

## History

# ABAFI AIGNER LAJOS AND THE SECRET SOCIETIES IN BANAT IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study analyses the contributions of Abafi Aigner Lajos, one of the most significant figures in Central European Masonic historiography, to our understanding of Masonic lodges and secret societies in the Banat region during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although Abafi is internationally recognised, he remains relatively unknown in Romanian historiography, primarily due to the inaccessibility of his seminal works, which are written in Hungarian and German. This article emphasises the pivotal role he played in exploiting the Old Archives of Hungarian Freemasonry, which were subsequently destroyed, and the significance of his methodology, which was grounded in primary sources. Drawing on Abafi's research, the paper distinguishes clearly between Masonic lodges and secret societies, demonstrating that the latter often pursued radical political objectives that were distinct from the philanthropic and cultural ideals of Freemasonry. A case study of Timișoara reveals the coexistence and rivalry between the Masonic lodge *Zu den 3 weissen Lilien* [At the three white lilies] and societies such as the Rosicrucians, the Illuminati and the Order of the Rose in a context marked by the Enlightenment, urbanisation and profound social transformation. The research emphasises the significance of Freemasonry and secret societies as catalysts for modernity and societal change in the Banat region during the Enlightenment era.

**Keywords:** Abafi Lajos; Corvin Mátyás Masonic Lodge; Secret Societies; Elites; Banat; Enlightenment.

## 1. A Renowned Historian of Freemasonry from Central Europe

Although he is considered by Central European historians to be the most renowned historian of Freemasonry in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Abafi Aigner Lajos remains virtually unknown in our country. While his value and work are undoubtedly beyond dispute, Abafi Aigner Lajos has yet to capture the hearts of those passionate about the past realities of Freemasonry in the western part of the country.

This disarming aspect can be explained, firstly, by the fact that his seminal works, primarily published in Hungarian and German towards the end of the Romantic era, have never been translated into Romanian. Consequently, Romanian historians (both Masons and non-Masons) have been unable to use his pertinent judgements and the valuable historical

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information he personally extracted from the Old Archives of Hungarian Freemasonry in their efforts to reconstruct the history of the lodges in Banat and Transylvania.

Fortunately, this initiative gained considerable momentum, particularly following the fall of the infamous regime, when the elimination of censorship enabled specialists to address topics that had previously been considered taboo.

No documents related to the Age of Enlightenment have currently been preserved in the Historical Archives of Hungarian Freemasonry. Historian Abafi Aigner Lajos was the last person to study them in their original form. He transcribed and translated some of these documents in full so that he could use them in his valuable monographs on the history of Hungarian Freemasonry from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Abafi, 1890).

The privilege of owning over 10,000 pages of original Masonic archive documents can be explained by an unusual fact: the renowned Hungarian historian was a descendant of Aigner Ferencz Ádám, a man of culture who personally collected and cared for Hungarian Masonic documents in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in order to preserve them in the best possible conditions.

Later, the Festetics family, a noble clan, took over these historical sources and stored them in their castle at Dég<sup>2</sup>. This is how it became known to contemporaries as the “Old Archives of Hungarian Freemasonry”: Dégi Levéltár<sup>3</sup>. But who was Abafi Aigner Lajos, whose life was closely linked to the history of Hungarian Freemasonry from its earliest days until the Romantic era dawned?

The renowned scholar was born in Iecea Mare, a village in the former Torontal County (now Timiș County), on 11 February 1840. Between 1850 and 1853, he attended the Stieber Commercial School in Timișoara. Passionate about books, he worked as a bookseller for 14 years until the end of the Austro-Hungarian Dualism, travelling extensively to Pozsony, Pest and numerous German cities. Between 1868 and 1896, he managed to establish a bookshop in the Hungarian capital, which quickly gained a reputation for selling high-quality books.

He became involved with Freemasonry through his friendship with one of the leading figures of the Hungarian 1848 generation: General István Türr. At his suggestion, on 23 February 1871, Abafi Aigner Lajos was initiated into the famous Pest lodge Corvin Mátyás, which operated under the Grand Orient of Hungary. Shortly after joining the lodge, he took over its library, bringing with him the most important publications he had collected while travelling through Europe.

The renowned historian was recognised for his merits and enjoyed a meteoric rise within Pestan’s workshop. On 31 May 1871, he received a salary increase and became a journeyman, and on 17 November 1871, he was awarded the rank of Master (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, 1871–1886). Furthermore, between 1883 and 1885, he was elected Venerable Master of the Corvin Mátyás Lodge. He was extremely active within Hungarian Freemasonry, constantly advocating for the unification of the two obediences (the Hungarian Grand Orient and the Hungarian Grand Lodge of the Johannite Rite). This event took place on 21 March 1886, marking the birth of the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge, which still exists today.

