuaded Count György Károlyi to take the flood relief proposal to the Palatine for his consideration and signature. When Wesselényi heard that Archduke István was inclined to approve the bill with only minor corrections, he translated a syllabus of the bill into German for the Palatine.⁵⁹ After lunch, Wesselényi was accosted by a group of young people, some of whom were medical students. Members of the group complained that as educated people, they should not have to do flood relief work in order to get food. Wesselényi retorted that honest work was not demeaning and that able-bodied persons should work for meals. But he angered the students, who announced that they had no intention of either working or starving. An irritated Wesselényi wanted to bring the complainers before a tribunal, which would show them the road out of town or admonish them. Sensing Wesselényi's displeasure and fearing arrest, the young people scampered away. When later that day he met with Lónyay and Dessewffy, a still angry Wesselényi told them about his argument with the idlers.⁶⁰ Dessewffy also told Wesselényi that the Palatine already had the syllabus. Dessewffy asked Wesselényi to translate the syllabus into Hungarian to be printed that night. Wesselényi completed that task and brought the document to the administrative offices that evening, but Dessewffy was nowhere to be found.⁶¹

Unbeknownst to Wesselényi on March 20, 1838, the royal commission had issued an order that he was officially barred from further participation in official relief and reconstruction programs.⁶² While Wesselényi was still abed on the morning of March 21, Dessewffy suddenly appeared and said that he had met with the Palatine the previous evening. Dessewffy told Wesselényi that the Palatine had reservations about some parts of the proposed bill, but had actually suggested only

a few amendments. But “with a deadly serious countenance”⁶³ the ashen-faced Dessewffy informed Wesselényi of the royal commission’s order and the Palatine’s instructions that he must no longer take part in flood reconstruction programs.⁶⁴ Later that day, Dessewffy told a flabbergasted Wesselényi not to publicly reveal the decision to exclude him from flood projects. If Wesselényi made such disclosures – even though official channels knew of the decision – such action would annoy the government and undermine public support for it.⁶⁵

Bristling at the suggestion that the order be kept silent, Wesselényi told Dessewffy it was inconceivable that he not inform his close friends about the edict. He bitterly complained that the decision reeked of shameful pretension and he would not be muzzled. Wesselényi reminded Dessewffy that all of his actions during the flood had been public. He had openly stepped forward when the danger was greatest and had visibly supported local officials in implementing relief policies. Since his actions during the flood had been for all to see, the reason for his release should also be made public. If he told no one about the order, people would not understand why he was no longer involved in the relief work, and he would be ridiculed and compromised. In the end he agreed to tell only a select group of friends and not discuss the matter further.⁶⁶

On March 22, Wesselényi met with Széchenyi at the Casino⁶⁷ in Pest. The latter had been ill during much of the month and lamented in his diary that his physical and emotional conditions sapped his ability to face challenges posed by the flooding.⁶⁸ On that day, however, Széchenyi announced his own plans for minimizing future flood damage in the city. In his presentation he proposed the construction of a flood control canal surrounding Pest to help drain off excess Danube overflow. He also suggested the erection of a new dam, dredging the existing Danube channel, particularly near Csepel Island, and a broad, vigorous program of public works.⁶⁹ In many respects his plan resembled proposals already made by Wesselényi. On that same day a seven member committee met to discuss plans to rebuild flood-damaged Pest. Neither Wesselényi nor Széchenyi was at the beginning included as a member of that committee.⁷⁰

Also on March 22, 1838 (and less than a week after Wesselényi concluded his flood rescue efforts), the Austrian Chief Public Prosecutor called for the immediate resumption of efforts to bring Wesselényi’s treason trial to a prompt conclusion.⁷¹

March 23–31

The latter part of March 1838 was an unsettling time for Wesselényi. Gradually he adjusted to the shock of the decision to exclude him from the flood relief committee (although his diary mentions some still unresolved bitterness). On Friday, March 23, Wesselényi visited Széchenyi. When he arrived, Széchenyi was ill and

still in bed. The afflicted Széchenyi rambled on about a number of subjects, one of which was the government.⁷² He pointedly urged Wesselényi not to take any further part in the flood commission nor attend its meetings. He advised Wesselényi to keep a low profile in Pest and, indeed, urged him to leave the city. Wesselényi said little at the time, but wrote that if Széchenyi had not been ill, he would have told him that his advice was neither appreciated nor edifying. Wounded by Széchenyi's words, Wesselényi wrote that he had already decided to distance himself from committee participation as soon as circumstances permitted. Hounded, and ostracized by some, who should have been his supporters, Wesselényi grimly resolved to proceed and to take one step at a time on a path he already knew too well.⁷³

