The History of Celestine Fejérváry and the Kárász (her Mother’s) Family

Mrs Fejérváry, Karolina Kárász, came from an ancient, prominent and prosperous family in Hungary. The family lived in Horgos, then in Hungary, in Yugoslavia after World War 1. Of the 14 children her parents had, only she and brother Imre survived into adulthood. Her father, intent on alleviating the devastation of the pestilence, was planning to found an orphanage, but early death prevented his plans. Karolina was going to carry out the plans, but her marriage to Nicholas Fejervary and their emigration to the US put her plans on hold. She left her daughter, Celestine Fejervary, with a legacy to carry out the plans. Karolina died in 1890 and is buried in Oakdale Cemetery in Davenport, Ia.

Celestine was born in 1848 in Budapest, Hungary. She was named after Celestine Dvornikovich, who was her father’s aunt. (This aunt was like a mother to Nicholas Fejervary since his real mother died four weeks after his birth.) Celestine was the second child of the family, following the birth of Nicholas Jr. in 1847. In 1863 she became the surviving child, since Nicholas Jr. passed away that year. He fought in the Civil War on the Union side, but the circumstances of his death are unclear. He is buried with his parents in Davenport.

In her formative years Celestine attended church with her mother at St Mary’s Catholic Church in West Davenport. At times she walked there with a friend, Susan Glaspell (later a Pulitzer prize winning author). In 1883 the church acquired a new organ, built by the Moline Pipe Organ Co. At the opening concert Miss Celestine Fejervary was one of the organists, probably instrumental in selecting two scores for the program by Franz Liszt, her compatriot. Celestine then became the main organist of the church.

In 1888, using her assets in Hungary, Karolina set up a foundation in her will to build an orphanage in Horgos. Following Karolina’s death in 1890, Celestine carried out her mother’s wishes, and deposited 91,600 florins in the foundation. The orphanage, run by an order of teaching nuns, was opened in 1898 for 20 girls.

In 1893 she visited Europe and in Belgium acquired a painting for St Mary’s, still the altar piece at the church. The painting is a copy of Raphael’s “Assumption of the Blessed Virgin”, painted by Guido Rene, an 18th century court artist for the King of Belgium.

In 1895 Count Fejervary died, leaving a large estate for his daughter. The following year Celestine returned to Hungary, presumably to Horgos. She retained the Fejervary family’s holdings in Davenport, and only in 1902 offered the family mansion and the surrounding 23 acres to the City of Davenport. We know of only one trip back to Davenport: in 1906 she returned, bringing her niece on a tour of America. That was probably the occasion when Celestine brought the Cezanne painting, Boy with the Red Vest, as a gift for Alice French, her friend. (Alice French was another accomplished local writer. She was known to have visited the White House, was a good friend of Andrew Carnegie, and others. Many details of Celestine’s life come from a biography of Alice, where their correspondence is referenced.)
In 1912 Celestine added 63,000 krones and 132 acres of land to the orphanage foundation to double its size. There was space now for forty orphans and very poor girls to attend elementary school (6 to 12 years of age), and to learn home economics (12 to 16).

In 1914 the war broke out. In a letter Celestine asked Alice for help in disposing some Fejervary property. Alice agreed and also organized aid drives for Hungarian war wounded. She organized sewing and knitting groups and was instrumental in arranging the sending of supplies to Hungary by the local chapter of the American Red Cross. Still later Alice organized a Fejervary Committee to continue a program of aid. In 1915 Celestine turned the Karasz mansion in Horgos into a nursing home for wounded soldiers.

In 1917 the United States entered the war, and Hungary was now an enemy. That year, the rest of the Fejervary estate was seized by the Federal Government, as alien property. Alice opposed the seizure by organizing petitions to return the property to its rightful owner, who after all was an American citizen. With the war over, in 1921 Alice succeeded. In response to a petition with 6,000 signatures Celestine was granted $10,000 for the property seized by the Government.

The above episode is the last mention of Celestine in Alice’s biography. The biography stretches to 1934, when Alice passed away. It would be reasonable to suppose that at the conclusion of the war, Celestine would move North, as Horgos and the district of Bánság (now Vojvodina) became part of Yugoslavia. She moved to Mezőberény, Hungary, and died there on Nov 4, 1937. Efforts are under way to find information about her life in that community.

Other members of the Karasz family stayed and are still living in Horgos, YA, and the surrounding area. On Oct 10, 1945 the advancing Russian troops marched into Horgos and “liberated” the village. The new communist regime confiscated the holdings of the Karasz family and the nuns were turned out of the orphanage. At first the buildings were used as soldiers’ barracks. In 1949 the orphanage became a grade school. In 1966 the orphanage, still a school, was renovated and enlarged. In 1969 the Karasz mansion too was modified into classrooms. To honor the Russian liberators and the new order, the communist leadership named the school The Oktober 10 Elementary School. It was to remind the village forever of their benefactors. In 2002, the school’s name remains, even though the communist influence subsided. Villagers are regaining their freedom, and are ready to part with the names and institutions imposed upon them. Some of them feel that the Fejervary-Karasz name for their elementary school would pay homage to the families who contributed so much to the history of their village and school. That is why in 2002 an email message arrived in the Davenport City Hall. It requested information about Fejervary descendents. Subsequent contact with Horgos indicated that they would like to establish contact with Davenport, perhaps on a formal or semiformal level. They intend to publish a pamphlet on the history of the Davenport – Horgos connection. In July 2003 a package was received from Zoltan Nagygyorgy, the Horgos district historian. It contained the Karasz family tree; four beautiful postcards (color) of Horgos historic sites; three illustrated pamphlets on Horgos history, and of a colorful periodical published in Hungarian; a brochure about the local farmers COOP; articles reflecting the recent relations of the Hungarian minority with the Yugoslav majority; and finally the book Beszelo Multunk* noted below. This book of 256
pages contains an abundance of information and illustration beside the three articles also noted below. Contents of the package will be offered to the Davenport Public Library.

Ferenc Beiwel, Davenport, 9/2/03.

SOURCES
Octave Thanet, Nicholas Fejervary in Memoria, A Tribute of Affection and Respect (Budapest, Hungary, 1898.)
George McMichael, A Journey to Obscurity, 1965 (a biography of Alice French, also known as Octave Thanet, her literary name.)
William L. Smith, ST. Mary’s Church 1867 - 1967
Ilona Karasz, A Horgosi Arvahaz es a Zarda Kronikaja, 1995(The Story of the Horgos Orphanage and Convent)*
Imre Taborosi, Fejezetek Horgos Oktatasugyenek Tortenetebol, 1995. (Chapters from the History of Educational Institutions in Horgos)*

* All three of these works were published in Beszelo Multunk (Our Past Speaks), (Ujvidek, Yugoslavia, 1995)