In both Masonic and secular circles, Abafi Aigner Lajos quickly gained a reputation as a great publicist. He was highly appreciated for his quality articles, which delighted his contemporaries with their depth and erudition, but especially with the meticulousness that could only be fully demonstrated by a historian and researcher of great value.

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<sup>2</sup> The castle in Dég was built between 1810 and 1815 at the behest of Count Antal Festetics. Pollack Mihály was chosen as the architect for this project. This splendid classical-style building housed many of the brothers’ possessions, as well as the Old Archives of the Order for a long time.

<sup>3</sup> The Old Archive of Hungarian Freemasonry (Dégi Levéltár) was mainly destroyed during World War II. During the war, German and Russian troops stationed in the castle in Dég converted the building into a field hospital. A major fire broke out in the castle in 1945, destroying most of the documents.

In 1882, Abafi came into possession of the Old Archives of Hungarian Freemasonry. The 10.000-page collection of documents provided him with material for a series of intelligent articles, which he published in leading magazines of the time.<sup>4</sup> However, his most intense editorial activity took place at the *Hajnal* magazine, where he was initially appointed associate editor in 1877, before being elected sole editor three years later. Following the unification of the two major Hungarian denominations in 1886, Abafi Aigner Lajos collaborated with the renowned Budapest historian and journalist Gelléri Mór on editing the aforementioned magazine.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to his works on the history of Hungarian Freemasonry<sup>6</sup>, also made a name for himself in literature, becoming a member of the renowned Petőfi Society in 1876<sup>7</sup>. Two years later, he established the National Society of Hungarian Booksellers in Budapest and launched an intensive programme to publish the finest manuscripts from across the country.

He edited around 3.500 manuscripts until his death in Budapest<sup>8</sup> on 19 June 1909. He gained fame over time thanks to his books on the history of Hungarian Freemasonry. His publications on Hungarian literature and folklore<sup>9</sup> also established him as a highly prestigious scholar in the eyes of his contemporaries, someone who knew how to value historical sources and references — the only things capable of helping to reconstruct the realities of the past in a truly professional manner.

As a historian of Freemasonry, Abafi Aigner Lajos was the first Central European scholar, as early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to propose the study of this subject based on a rigorous methodology founded on the use of primary archival sources. By studying these sources meticulously, he demonstrated that a comprehensive understanding of the history of Freemasonry and secret societies is essential for grasping the full picture of a given era.

Over a century ago, he recognised the extraordinary importance of this topic in the context of a nation's history. However, he also recognised that many dilettantes, through their superficiality, ignorance or narrow-mindedness, would only harm this field of research. His testament to posterity is therefore extremely significant. History is an ongoing process of research and discovery.

At the same time, it is also the most beautiful adventure a scholar can embark on. Until you find satisfaction in the act of acquiring knowledge itself, you must learn to search long and hard. Then, you must understand what you have found and preserve the treasures you have discovered carefully. When the time is right, you can pass these on to others, opening up new

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<sup>4</sup> These are the journals: *Hajnal* [Dawn], *Világosság* [Light], *Hazánk*, [Our Homeland] *Zirkel* [Compass], and *Bauhütte* [Masonic lodge].

<sup>5</sup> He was born in Apátfalva on 14 January 1854 and died in Budapest on 1 September 1915. He studied in Szarvas and Szeged, and was initiated into Freemasonry in 1879 at the Könyves Kálmán Lodge. Between 1887 and 1888, he edited the magazines *Hajnal* and *Orient* together with Abafi Aigner Lajos. In 1889, he was one of the founders of the Demokrácia Lodge, and he remained a member until his death.

<sup>6</sup> Of his many publications on Freemasonry, two stand out as they provide a unique perspective on the lodges and secret societies of Hungary, Transylvania and the Banat region. See *A magyar testőrök és a szabadkőművesség* [The Hungarian guardians and freemasonry], (1881); *Titkos társulatok Temesvárott a mult században* [Secret societies in Timișoara in the last century], (1896).