On March 28, the melodrama surrounding Wesselényi's role on the flood relief committee took another remarkable twist. In an abrupt reversal of its position only one week earlier, the committee now asked Wesselényi to resume his membership in the group. Somewhat surprisingly, he agreed. He also suggested that the committee extend membership to Széchenyi. While Wesselényi knew some members disliked Széchenyi, he believed his old friend would play a useful committee role and the nation would be ill-served if the "Greatest Hungarian" were snubbed. Dessewffy worried that Széchenyi's ego would be an obstacle to group harmony. But Wesselényi urged that the magnitude of the task required Széchenyi's talents. After further consultation, Dessewffy agreed that Széchenyi would be admitted, although only as an alternate member.⁷⁴

A number of Hungarian scholars have criticized Széchenyi's actions during the 1838 flood. Some have chastised him for what they believe to have been his less than heroic response to the flooding, particularly when his actions are compared with Wesselényi's. Mózes Rubinyi contrasts their respective responses during the high water period when Wesselényi "worked the entire night," while Széchenyi's thoughts seem to have been centered on his illness, his wife curling her ringlets and the impositions on their social schedule.⁷⁵ In some parts of his diary Széchenyi reproaches himself for not doing more:

I spent a wretched night and my condition is not getting any better. The end draws near with threatening steps. My bungled life appears clearly before me. ... Everywhere there is activity, meetings and conferences, and I simply cannot rise to the occasion. What an ignominious existence! From the thirteenth to the seventeenth [of March] I could not perform the duties I owed. I should have devoted myself [more fully], so tells me an inner voice.

I am totally enervated. A heinous end awaits me.⁷⁶

But it would be unfair to judge Széchenyi solely on a few isolated passages in his diary. Admittedly he was a man of mood swings, but there is a danger in drawing overly broad conclusions from scattered diary impressions made when he was dis-

couraged, or under great stress.⁷⁷ During much of the period he suffered physical and emotional pains.⁷⁸ Like others he was horrified at the extent of the damage and wondered if the city would ever rise again.⁷⁹ But shortly after the water receded he introduced a well-reasoned flood control plan. While he did not physically take part in rescuing stranded people, his own talents inclined him more to planning than to manning a boat.

Perhaps most importantly the 1838 flooding of the two cities convinced Széchenyi that there was an immediate need to construct a bridge to connect Pest and Buda.⁸⁰ On the same day he wrote Baron Sína about Pest's extensive damage, Széchenyi emphasized that it would be unthinkable not to rebuild it.⁸¹ About a week later he wrote that the matter of the bridge looked most promising⁸² and that although flood relief was the talk of the day in Pest, a major flood occurred only every century, while the bridge was a pressing everyday need.⁸³ In a March 27, 1838 letter written to the bridge engineer, William Tierney Clark, Széchenyi reiterated that as a result of the flood, the need for the bridge was more imperative than ever. While Széchenyi's conduct during the 1838 flooding did not galvanize the city and nation as did Wesselényi's, his efforts to find long-term solutions to flood problems should not be denigrated.

On March 31, 1838 the Pest flood committee announced its reconstruction plan. While the report cited the need to protect Pest from future floods, it did not propose innovative, bold measures. The flood canal championed by both Wesselényi and Széchenyi was seriously underfunded. The bid was awarded to an enterprise, which proposed and used cheap and inferior materials. The residential homes built near the canal were constructed of substandard materials. The level of the land was not raised nor was a significant embankment constructed along the Danube. The channel of the river was neither cleaned out nor deepened. Little forethought was given to long term flood protection even though Danube floods had plagued the city for centuries. No new rescue barges or boats were requisitioned. In short, the committee proposed only a superficial response to the 1838 tragedy and seemed to be more willing to forget than to guard against its recurrence in the future.⁸⁴ The plan generally proposed only band-aid solutions, leaving the underlying problems essentially ignored and untreated.

