

ŠTEFAN KRČMÉRY AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO ADULT EDUCATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT ACTIVITIES IN INTERWAR SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: Štefan Krčméry was a Slovak poet, literary historian and critic, publicist and translator. He served as a Secretary of *Matica slovenská* and renewed the publishing of *Slovenské pohľady*. Krčméry contributed to the improvement of *Matica slovenská*'s enlightening, cultural, educational, scientific, and literary activities through his organizational, editorial, scientific and literary endeavours. Štefan Krčméry was one of the signatories of Martin's Declaration adopted on 30 October 1918.

Keywords: Štefan Krčméry, biography, public enlightenment activities, Czechoslovak Republic.

1 Introduction

The establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic presented Slovaks with a challenging opportunity for their national and cultural advancement. Štefan Krčméry, Secretary of *Matica slovenská* and "a leading advocate of modern Slovak identity" (Vanovič, 2006, p. 66) brought a fresh note of optimism and a vision of the hopeful future. Known for his extensive knowledge, Krčméry was a man of extraordinary talents and an ardent advocate of the Slovak affairs (Krčméry, 1995).

2 Biography

Štefan Krčméry was born on 26 December 1892 in Mošovce. In 1896, the Krčméry family moved to Jasenová na Orave, where Krčméry also completed his primary education. He spent four junior years of his comprehensive secondary education in Banská Bystrica. From 1907 to 1911, Krčméry attended the Evangelical Lyceum in Bratislava. It was here where Krčméry had gradually built his circle of friends with whom he shared his enthusiasm for the culture of their own nation. He studied a lot and was interested in issues concerning literature and philosophy. Krčméry composed poetry and wrote down his verses in notebooks in both Slovak and Hungarian (Katuščák, 1979, p. 21). In 1911–1915, he studied at the Evangelical College. Upon the completion of his studies, Krčméry served as a chaplain in Krajné, later, in 1917, in Bratislava (Zelenková, 2006, p. 95).

From 1918 to 1919, he edited *Národné noviny* [The National Newspapers] in Martin (Bakoš, 1996, p. 169). He wrote editorials, formulated the principles defining the strategies of political, national, and cultural work, composed verses about freedom, and organized various other activities (Katuščák, 1979, p. 55). In 1919, Krčméry was appointed First Secretary of *Matica slovenská* and remained in the office until 1932. His editorial work for magazine *Včelka* [The Bee] in 1925–1927 was equally important (Holéniová, 1973, p. 50). From 1922 to 1932, Krčméry was a contributing editor-in-chief of *Slovenské pohľady* [The Slovak Views] (Bakoš, 1996, p. 169) as a literary critic, historian, glossarist, and publicist. He inspired several authors to engage in their own writing, among others Janko Alexy and Ján Hrušovský (Holéniová, 1973, p. 50). He worked for other magazines too, e.g. *Slovenský ochotník* [The Slovak Amateur Performer] (1925 – 1927), *Naše divadlo* [Our Theatres] (1928), *Knižnica slovenských pohľadov* [The Series of the Slovak Views] (12 volumes) (Zelenková, 2006, s. 97).

Krčméry was most productive from 1914 to 1922. For his writing endeavours, Krčméry sought inspiration in traditional Slovak patriotism, folk poetry and his own personal life. His debut collection entitled *Keď sa sloboda rodila* [When Freedom Was Born] was published in 1920. It was followed by

Herbárium [Herbarium] (1929), *Piesne a balady* [Songs and Ballads] (1930), *Oslobodenie* [Liberation] (1932), *Pozdrav odmlčaného básnika* [Greetings from the Silenced Poet] (1944) (Bakoš, 1996, p. 169). In *Matica slovenská*, Krčméry devoted his time and energy to literary history. His most important books about literary history include *Prehľad dejín slovenskej literatúry a vzdelanosti* [The Concise History of Slovak Literature and Culture] (1920), *Ludia a knihy* [People and Books] (1928), *Moyses a Kuzmány* [Moyses and Kuzmány] (1928, co-authored with Eugen Klementis), *Zo slovenskej hymnológie* [Slovak Hymnology] (1936), *Stopäťdesiat rokov slovenskej literatúry* [150 years of Slovak Literature] (1943) (Holéniová, 1973, p. 49). Krčméry translated from French, English, and Hungarian. The collection of his translations was published under the title *Z cudzích sádov* [From the Distant Orchards] (1944). He translated a selection of Slovak poetry into Hungarian under the title *Anthológia Szlovák Költökből* (1925) (Bakoš, 1996, p. 169). From the so-called *organizational books* we can name *Päť rokov Matice slovenskej* [Five Years of Matice slovenská] (1919 – 1923), *Tri roky Matice slovenskej* [Three Years of Matice slovenská] (1924 – 1926), *Rok Matice slovenskej* [One Year of Matice slovenská] (1927, 1928, 1930) (Zelenková, 2006, p. 97).