<sup>7</sup> The Petőfi Society operated in Budapest from 1876 to 1944. Its founding members were prominent figures in Hungarian literary life, including: Balázs Sándor, Éjszaki Károly, Komócsy József and Szana Tamás, among others. The society aimed to promote the cult of Petőfi Sándor, the great Hungarian poet of the 1848 Revolution, as well as spreading Hungarian literature as widely as possible. The society's first meeting took place on 1 January 1876, with the renowned writer Jókai Mór being elected as its inaugural president.

<sup>8</sup> In the last years of his life, his health deteriorated significantly due to his intensive work schedule. He gradually gave up the book trade, one of his great passions, which resulted in a considerable decrease in his income. In 1899, he was forced by circumstances to accept the position of Chief Inspector of Hungarian Libraries and Museums. This intense activity in the secular sphere took up much of his time, and his illness also played a part in his decision to end his life on 10 October 1900.

<sup>9</sup> See: *A Magyar népdalról* (1872) [On the Hungarian folk song], *Mikes Kelemen* (1872), *Fessler Ignác Aurél* (1878).

horizons. Only in this way is history not just a story. It is an instrument of knowledge that helps you see the future because you had the wisdom to understand your past.

## 2. Masonic Lodge vs. Secret Society

In his research on 18<sup>th</sup> century Freemasonry (Abafi, 1884), Abafi Aigner Lajos clearly distinguishes between the Masonic Lodge and the secret society, emphasising that the two should not be confused.

From his point of view, the secret societies that operated in Banat during the second half of the Enlightenment were independent of the Masonic Order. They were often established for political reasons by people who had withdrawn from Freemasonry because they had failed to fulfil the expectations that had led them to join. Most of these people had hoped to learn the secrets of alchemy that so many people coveted, such as the elixir of life, the ability to turn metals into gold and communicate with spirits.

At that time, secret societies targeted the existing political order and fundraising in particular. To succeed in their planned endeavours, they lured potential followers with a mirage that former Freemasons knew how to make almost irresistible. They were invited to join an organisation that was presented as a preparatory antechamber for the great secrets of Freemasons and alchemists.

In such a place, the initiators adopted conduct similar to that of some symbols in a Masonic workshop. They sought to foster a sense of solidarity akin to that found within a Masonic lodge. This was all the more important given that they were part of an anarchist movement based on ambitious ideals, such as the overthrow of the Habsburg monarchy, the establishment of a republic or a federation, and the attainment of social rights, which were denied to most of them at the time (Abafi, 1884, pp. 515-520).

In his analysis of Banat as a case study, Abafi Aigner Lajos emphasises that, contrary to expectations, an important Masonic lodge called *Zu den 3 weissen Lilien* [At the three white lilies] operated in Timișoara in this province in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as did three rival secret societies. These societies generated significant social activity, polarising prominent figures from both the cultural-political and ecclesiastical spheres.

The Masonic Lodge *Zu den 3 weissen Lilien* [At the three white lilies] was founded by members of the middle classes. Conclusive data on its activities only dates from 1782 onwards. The following list of members shows that during this period the lodge was led by the third Venerable Master. As the first two Venerable Masters only remained in office for a few years, it is highly likely that the Timișoara workshop began its activities in the early 1770s.<sup>10</sup>

The lodge was founded by József Sauvegne, a merchant, who is known to have left Timișoara in 1782 and moved to Fiume. Following his departure, the following individuals became involved in managing the workshop: Eckhard Frigyes, a nobleman and Venerable from Kanizsa; Barth János György, the first supervisor; Heigl Ferenc, the second supervisor and a merchant from Timișoara; Kirchgeher Engelbert, the orator and a timber control office official in his secular life; and Wreden Ferencz, the treasurer.<sup>11</sup>

They advocated that all their efforts should focus on philanthropy, sound morals and avoiding vices; leading an irreproachable lifestyle; and, above all, free thinking and promoting culture (Abafi, 1884, pp. 515–520). Brother Seipp Kristóf Lajos, born in Worms in 1748, was a well-known actor who travelled all over the world and excelled in this regard. He worked in Erfurt in 1768, in Hungary from 1774, and in Sibiu from 1783, finally moving to Timișoara.

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<sup>10</sup> See *Titkos társulatok Temesvárott a mult században* [Secret societies in Timișoara in the last century] (1884).

<sup>11</sup> Old Ritual for the Reception in the Lodge “The Three White Lilies – Vivat Concordia et Lux” in Timișoara: Reception of an Apprentice, Moral Instruction for Apprentices, Catechism of the Fellow Crafts, Catechism of the Masters.

He seems to have been highly appreciated here for his plays performed in a secular environment, where he managed to win over the audience (Abafi, 1884, pp. 515-520).