An Afterword

The 1838 flooding of Pest and Buda inflicted significant damage on both cities. While each was badly flooded, Buda with its generally more hilly terrain was not as extensively inundated as was the flat lowland of Pest. In a March 27, 1838 letter to William Tierney Clark, Széchenyi wrote: "... a large part of Buda and two-thirds of Pest are quite literally destroyed".⁸⁵ The devastation to Pest was so

extensive that both Széchenyi and Wesselényi wondered whether the city would ever again be the same.⁸⁶ Of the estimated 4,580 dwellings standing in Pest before the flood, nearly half of them (2,280) were destroyed or ruined by the deluge.⁸⁷ In both the city center and in the Lipót quarter, about a third of the houses were destroyed or made uninhabitable by the flood. In the Teréz- and József districts the figure was close to eighty per cent. The Ferenc district was reportedly the most badly damaged, with perhaps ninety-five percent of the homes destroyed, weakened or made useless.⁸⁸ Even some of the city's sturdiest buildings suffered significant water damage. Older parts of the county building, the National Theater, the Curia and other seemingly well-protected buildings suffered at least some structural damage because of the flooding.⁸⁹

The cost in human life, though not as extensive as it might have been, was not insubstantial. According to some government statistics there were 153 registered deaths caused by the flood.⁹⁰ More recent sources suggest the number killed was closer to four hundred.⁹¹ Whatever the number of deaths, they were doubtless reduced by the efforts of Wesselényi and others. If indeed 600 people were rescued by Wesselényi and others working directly with him,⁹² then the number of persons saved clearly exceeded the number of those who lost their lives in the flood. Obviously, Wesselényi was not the only person involved in the rescue efforts, so that the combined efforts of all the rescuers greatly ameliorated losses of human life. In addition to the unfortunate souls who drowned, the emotional toll suffered by thousands who cowered on rooftops wondering whether help would come before the building collapsed, the agonies of those exposed for hours amidst the raging, inhospitable elements, and the pain of being separated from families, friends and associates suffered by those who were unsure of the condition of loved ones defies objective calculation. The real and personal property losses were staggering. Uncertainties of where and how to resume life weighed heavily on many people, but particularly on the poor folk, who were least able to withstand a major economic dislocation.

The official press did not totally ignore Wesselényi during the flood, but generally relegated him to a distant third position behind the Palatine and his archduke son. However, among the common people Wesselényi's stature acquired an almost legendary proportion, at times crediting him some acts of heroism he probably did not perform.⁹³ His role was widely acknowledged by the general populace despite official attempts to underplay his efforts during and after the flooding. In a letter to Kölcsey, Wesselényi accurately predicted that once the flood crisis was over, his persecutors would promptly move forward toward a quick conclusion of the treason trial.⁹⁴ Although the authorities did not delay trial because of Wesselényi's part in the flood, the government's strident anti-Wesselényi posture softened somewhat and official demands for his death abated.⁹⁵

Undaunted by the government's stance, Mihály Vörösmarty, Hungary's foremost Romantic poet, penned a heroic poem entitled "The Boatman of the Flood" within a few weeks of the catastrophe. That poem was read for the first time on April 27, 1838 at the Pest Hungarian Theater by a young actress, Róza Laborfalvi, who later married Jókai. After the first reading of Vörösmarty's poem, the audience refused to let Ms. Laborfalvi leave the stage until she had recited the entire piece two more times. Each recitation was greeted by thunderous applause.

"The Boatman of the Flood" is not generally regarded as one of Vörösmarty's great poems.⁹⁶ It does not specifically name either Wesselényi or Pest, but describes a boatman who rescues defenseless, poor and abandoned souls during a flood. The first three verses contain powerful poetic images of the cataclysm, and depict haunting scenes of surging, murderous flood waters, nightmarish terrors felt by those stranded on roof-tops, awful crashing of immersed houses and terrifying dangers of foam-topped whirlpools. The poem eulogizes a mystical boatman whose acts of salvation rescue many stranded people. Still the boatman is more allegorical than a mere mirror-image of Wesselényi. Near the poem's conclusion the boatman admonishes, perhaps not only the rescued people, but the entire Hungarian nation:

Emlékezzél reám
Sorsodnak éjjelén:
Önérzeted vagyok,
Nevem Jótétemény.⁹⁷

Wesselényi's 1838 efforts are also commemorated in a Jókai novel, which was written more than fifteen years after the flood and before Wesselényi's March, 1838 diary entries were published. In *Kárpáthy Zoltán*, Jókai writes of a young member of the gentry, who is in Pest when waters cover the city. It is night, but in the dim distance a faint ray of light appears and draws nearer until he can distinguish men with torches in a boat:

In the midst of the torches stood a muscular, herculean figure, hatless and clad in a light cloak thrown over his shoulders. Who would not have recognized that dark, heroic face, the flashing fearless eyes . . . ? Who could not have been aware or known who he was? During Pest's three most awful days, thousands had heard the name as if it sounded as a watch-cry of their deliverance, and afterwards was spoken with reverence, laud and prayer. That man was Wesselényi.⁹⁸

