István Hangácsi

The man of a generation

There are many, whose legacy is preserved by books or historians. On the other hand are the few, whose life and deeds are carved in the heart and mind of a generation. Árpád Göncz was the first president of Hungary after the communist era, but maybe last of his kind: a positive, inspiring and humane politician, truly one of the people.

Göncz Árpád’s life could be easily grown on movie scene, if he had been the president of the USA and not Hungary. He had an extraordinary life, during which he experienced unique historical moments personally. Göncz witnessed as a young scout, when the Hungarian troops retook parts of Czechoslovakia (which they lost in 1920 according to the treaty of Trianon) by the First Vienna Award in 1938. During World War II, he helped and rescued Hungarian Jews from the Nazi death squads. He preferred to be in the background rather than in the public eye, which was changed by the Hungarian revolution in 1956. Göncz supported the non-orthodox communists, went through show trials and ended up in jail after the unsuccessful revolt where he translated novels and learnt English. He was released in the 60s and later became the director of the Hungarian Writers Association, which greatly increased his reputation and popularity.

Even in the world of politics, Árpád Göncz was a positive personality. Simplicity characterized his work from the very first days of his mandate. After the peaceful negotiation among the democratic opposition and the reform communists, which lead to the Hungarian regime change in 1989, Göncz was unanimously elected by the parliamentary parties as the president of the country in 1990. He was THE president for socialists, conservatives, liberals and radicals, popular among older and younger generations too.
Although, that did not mean that he was immune to political conflict or did not make divisive decisions. The most famous was at the time of the taxi blockade, when cab drivers protested due to the rise in gas prices, which resulted in the blockade of the capital and many other major cities. The situation escalated till the plan of deploying the Hungarian army was raised, however Árpád Göncz as the supreme commander of forces, declined to use this option, and the protest was finally resolved peacefully.

Nowadays these humane features are missing from Hungarian political leaders and politicians. Furthermore, the continuous conflict seeking behavior greatly polarizes Hungarian society and political thinking. Göncz was different in these fields as well: he rarely interfered in daily politics during his mandate, unlike his foreign colleague, the former president of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. These two former statesmen had certain similarities: both were in prison, wrote literature, and were elected as first presidents after the regime change because of their popularity. However, the Czech president had a personal mission to influence society, as he did during the communist era with his dramas and novels, while Göncz did not. Moreover, the Hungarian president kept his high level of popularity and confidence among the citizens, while Havel lost it by the end of his mandate.

A lot has changed in Hungarian politics since then, especially regarding relevant experience and the way of communication. However, the political division continuously deepens and radicalizes. In the 90s, the Hungarian political elite was largely naive in the Western way of politics: to fulfill the main representative roles, because the lack of professionalism. In these confusing periods many tried to be beacons for the changing Hungarian society. Only one man emerged from the uncertain and never ending day-to-day political debates who behaved loyal to his nation and true to himself: Árpád Göncz. Leading party politicians today could learn from the example of the former president how to stay humane and inspiring for future generations.