Until 1786, the brothers in Timișoara were the only ones who could carry out the activity of enlightening the masses through culture. However, for unknown reasons, the Grand Master, Count Pálffy Károly, requested the closure of the lodge that year. It is known only that the members intended to send a memorandum to Emperor Joseph II — who was also a Freemason — but Count Pálffy thwarted their initiative.

During the reign of Leopold II, who was also a Freemason (Abafi, 1884, pp. 515–520), the Timișoara lodge received approval to resume its activities. Court Chancellor János Márton Loebel asked the brothers in Timișoara to start working again, having mediated this request with the higher authorities in Vienna (Abafi, 1884, pp. 515–520). The Timișoara lodge resumed its activities, but unfortunately not for long. According to a contemporary source, the workshop had fallen dormant by 1793 (Abafi, 1884, pp. 515–520).

The reasons why the lodge ceased its activities in the Banat region are also unknown. However, what is certain is that against the backdrop of the void left by the renowned Timișoara workshop, the Rosicrucian Order, as well as the Order of the Illuminati and the controversial Order of the Rose, consolidated their positions in the province.

As early as 1772, the Rosicrucians managed to establish a Circle in Timișoara. After the Zu den 3 weissen Lilien lodge fell dormant, some of its members joined the Rosicrucian Circle. They were accepted in exchange for the fees they paid upon being initiated into the first three degrees. According to a document from that period, Baron Miksa József Linden, an administrative advisor, paid 80 francs for the first degree and 60 francs for the next two after only six months.

As with the Masonic workshop, the Rosicrucian circle generated considerable excitement within the community. Only the Order of the Illuminati, which had gained fame as an anarchist society seeking to overthrow the state order and penetrate the main leadership positions within the empire, surpassed it in prestige.

According to a letter dated 31 July 1786, the Illuminati had spread their activities throughout the province, infiltrating all existing lodges. During that period, the Illuminati were the most feared secret society. In order to federalise the Empire, they intended to increase their power by undermining the Masonic lodges and subjugating them (Rudolf & Varga, 2013, pp. 77–90).

Similarly, the Order of the Rose sought to completely disrupt contemporary thinking. The secret police of the time constantly sought to obtain detailed information about this secret society, infiltrating its ranks with their most skilled spies. This secret society was founded by an extremely controversial figure of the time, the Jesuit Grossinger Ferencz Rudolf.

He was born in Komárom on 20 September 1752. In the baptismal register, he is listed as Grossinger Ferencz Máté, the son of Grossinger Ferencz, who was a town councillor and a butcher (Szinnyei, 1909). His grandfather, Grossinger Keresztély, was born in Königsbrunn, Austria.

His nephew, Grossinger Ferencz Rudolf<sup>11</sup>, attended the Jesuit secondary school in Komárom. He then joined the Jesuit order and went on to study philosophy in Győr and

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<sup>11</sup> He carried out impressive journalistic work throughout his life, and his writings served as essential reading for members of the order: *Freimüthiger Briefwechsel zwischen zwei teutschen Reichsständen, über Bayerns gegenwärtige Angelegenheiten* 1778 [Frank correspondence between two estates of the German Empire, Concerning Bavaria's current affairs] (1778); *Die Souverain, oder die ersten Haupt- und Grundgesetze einer monarchischen Staats* [The Sovereign, or the first principal and fundamental laws of a monarchical state] (1780); *De religiosis ordinibus et eorum reformatione liber singularis, quem e germanico in latinum traduxit, suisque auxit animadversionibus* [A treatise on religious orders and their reform, which he translated from German into Latin and augmented with his own observations] (1781); *Allgemeines Tolarenz- und Religionssystem für alle Staaten und Völker in der Welt Leipzig* [General system of tolerance and religion for all states and

Nagyszombat. He proved to be an exceptional student and learned several languages: Italian, French, German and Latin.

Following the abolition of the Jesuit order in Hungary, he moved to Vienna and became a court secretary by decree of Empress Maria Theresa on 4 October 1777. Later, during the reign of Joseph II, he fled to Oberndorf am Main, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Halle and Berlin. He was imprisoned in 1788 for inciting the Hungarians to rebel against the Empire.