In late April, 1838 Metternich ordered the cabinet to bring Wesselényi's treason trial to a head as quickly as possible. Hungary's Parliament was scheduled to meet in 1839 and the government wanted the Wesselényi and other political trials (including Kossuth's) completed before the diet met.⁹⁹ On January 14, 1839 documents in defense of Wesselényi were formally filed. Three weeks later, on January

31, 1839 (and less than a year after the flooding of Pest) the royal court entered judgment against him, sentencing him to three years in prison. A week later the royal court's judgment was affirmed by a seven person appeals court panel.¹⁰⁰ He served a brief part of that sentence in Hungary, but because of his rapidly failing eyesight Wesselényi was later transferred to Gräfenberg in Bohemia so that he could receive treatments for his deteriorating vision. After serving less than a year in prison Wesselényi was pardoned, but remained in self-imposed exile in Bohemia until 1843, when he returned to his estates in Transylvania.¹⁰¹ After his imprisonment he never regained his earlier political influence in Hungary. Although in 1838 he had been lionized by the people of Pest, it was not until 1842 that his flood rescue efforts were officially recognized by the city. But the official proclamation was only sent to him in 1845 and was mailed by a minor bureaucrat.¹⁰²

His imprisonment, ill health and separation from the main current of national politics essentially removed Wesselényi as a major player on the Hungarian political stage. Isolated and nearly blind, in 1843 he wrote a thought-provoking, at times almost prophetic work, *Szózat a magyar és szláv nemzetiség ügyében* [An Appeal in the Matter of the Hungarian and Slav Nationalities]. The book addresses the situation of Hungary's "minorities" (who in reality combined to comprise a majority of the nation's peoples). The work begins with a dire warning of imminent dangers facing Hungary and laments Wesselényi's own loss of influence in national politics. Five years after his enormous popularity during the flood, Wesselényi describes himself as "... the voice of one who is politically dead".¹⁰³ He morosely observes that his fall from high political visibility is the common lot of mankind; "... the fate of mortal man is to forget and be forgotten". Like a picture that once graced a manor's main halls, but has since become faded, dust-covered and forgotten, Wesselényi no longer sees himself as a vibrant member of his nation's family.¹⁰⁴ Despite its timely message for nineteenth-century Hungary, both *Szózat* and Wesselényi were largely ignored at the time.

When the 1848 Revolution broke out, Wesselényi played a notable role in Transylvania, but a smaller one in Hungary. After the breach between Hungary and Austria became irreparable in the fall of 1848, Wesselényi took his family away from Hungary and returned to Gräfenberg. After the revolution, a gravely ill Wesselényi left Gräfenberg hoping to return to and die on his family estates in Transylvania. En route he contracted pneumonia, and in a perhaps fitting irony, died in Pest on April 21, 1850.¹⁰⁵ He who devoted his political life to a renascent Hungary took his last living breath in the city where he had rescued the lives of so many of his countrymen.

The 1838 flood interrupted, but did not reverse Pest's rise from a relatively insignificant town in 1800 to a major municipality by the century's end. Memories of the flood were soon eclipsed by the 1848–49 revolution and the Compromise of 1867 by which Hungary became Austria's political partner. Particularly after the

latter event, the 1871 unification of Pest, Buda and Óbuda led to the creation of Budapest, which became one of two capitals of Austria-Hungary and by 1900 the sixth largest city in Europe.¹⁰⁶ Hungary's massive Parliament Building, its National Museum, Academy of Sciences, Opera House and the site of the nation's 1896 Millennial celebration were all located in Pest.

