A Masonic pretender to the Hungarian throne: François Claude Auguste de Crouy-Chanel
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When the Revolution of 1848 failed, many Hungarians, worried about the Austrian repression, quit their home, going all over Europe and also reaching the United States of America. One of the leaders, Lajos Kossuth, tried to mix the most important States up in this issue, bringing himself near to Piedmont. As a matter of fact, for some time the Savoy dynasty was urging obtaining the Northern Italy regions, still under Habsburg domain. So, in 1859 Turin, the capital city, became the centre of Hungarian emigration.

After the Second Italian War of Independence, fought among France, the Austrian Empire and the kingdom of Sardinia, the exiles' front started to crumble: since the achievement of an independent Hungary was still a dream, many were looking around to find new opportunities.

At that exact moment, a man, who claimed to be the last descendent of Arpad’s dynasty, the last ruling family of Hungary, arrived in Turin: he was the marquis François Claude Auguste de Crouy-Chanel (1793-1873). In the balance between comedy and tragedy, he was one the most controversial figure of his time. When coming to Italy, the sixty-year-old person had already an impressive background.

Born in 1793 in Duisburg (Prussia) in an aristocratic family fled from the French Revolution, initially he had to live as an exile. Thanks to Napoleon’s takeover his parents could come back home, and he finished his studies in Grenoble. After a brief experience in the royal court, he decided to leave and find his way.

In 1821, for the first time, he gained some notoriety, openly supporting the Greek cause and starting a fund-raising. This year was important for another matter: he, along with his brother Henri, won a trial against duke Croÿ d’Havré and his house was recognized as the only family allowed to use the coat of arms of Hungary. Thanks to that, his claim to be a direct heir of the Arpad royal dynasty, grew stronger.

In 1823, he started his conspiratorial career, being involved as a financial broker for the Spanish royalists. At that moment, the situation in Iberian peninsula was very complex and there was a civil war between liberals and absolutists. The government desperately needed money, and he went to Madrid promoting an agreement. This activity brought him almost one million francs.

This internal conflict, won by the royalists thanks to the French military intervention, had an impact on the Spanish colonies which were more and more against this oppressive rule. Given his prestige, Crouy-Chanel plotted a new plan: creating a Mexican state under French influence. To do so, he contacted the young infant Francisco de Paula of Bourbon and asked him if he wanted to be emperor. Having obtained his approval, from 1825 to 1828 he travelled to Paris, Madrid and
London trying to receive political support for this project. Having obtained nothing, Francisco de Paula, fearing to be discovered, stopped everything and so the marquis found himself jobless.

His next step was to go in the near Portugal, where there were many opportunities. The country was under the rule of Miguel of Braganza who, after being appointed regent for his under-age niece, had totally overthrown the girl. After his arrival, Crouy-Chanel became very close to new king and formed a special relation with his mother, Carlota Joaquina of Spain, a staunch supporter of absolutism. Thanks to the latter, the marquis got in touch with the Catholic Church and became acquainted with Gioacchino Ventura and Felicité de Lamennais, whose political ideals would have radically changed in the next following years, and they would have become liberals and democrats.

This special relationship with the Vatican had its own benefits: in 1848, he would have been nominated commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great while his daughters would have got the title of princess and the Roman citizenship.

Meanwhile, the French Revolution of 1830 radically changed the situation at home. The new regime, guided by Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orléans, decided to put under control several personalities and, among them, there was the marquis, who was going back and forth to Paris, trying to receive funding for the Portuguese government.

After a while, in 1831 he was arrested under accusation for having put on the market counterfeit money. This was a heavy charge because if found guilty, Crouy-Chanel could have been sentenced to death. After awaiting trial for nine months, on September 5 1832 the judge acknowledged his innocence, and he was freed.

Regardless this horrible experience, the marquis didn’t want to drop his love for intrigue. Few years later, in September 1838, he shifted his political ideas, and he became a Bonapartism supporter. Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, nephew of the famous emperor, was trying to build a party and needed men for his cause. Gained his trust, he went to London to speak with him, and they decided to launch a newspaper. In June 1839, the first number of the “Capitole” was out. In September, after several quarrels inside the editorial office, he left this assignment. Needing to justify how the money was spent, he organized all the papers. On November 27, just before leaving for United Kingdom, he was arrested again: the charge was conspiracy against the state. At the end, after five months in jail, he was finally freed.

Coming back to 1861, as we have seen, the marquis was a pretty shady character, however, he was charming for some exiles, because he was offering a new chance to modify the current state of affairs. His arrival was a shock for the Hungarians exiled in Italy: their unity of purposes was irremediably broken, since not everyone welcomed the marquis as his future ruler.

Among the enthusiasts were Gyorgy Klapka, Ferenc Pulszky and Albert Nyary. After a moment of hesitation, in 1862 they focused on propaganda and published several pamphlets. His arrival influenced also the Italian Masonic situation: Pulszky and Klapka were members of the independent “Dante Alighieri” lodge, while Kossuth and István Türr were associated to the Grand

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In December 1862 the marquis, along with several others Freemasons, like Klapka, Francesco De Luca and Lodovico Frapolli, founded the Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite based in Turin. With that move, all Freemasons who were against the moderates created a Masonic body alternative to the Grand Orient.

The close collaboration between Crouy-Chanel and Worshipful Master Frapolli, who would have been Grand Master of the Grand Orient of Italy in 1869, led the marquis to became the first Sovereign Grand Commander, and he maintained the assignment until 1864. The moderates’ answer was sudden and unforeseen: in 1863 Kossuth and Türр created a Grand Orient of Hungary.

So it started a war which ended one year later and where the Freemasons linked to the Historical Right lose: in June, during the general assembly in Florence, the “Dante Alighieri” lodge was readmitted in the Grand Orient of Italy and Giuseppe Garibaldi was elected Honorary Grand Master, while Francesco De Luca Active Grand Master. With these crushing elections, the crisis was over and the democrats were by then in control.

Meanwhile, in the non-Masonic world, Crouy-Chanel’s fortune was rapidly fading: the Hungarians doubts were increasing, and the situation was still blocked. To achieve something and to gain some visibility, the so-called rightful heir to the Hungarian throne brought an action against Francesco V d’Este, former duke of Modena. In accordance with the marquis, since he was a direct descendant to Beatrice d’Este, queen of Hungary, all the titles and properties belonged to him. In 1863, helped by some of the most important Italian lawyers, he started a legal process which took a long time. After a first defeat, he retried again and in 1865 he won. However, the Supreme Court closed this trial once and for all declaring unwarranted his claim. The costs of proceedings were very high, and he had lost a large sum. Debts weren’t the only problem: another trial was ending in the same years in France.

In fact, a scandal had broken in that country which also implicated Crouy-Chanel. An unfaithful receiver, working for the French railways reserve fund, had taken three millions and two hundred thousand francs and the marquis had been one of his accomplices. In 1866, he was sentenced to hard labour by default. Returned in Paris the following year, he obtained to commute the penalty to three years in prison and to pay ten thousand francs.

Everything was over: old and by that time left alone, he spent his last remaining years in poverty and in 1873 he died in Paris.