Štefan Krčméry was one of the most versatile figures of Slovak culture. He eagerly engaged in organizational and cultural activities and greatly influenced the future direction not only of *Matica slovenská*, but also of the Slovak culture as such. Krčméry ranks among the most prominent cultural-enlightenment workers. He wrote articles, gave lectures at conferences for librarians and enlightenment workers, organized theatre life, etc. (Bakoš, 1996, p. 169).

He was a member of the committee of *Muzeálna slovenská spoločnosť* [The Slovak Museum Society], *Spolok slovenských spisovateľov* [Slovak Writers Association], *Spolok slovenských umelcov* [Slovak Artists Association] and a deputy chairman of *Ústredie slovenských ochotníckych divadiel* [The Central Office of Slovak Amateur Theatres] (Zelenková, 2006, p. 97). Krčméry was an excellent chess player, great speaker with acting talents, a musician, and a painter (Holéniová, 1973, p. 53).

Krčméry travelled a lot. In 1920, the Ministry of Education provided him with a scholarship to support his study stay in France. In Paris, Krčméry gave lectures on Slovak literature at Institut d'Études Slaves and studied history of French literature at the Sorbonne University. He was also interested in the history of fine art. Krčméry spent some time in Geneva and in Provence. He visited Marseille, Nice, Monaco, Monte Carlo, Venice and Yugoslavia (Holéniová, 1973, pp. 47–48).

Krčméry lived for others. His personal engagement and never-ending care for the needs of the greater group from the various positions he held throughout his life: as the Secretary of *Matica slovenská*, the editor of *Národné noviny* [The National Newspaper], *Slovenský týždenník* [The Slovak Weekly], *Slovenské pohľady* [The Slovak Views], *Slovenský ochotník* [Slovak Amateur Performer], *Včelka* [The Bee], and *Roky Matice slovenskej* [The Years of Matice slovenská], the writer, literary critic and historian, art theorist (lectures, study stays, presentations of art values, popularisation of national literature, publishing, tension in Czech-Slovak relations, unresolved issues concerning politics, culture, literature and art, etc.) took its toll. As it soon became apparent, Krčméry's fountain of energy proved not to have been bottomless. Medical problems of various intensity became his everyday reality (Tatár, 2015, pp. 13 – 14).

Štefan Krčméry died on 15 February 1955 in Pezinok.

3 Štefan Krčméry for the nation

From the time Krčméry first came to Martin as an editor of *Národné noviny*, he showed a great interest in all issues concerning the Slovak nation. He helped prepare the first assembly of the restored *Matica slovenská*, and greatly contributed to shaping its profile in the 1920s and early 1930s (Eliáš, 1974, p. 118). Together with Miloš Vančo, Krčméry drafted the 1919 Statutes of *Matica slovenská*. On 15 February 1919, they published the Statutes in *Národné noviny*, following the ministerial ordinance no. 1 issued on 1 January 1919 on restoration of *Matica slovenská*'s activities (Holéniová, 1973, p. 43). From his position of the *Matica slovenská*'s Secretary, Krčméry basically managed the institution and was in charge of almost all of its varied activities (Eliáš, 1974, s. 118). With that said, we must not undermine the work of Škultéty as the administrator of *Matica slovenská* (Holéniová, 1973, p. 44).

The central principles of *Matica slovenská* formulated by Krčméry in his Statutes' proposal in 1919 were: *Matica slovenská* was to be a national cultural institution whose main role was to "unite all those who share the feeling of pride and love for the Slovak nation, so they could work together in order to improve the level of education among Slovaks and hence improve material wellbeing of the whole Slovak nation". *Matica slovenská* was to become an association of an apolitical nature and was to unite all Slovaks regardless of their religious beliefs or political preferences. In practice, however, the political indifference proved an unrealistic concept. Being a central cultural institution, *Matica slovenská* surely had some power to influence politics. Almost all political parties tried to sway *Matica slovenská* in their direction (Eliáš, 1974, p. 118).

As an editor of *Národné noviny*, Krčméry supported the political platform of *Slovenská národná strana* [Slovak National Party]. The level of cultural awareness determined his political opinions and preferences. He promoted united Czechoslovak Republic and ruled out any form of Slovak separatism. Krčméry advocated for Slovak language as an official language and supported Slavic mutuality. He rejected Czechoslovakism and engaged in long disputes with those who promoted it (mainly Pražák) and those who attacked Slovak language and culture, degraded Slovak standard language into a dialect, and in comparison to the Czech culture viewed the Slovak culture as provincial (Holéniová, 1973, pp. 44-45).