For the Austrian government and its representatives in Hungary, the timing of the 1838 flood was highly inopportune. The catastrophe exposed inadequacies of the governmental precautions to spare the city from a clearly foreseeable danger; and Wesselényi's actions during the flood made a hero out of the very man Metternich wanted to paint as a major state enemy. The hounded baron emerged as a national icon, while the Austrian government and its Hungarian representatives appeared peevish and short-sighted, if not incompetent. Having embarked on its path of intimidation, the government felt it had to go forward with the treason trials. But its decision to ramrod through the criminal action against the "Boatman" appeared both unfeeling and mean-spirited to many Hungarians. Wesselényi's popularity was at least a temporary reality which could not be ignored. That popular opinion influenced the government to mute its criticism of Wesselényi and modify its prior rhetoric calling for the death penalty.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps the most enduring influence of the 1838 flood is symbolic. In a time of crisis a member of Hungary's titled nobility made a visible decision to physically rescue needy souls, regardless of their social status. A prominent, though embattled, national figure manned a boat to save imperiled lives rather than simply occupy space on the national stage. Wesselényi's conduct during the flooding reflects the congruence between his thoughts and actions. Without attempting to apotheosize him, we may note that Wesselényi's nineteenth-century liberal principles were not mere abstractions, but guiding forces of action, which directed him in a time of trouble. When lives were in peril he did not put his personal convenience above public concerns, but rather implemented his political beliefs to help others. At a time when his own life was on the line and when he was racked with bodily pains, he opted not to focus on his own personal woes, but repeatedly rowed out into the watery darkness to rescue his fellow men.

In 1838 Hungary may have stood at an historic crossroad. It was ruled by dynasty under the dominant influence of a chancellor who opposed any manifestation of a Hungarian national revival. Some of Hungary's most influential writers of the day worried about the nation's possible linguistic and cultural demise. The powerful conservative wing of the nation's political elite doggedly resisted significant change in the country's structure. But Wesselényi and his "reformers" boldly called for Hungary's rejuvenation. They envisioned a nation, to be sure Magyar, but one in which all its peoples would have individual legal freedoms recognized by the state, one in which archaic feudal tenures would be altered, and one in which a much larger circle of the nation's people could have not just politi-

cal, but also economic opportunity.¹⁰⁸ Before 1838 there had been theoretical discussion of these issues, but little actual realization of them. Wesselényi's rescue efforts during the flood helped to demonstrate that some Hungarian aristocrats intended to translate their beliefs into actions, even at inconvenient times. In the end, Wesselényi showed Hungary in 1838 that the lives of common people do matter, and that a nation consists not just of its hereditary elite, but also of its untitled common people: including its peasants, urban dwellers and small tradesmen.

Notes

- 1 Katalin Czellár and Ferenc Somorjai, *Magyarország* (Budapest: Panorama, 1998), 211. (3rd ed.)
- 2 Samuel Kardos, *Báró Wesselényi Miklós: Élete és Munkái*, vol. 1 (Budapest: Légrády Testvérek Könyvnyomdája, 1905), 328. (Two vols.)
- 3 One of Wesselényi's remote ancestors was a Count Palatine of Hungary who lost his life in the seventeenth century "Wesselényi Conspiracy". Kardos, vol. 1, 15–16.
- 4 Zsigmond Kemény, "A két Wesselényi Miklós", *Báró Kemény Zsigmond munkáiból* (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1905), 60; George Barany, Stephen Széchenyi and the Awakening of Hungarian Nationalism, 1791–1841 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 104–105; Kardos, vol. 1, 87.
- 5 István Széchenyi, *Hitel* (Pest: Trattner & Károlyi Könyvnyomtató, 1830); Miklós Wesselényi, *Balítéletekről* (Bucharest–Leipzig: Farkas & Ferentz, 1833).
- 6 Zoltán Jókai, *Metternich und die Frage Ungarns*, trans. Erzsébet Andics (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1973), 70–72. See also László Csorba and Ferenc Velkey, *Reform és forradalom (1790–1849)* [Reform and Revolution, 1790–1849], (Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó, 1998), 107.
- 7 Gyula Mérei, ed., *Magyarország története, 1790–1848* [The history of Hungary] vol. 2, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983), 756, 1269–1270. (2 vols.) Zsolt Trócsányi, *Wesselényi Miklós* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1965), 317. But see also Béla Köpeczi, ed., *History of Transylvania*, trans. Adrienne Chambers-Makkai (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994), 463. One possible reason for differences of opinion among scholars may be that documents of the royal high court of Transylvania in the *Magyar Országos Levéltár* were destroyed by a fire in 1945. Trócsányi, 317 (footnote).
- 8 C. M. Knatchbull-Hugessen, *The Political Evolution of the Hungarian Nation*, vol. 1, (New York: Arno and New York Times, 1971), 1295–1296 (two vols., reprint); Mérei, vol. 1, 756. Literally, the alleged statement was that the government had "sucked the fat out of the peasantry" (... *a kormány szivja egyfelől a parasztság zsíriját* ...).
- 9 Zoltán Fónagy, *Wesselényi Miklós*, Válogatta, a bevezetést és a jegyzeteket írta Fónagy Zoltán; *Magyar Szabadelvűek* (Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 1999), 41–42 (citing *Magyar Országos Levéltár, Wesselényi Levéltár*, VA 666).
- 10 Fónagy, 43. See also Zsolt Trócsányi, *Wesselényi Miklós hűtlenségi pere* (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 1986), 9–10.
- 11 Hungarian politicians at the time and scholars since have debated the issue. Years after the trial, Wesselényi claimed that the root cause of the treason charge was not his statements at Szatmár, but his support of peasant land reforms. He denies ever having made the treasonous remarks with which he was charged. To the contrary, he wrote that he was, and always had