The secret society of the Rose, founded around 1786, was modelled on the Jesuit order. At city level, members met in a place known as the Circle, which bore the symbolic name of “The Rose of the Place”. Several such “roses” were subordinate to the authority of the “Basic Rose”, believed to be coordinated by a certain Henriette Rosenwald. However, this was a fictional character; according to the secret police, Grossinger Ferencz Rudolf himself exercised all the authority of the Order, forcing all members of the “local Rose” to donate two francs per month to a common fund. Each of these donors was known as a “Rose”, and their secret meetings were referred to as “Walks”.

Admission to the Order was by recommendation and required the payment of a fee, followed by a detailed presentation of activities carried out up to that point, the purchase of a symbol and a membership diploma. The order’s activities were governed by a set of rules finalised on 1 May 1786. The Order also established a branch in Timișoara which operated without interruption until 1789 when the authorities intervened, outraged by the radical ideas that its members were propagating within the community, including rebellion against tyranny, the abolition of priestly celibacy and monastic orders, criticism of the papacy and promotion of polygamy.

It is all the more interesting to note that the members of the order who embraced these eccentric ideas were leading figures in clerical life in Banat and beyond: Orthodox Bishop Petru Petrovici<sup>12</sup>, Canon of Cenad Vuko-Branco Pál, Transylvanian Bishop Gherasim Adamovici<sup>13</sup>, the bishop of Vârșeț Sakabent Joanovics. Joining these societies was a way for figures from the cultural and religious spheres to protest against an authoritarian regime that did not meet the expectations of a growing social class who had begun to sympathise with the ideas of the time.

During the second half of the Enlightenment period, Freemasonry and other imitative secret societies attracted many followers because they consolidated urban, cultured groups that were outside traditional structures. Here, fraternal equality was encouraged, meaning that people were judged on their own merits regardless of their name, status or circumstances (Nicoară, 2005, p. 256). The significant changes that took place in the community can also be seen as an explanation for the fact that Freemasonry and secret societies managed to establish themselves firmly in Timișoara, gaining numerous adherents.

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peoples in the world] (1784); *Päbstengeschichte im Grundrisse. Göttingen und Offenbach* [History of the Popes in Outline. Göttingen and Offenbach] (1784); *Die Kirche und der Staat, ihre beiderseitige Pflicht, Macht und Gränzen* [The church and the state, their mutual duties, power, and limits] (1784); *Jus publicum Hungariae unica complexum deissertatione* [The public law of Hungary presented in a single comprehensive dissertation] (1786); *Statistik aller katholischen geistlichen Reichsstifter in Deutschland* [Statistics of all catholic ecclesiastical imperial estates in Germany] (1786); *Ungarisches allgem. Staats- und Regimentsrecht* [Hungarian General Constitutional and Administrative Law] (1786); *Ein Handvoll Schurkereien und Thorheiten aus dem Tagebuche eines Reisenden Engländers* [A handful of rogueries and follies from the diary of a travelling Englishman] (1786).

<sup>12</sup> He served as bishop of Arad between 1783 and 1786.

<sup>13</sup> He was the [Orthodox bishop of Transylvania](#) between 1789 and 1794. He was of Serbian ethnicity and came to Transylvania to be installed as Orthodox bishop in [Răsinari](#). In March 1792, together with the [united](#) bishop [Ioan Bob](#), he submitted to Emperor [Leopold II](#) the extended version of the memorandum [The petition of the Romanians of Transylvania], which demanded that [the Romanians](#) in the province no longer be considered “tolerated” and that they have political, economic, and religious rights equal to those of the privileged classes (nobles, [Saxons](#), and [Szeklers](#)).

In 1781, Timișoara was granted the privileged status of Free Royal City by Emperor Joseph II in a diploma that was renewed in 1790 by Emperor Leopold II. This status brought a number of advantages to the city, including being removed from the jurisdiction of the county re-established in 1780; the right to send its own representatives to the local parliament; the election of its own magistrates and jurors; the collection of customs duties on the entry and exit of goods; the organisation of annual or weekly fairs; its own budget of revenues and expenditures; exemption from tax obligations; and its own coat of arms (Munteanu & Munteanu, 2002).

In addition, German and Swabian colonisation contributed to the development of crafts, trade and industry. In other words, this led to the accelerated development of urban activities and the consolidation of a middle class in society, as reflected in the composition of lodges and secret societies.

These elite groups came to consider themselves the guardians of a truth capable of ensuring the good of humanity by reconciling modern values with traditional ones through the ideals they upheld (Nicoară, 2005, p. 256). This is why they are so important for understanding the specific nature of that era, an idea also supported by Abafi Aigner Lajos, known as the “Father of the History of Modern Hungarian Freemasonry”.

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