In his activities concerning popular education, Krčméry encouraged national education and raising national awareness. He came against the constant attacks of promoters of Czechoslovakism who called for the united Czechoslovak nation (Holéniová, 1973, p. 45).

Krčméry always pictured *Matica slovenská* as a leading Slovak institution instrumental in the development of science and cultural enlightenment. Its status of a central institution was to be secured not only because of *Matica*'s long tradition, but also because of its contribution to the cultural and scientific development (Holéniová 1973, p. 46). According to Krčméry, *Matica slovenská* was to become a nationwide enlightenment association with a program reaching to the furthest villages (Eliáš, 1974, p. 120). "*Matica slovenská ought to have members in every municipality, and branches in every small town and village. These branches should establish a public library and a choir in every municipality, organize theatres, prepare popular lectures aimed at the education of the masses and many more...on condition that the organization is branched out to the municipal level just like Slovenská národná rada [Slovak National Council] is*" (Krčméry, 1919, p. 1). "*In our educational activities we honour the memory of prominent figures from individual regions and always start from there. We strive to evoke a familiar feeling of love towards one's nation and state from the attachment one feels towards their home region*" (Krčméry, 1926, pp. 627 – 628).

Krčméry got personally involved in the enlightenment activities: 28 May 1922 he gave a presentation on the role of enlightenment

work at the meeting of the local branch of *Matica slovenská* in Nitra; 3 to 6 June 1922, he attended a congress of the enlightenment workers in Prešov, where he unveiled a commemorative plaque for Hviezdoslav on 4 June; 11 March 1923, he gave a presentation entitled "Compassion and enlightenment bring glorious future" at the assembly of the local branch of *Matica slovenská* in Kremnica; 19 October 1923, he participated in the meeting of the preparatory committee for social and cultural work in Slovakia held in Prague; 23 May 1926, he gave a lecture entitled "How can the popular education in Slovakia contribute to the correct understanding of statehood and to a substantive solution to Czech-Slovak relations?" at the congress of the enlightenment workers in Turčianske Teplice; 28 July 1926, he gave a presentation on enlightenment work in Slovakia at the international congress of librarians held in Prague (Katuščák, 1979).

When enlightenment activities are concerned, Krčméry based his approach on Štúr's understanding of popular education. "...a nation can create only when it recognizes the abilities and talents that are truly alive within that nation. Popular education's task is to liberate people, allow them to grow freely and prepare them in the self-conscious spirit for their life purpose" (Krčméry, 1926, p. 479). For Krčméry, the popular education also involved making culture accessible to everyone. He emphasised the role of Slovak amateur theatres recognizing that there had been a great interest in theatre among Slovaks. Krčméry acted like an intermediary between *Matica slovenská* and *Ústredie slovenského ochotníckeho divadelníctva* [The Central Office of Slovak Amateur Theatres]. He served as a deputy chairman there. From 1925, Krčméry was an editor of *Slovenský ochotník* [Slovak Amateur Performer], which was later renamed *Naše divadlo* [Our Theatre] (with Krčméry as the editor). Krčméry engaged in professional theatre too. From the establishment of the Slovak National Theatre he represented *Matica slovenská* in its administration and was responsible for extending the Slovak repertoire (Holéniová, 1973, p. 50).

In *Matica slovenská*, Krčméry was in charge of organizing various activities concerning collection, research, publishing, and promotion. He did so in cooperation with *Matica slovenská*'s scientific and local departments. He fostered collaboration with other cultural associations, encouraged the collection of verbal folk art, sought and educated literary talents and encouraged older writers. By doing all that, Krčméry helped to create favourable conditions for the development of literature and cultural life. For instance, Krčméry collaborated with Martin Kukučín, Vladimír Hurban Vladimírov, Ladislav Nádaši, Terézia Vansová, Sidónia Sakalová and others (Katuščák, 1979, p. 87).

For Štefan Krčméry, the establishment of Czechoslovakia was an opportunity for national and cultural advancement of Slovaks. He expressed his opinions and convictions in challenging times when it was no longer the existence or nonexistence of our nation that was at stake, but rather its dignified status in the context of a new union with the Czech nation (Tatár, 2015, p. 71). He was one of the leading figures of *Matica slovenská* fighting for the Slovak national and cultural identity against the pressure from the representatives of the Czechoslovak state who were trying to incorporate *Matica slovenská* into the frame of the state policy promoting united Czechoslovak nation and one common Czechoslovak culture (Vašš, 2013, s. 104). Štefan Krčméry emphasised *Matica slovenská*'s role in national emancipation as one of its primary activities and worked hard towards the development of Slovak language and culture – the two fundamental attributes of the Slovak nation.

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