been, a loyal servant of his country and sovereign. Miklós Wesselényi, *Szózat a magyar és szláv nemzetiség ügyében* [Manifesto in the matter of the Magyar and Slav nationalities] (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1974), 15–16 (footnote). Reprint. Wesselényi's accusers claimed that a declaration against the government is an attack on the ruler himself, citing portions of Werbőczy's sixteenth-century *Tripartitum*, which asserted that since a government received its authority from the king, one who attacked his representatives thereby challenged the monarch himself. Dániel Veress, *Wesselényi Miklós* (Budapest: Móra Ferenc Könyvkiadó, 1983), 133–134. But Gábor Klauzál (later a minister in Hungary's 1848 cabinet) responded that Wesselényi's accusers misinterpreted the law. Klauzál argued that there are two Latin terms for government. One means the king's realm (*regimen*), the other (*gubernium*) a mere representative of the government. Klauzál claims treason requires that a statement must be made directly against the king or his kingdom, and not just against his political agents, who implement a debatable policy. Veress, 134.

12 István Széchenyi, *Széchenyi István: Napló*, ed. Gyula Vizsota, (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1978), 846. See also Széchenyi diary entry of June 20, 1837: "I was with Wesselényi, who already has a strong prison odor about him. The poor devil. He has suffered severely for his conceit." Széchenyi napló, 836.

13 Katona, vol. 1, 328; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 392–393; Tamás Katona, "Az árvíz szerepe Pest-Buda világvárossá fejlődésében", *Előadások és tanulmányok Wesselényi Miklósról*, Erdélytörténeti Könyvek 1 (Debrecen: Felelős Kiadó, 1997), 124.

14 Kardos, vol. 1, 327; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 392.

15 In 1871 the traditional towns of Buda, Pest and Óbuda were consolidated into a single city unit called Budapest. However, during Wesselényi's lifetime Pest and Buda were still separate municipalities. But even during the first half of the nineteenth century, and particularly after the construction of the Chain Bridge, which connected the two towns, some writers had begun to refer to Pest-Buda as a single metropolitan area, even though each maintained its own separate local government.

16 Katona, 122–123.

17 Mór Jókai, *Kárpáthy Zoltán*, Jókai Mór Művei series, vol. 6, part 1 (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1925), pt. 1, 116.

18 Average temperatures in Pest-Buda were significantly lower than normal. December average temperature was 4.1 Fahrenheit degrees (2.3 degrees Centigrade), January 9.7 Fahrenheit degrees (5.4 degrees Centigrade), February 7.4 Fahrenheit degrees (4.1 degrees Centigrade) lower than usual. Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 391.

19 Veress, 138–140; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 391.

20 Veress, 139–140; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 391–392.

21 Veress, 139; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 391.

22 Katona, 122; Veress 140.

23 The primary source containing Wesselényi's impressions of and actions during the March flooding (and its immediate aftermath) are found in portions of his diary which were printed in Kardos, vol. 1, 329–340 and in a later work containing Wesselényi's diary entries for and commentaries about the period of the flood by other writers. Miklós Wesselényi, *Báró Wesselényi Miklós: Az árvízi hajós naplója* [Baron Miklós Wesselényi: The diary of the boatman of the flood], ed. Mózes Rubinyi and a preface by Lajos Bankó (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1938 [?]). Unfortunately, the greater part of Wesselényi's extant diaries have not yet been published.

24 Kardos, vol. 1, 329, Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 17. In Széchenyi's diary entry of March 13, he indicated that the ice originally began to move around 2:30 in the afternoon. Széchenyi, 857.

25 Kardos, vol. 1, 329; Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 17; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 392.

