“All good things come in threes”. The joint FEBS-IUBMB Congress in Budapest is the third annual meeting to which the Hungarian Biochemical Society have invited their colleagues from all over the world. I am convinced the large number of participants is a reflection of both a most interesting scientific programme and famous Hungarian hospitality.

Budapest hosted the 9th FEBS Meeting in 1974, from August 20–25. It is a pity that I could not participate; all the more as some years later I had several opportunities to experience Budapest as a most attractive city. The 20th FEBS Meeting held in Budapest 1990, from August 19 to 24, offered a good chance to come back (Fig. 1).

For the 20th FEBS Meeting, the Hungarian Biochemical Society had chosen three Congress venues: the opening and closing ceremonies as well as the five plenary lectures took place at the Budapest Convention Centre, while the scientific sessions were held at the University of Economic Sciences and at the Technical University of Budapest, these places being located a short walking distance from each other. The Scientific Programme Committee had concocted a rich scientific menu that was served in a total of 25 Symposia, 28 Colloquia, 5 Workshops and three Poster Sessions – but fortunately the organizers had reserved a whole afternoon to offer to all participants a free sight-seeing tour through wonderful Budapest. Another venue of the social programme will stay unforgettable as well: a grand reception at the National Gallery of Arts on the evening of 20th of August followed by fulminate fireworks that night. The significance of this particular St. Stephen’s Day celebrated on 20th of August becomes evident from an article contributed by a young journalist to a special Meeting’s newspaper produced for the meeting (edited at a FEBS Meeting for the first time, Fig. 2): the organizers included into the congress an extraordinary event, the first national holiday after the breakdown of the communist era. One could easily feel the relief of the Hungarian people, which was also obvious from the fact that the Technical University, former “Karl-Marx-University”, had been instantly renamed, and the monument of Marx at the entrance hall had been covered over and over with Hungarian tricolours by the students.

In 2005, the FEBS-IUBMB Congress in Budapest, devoted to the Protein World, is the second common venture between FEBS and the IUBMB, a joint Congress was also held in Birmingham in 2000. My colleagues, Péter Friedrich and Gáspár Jékely, who are so brilliantly outlining the importance and aims of this forthcoming venue, have also selected the contributions of this Special Budapest Issue of FEBS Letters. I wish to express my gratitude to them for having undertaken this effort. I am convinced that these articles will attract the attention of all participants, and the issue is the perfect compliment for the rich scientific and social programme.
Apart from its scientific significance, the timing of the 20th FEBS Meeting offers a unique opportunity to the organizers to introduce Hungary a little bit in depth to the participants. As it is quite uncommon that scientists attending a meeting are celebrated by fireworks, inevitably questions will be asked about the significance of the 20th of August.

The story began in 895 AD when the pagan Magyar tribes settled here at the end of a long journey from their original homeland somewhere in Central Asia. (According to their original plans they would have moved further westward had they not been stopped by the German Empire; this would have saved us much trouble later in history. But one could not escape geopolitical realities even in the 9th century.) Having arrived to a Christian Europe, the Magyars' only chance to survive was to abandon their original tribal religion and put an end to nomadism. This was realized first by Duke Geza, although personally he considered himself powerful enough to believe in two religions: the ancient tribal one and the new Christianity. (The few Christian missionaries around him suspected that he did not believe in anything at all.) As a careful political move, he had his son Vajk baptized, to whom on this occasion the name Stephen (after the first Christian martyr) was given. Heir to Geza, Stephen became Duke in 997. He was coronated on Christmas day, 1000 AD with a crown sent by Pope Sylvester II.

The coronation of King Stephen was of great significance. Symbolically, the Pope recognized him as a Christian king and gave him support to convert the Magyars into good Christians. Moreover, receiving a crown from the Pope meant the independence of Hungary, since if Stephen had accepted a crown from, say, the Emperor of Germany, he would have been regarded as a mere vassal. Therefore his crown, also known as the Holy Crown of Hungary, has remained the symbol of Hungarian independence ever since. Stephen completed the Christianization of Hungary and built the framework of the Hungarian state. He was a truly religious man; although his efforts to create a then modern state required cruel measures, his laws were considered humane by his time's standards.

Not so long after Stephen's death in 1038, his descendant King Laizlo I arranged for his canonization not only on religious grounds but presumably also to pay tribute to the founder of the Hungarian kingdom. St. Stephen became the first Hungarian saint in 1083. Catholic saints have special days on which they are celebrated: St. Stephen's day is the 20th of August.

For Hungarians the importance of this day is well beyond that of a Catholic holiday. Being the founder of the independent Hungarian state, St. Stephen is revered as one of our national heroes. 20th of August reminds us Hungarians of our national identity which we could preserve over 1000 years, surviving a not particularly merciful history.

The importance of the 20th of August is such that even the Communists, although fueled by their usual enthusiasm to eradicate all patriotic feelings from the nation, did not dare to abolish its celebration completely. On the 20th of August, 1949 the new Constitution of Hungary, compiled following the guidelines of Stalin's Soviet Constitution, came into force and this careful timing gave an excellent pretext for the celebration of St. Stephen's Day as Constitution Day. (Yes, with military parade and fireworks.) By tradition, this is also the day when the first bread is baked from the newly harvested crop: this has also been adopted by the Communist mythology, probably to calm down the peasants. Later it was not considered awkward even to remember St. Stephen as well: this way the Hungarians were given a "three-in-one" national holiday.

The end of the Communist rule in Hungary was symbolised, among other hints, by the appearance of some of the prominent personalities of the previous regime last year in the procession held by the Catholic church regularly on St. Stephan's Day. (In this procession the king’s right hand, an invaluable relic, is shown around; otherwise it is on display in the Basilica of St. Stephen in Budapest.)

The 20th FEBS Meeting was carefully organized so that it takes place after the "peaceful revolution". Therefore all of you are kindly invited to celebrate St. Stephen's Day, for the first time without any distortion of its traditional meaning, together with us. Do not worry, just leave the patriotic feelings to the Hungarians, we will be satisfied if you enjoy the fireworks.

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