- 26 Kardos, vol. 1, 329; Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 17–18; Elek Benedek, *Nagy Magyarok Élete* (Budapest: Holnap Kiadó, 1995), 217–218. The original optimism in Wesselényi’s diary entries of March 13 is in sharp apparent contrast to that of Széchenyi’s diary of the same date. The latter wrote of water up to the second stories of houses in some places, of water levels rising throughout the evening, and of “chaos in the city.” Széchenyi, 857. It is possible that Széchenyi may have telescoped the evening hours of March 13 and the wee morning hours of March 14, when by all accounts flooding had become acute.
- 27 Kardos, vol. 1, 329–330; Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 18–19; Benedek, 218.
- 28 Kardos, vol. 1, 330; Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 20; Trócsányi, *Hűtlenségi pere*, 81–82; Benedek, 218.
- 29 Kardos, vol. 1, 330; Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 20; Benedek, 218.
- 30 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 20–21; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 393; Benedek, 219; Kardos, vol. 1, 330.
- 31 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 21; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 393; Kardos, vol. 1, 330–331.
- 32 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 21–22; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 393; Benedek, 218.
- 33 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 22, Kardos, vol. 1, 331; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 393.
- 34 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 22–23, Kardos, vol. 1, 331.
- 35 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 23–25; Kardos, vol. 1, 331–332; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 393.
- 36 Széchenyi, 858.
- 37 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 393; Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 25–26; Kardos, vol. 1, 332–333.
- 38 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 27–28; Kardos, vol. 1, 333.
- 39 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 28–29; Kardos, Vol. 1, 334; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 394.
- 40 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 29–30; Trócsányi, *Hűtlenségi pere*, 82; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 394.
- 41 Széchenyi, 858.
- 42 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 31–32; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 394; Kardos, vol. 1, 335.
- 43 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 32–33; Kardos, vol. 1, 335.
- 44 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 33–35; Kardos, vol. 1, 336; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 394.
- 45 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 35; Kardos, vol. 1, 336.
- 46 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 37; Lajos Mangold and Cyrill Horváth, eds., *Tolnai Világtörténelme: A legújabb kor 1815–1908: A szabadságharcok és a nemzeti újjáébredés kora* [Tolnai’s world history. The most recent era, 1815–1908: the age of wars of liberation and national revival], vol. 2, (Budapest: Magyar Kereskedelmi Közlöny Hírlap- és Könyvkiadó [date unclear]), vol. 2, 144, (two vols); Széchenyi, 859.
- 47 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 37; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 394; Kardos, vol. 1, 337.
- 48 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 45, 48–51; Trócsányi, *Hűtlenségi pere*, 82.
- 49 According to Trócsányi, the only city officials who played an active role in relief efforts during the flooding itself were Havas and Trattner. In contrast to the majority of the city representatives, a number of the Pest county leaders were much more active in dealing with both the flood rescue actions and reconstruction efforts. Prónay, originally criticized by Wesselényi for his inactivity during the first days of the deluge, afterwards rendered excellent service. And Dubraviczky, the court appointed vice lord lieutenant [*alispán*] of Pest County, also worked diligently. Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 394–395.
- 50 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 395.
- 51 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 39–41, Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 395.
- 52 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 42.
- 53 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 43–44; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 395.
- 54 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 44.
- 55 In his diary, Wesselényi noted that he was more touched by the Archduke’s speaking to him in excellent Hungarian than he was by István’s effusive protestation of gratitude. Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 45.

- 56 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 396.
- 57 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 45.
- 58 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 46.
- 59 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 47.
- 60 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 47–48; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 395.
- 61 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 48; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 396.
- 62 Ferenc Kerényi, “‘Az árvizi hajós’ és Vörösmarty Mihály” [The boatman of the flood and Mihály Vörösmarty], *Előadások és tanulmányok Wesselényi Miklósról* [Lectures and studies on Miklós Wesselényi], Erdélytörténeti könyvek 1, (Debrecen: Felelős Kiadó, 1997), 171–178, 176.
- 63 The Hungarian expression used by Wesselényi is “halott-kísérő pófával” (literally “with death attendant face”).
- 64 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 48–49; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 396.
- 65 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 49; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 396.
- 66 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 49–51.
- 67 The term “Casino” refers primarily to a gentlemen’ club, more than to a purely gambling kind of establishment. Széchenyi founded the Casino in Pest as a place where people of high social station and/or education could meet to discuss political topics, read domestic and foreign newspapers, and review scholarly periodicals. See George Barany, *Stephen Széchenyi and the Awakening of Hungarian Nationalism, 1791–1844* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 167–173.
- 68 Széchenyi, 859. His diary entry for March 19, 1838 noted: “When I awoke, I was in great pain. I suffered until about 4 o’clock. I am no longer a man of action. Every ambition has slipped away.”
- 69 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 51–52; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 396–397. Széchenyi’s own diary contains no entry, which mentions the flood relief plan he presented at the Casino.
- 70 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 397.
- 71 Kerényi, 176. The Public Prosecutor was the rough equivalent of an American Attorney General or Prosecuting Attorney.
- 72 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 53–54. Perhaps because of his illness, Széchenyi’s diary contains no entry for March 23, 1838.
- 73 Wesselényi–Rubinyi, 54–56.
- 74 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 397. Széchenyi, 861. Diary entries for March 28 and March 30, 1838.
- 75 Rubinyi, 11–12.
- 76 Széchenyi, 861, entry for March 28, 1938.
- 77 Széchenyi, 860 entry for March 25, 1838.
- 78 Széchenyi, 858, entries for March 14 and 15, 1838.
- 79 Vera Bácskai and Lajos Nagy, eds., *Széchenyi pesti terve* [Széchenyi’s plans for Pest], trans. Iván Bába, et al. (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1985), 155 (Széchenyi’s letter of March 21, 1838 to Baron Georg Sina).
- 80 The Széchenyi Lánchíd, or Chain Bridge was erected between 1839 and 1849 and is regarded by many as a symbol of the union of Buda, Pest and Óbuda into the metropolis now known as Budapest.
- 81 Bácskai, 156.
- 82 Bácskai, 160–161. (“Igen, a híd ügye most már pompásan áll.”). (Széchenyi’s letter to Sina dated March 27, 1838)
- 83 Bácskai, 162.
- 84 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 397.
- 85 Bácskai, 157.

- 86 Bácskai, 155, Széchenyi's letter of March 21, 1838 to Baron Georg Sina; Wesselényi's letter dated March 24, 1838 to Ferenc Kölcsey, cited in G. Zoltán Szabó (ed.). *Kölcsey Ferenc levelezése* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1990), 290.
- 87 Kardos, vol. 1, 328; Veress, 140; Lajos Mangold and Cyrill Horváth, eds., *Tolnai világtörténelme: A legújabb kor 1815–1908; A szabadságharcok és a nemesi újjáébredés kora* (Budapest: Magyar Kereskedelmi Közlöny Hírlap- és Könyvkiadó, no date), vol. 2, 144–145.
- 88 Katona, 126.
- 89 Mangold, vol. 2, 145.
- 90 Katona, 126.
- 91 László Kontler, *A History of Hungary*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 237.
- 92 E.g. Kardos, vol. 1, 328.
- 93 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 397.
- 94 March 24, 1838 letter from Wesselényi to Kölcsey, cited in G. Zoltán Szabó, ed., *Kölcsey Ferenc levelezése. Válogatás* [Selections from the correspondence of Ferenc Kölcsey] (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1990), 290.
- 95 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 397.
- 96 Ferenc Kerényi. "Az árvizi hajós' és Vörösmarty Mihály" [The boatman of the flood and Mihály Vörösmarty], *Előadások és tanulmányok Wesselényi Miklósról*. Erdélytörténeti könyvek (Debrecen: Felelős Kiadó, 1997), 171–178, 176; Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 397; Katona, 124.
- 97 Mihály Vörösmarty, *Vörösmarty Mihály költői művei* [The lyrical works of Mihály Vörösmarty], ed. András Martinkó (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1987), vol. 1, 311–315. A very rough translation of the cited passage reads:
- Hold me in your thoughts
On this night of destiny:
I am your self-regard,
Whose name is Charity.
- 98 Jókai, *Kárpáthy Zoltán*, vol. 1, 157.
- 99 Trócsányi, *Pere*, 83.
- 100 Trócsányi, *Pere*, 99–100; Mérei, vol. 2, 1275.
- 101 Miklós Asztalos, *Wesselényi Miklós az első nemzetiségi politikus* [Miklós Wesselényi, the first politician of the nationalities] (Pécs: Karl Könyvesbolt Kiadása, 1927), 16.
- 102 Fónagy, 17.
- 103 Miklós Wesselényi, *Szózat a magyar és szláv nemzetiség ügyében* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1992), 15 (reprint).
- 104 Wesselényi, *Szózat*, 15.
- 105 Fónagy, 19–20.
- 106 John Lukács, *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture*, (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 67.
- 107 Trócsányi, *Wesselényi*, 397.
- 108 Miklós Wesselényi, *Balítéletekről* [On misjudgments], ed. and intro. Dániel Veress (București: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1974), 120, 123, 234–236.