At the Crossroads of Identity: Arminius Vámbéry – Oriental Traveller and Scholar

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Abstract

Drawing upon recent Hungarian scholarship this article examines the different identities of Arminius Vámbéry (1832-1913) as seen in his life and writings. Originating from an obscure Hungarian-Jewish family, as an explorer and Orientalist Vámbéry led an adventurous and celebrated life. Completely self-taught in oriental languages, he was a close ally of British and Ottoman political circles as well as an expert on the Muslim world. From Vámbéry’s life a four-part identity structure emerges: 1) Jewish roots. Officially neglected, these hold undeniable importance especially for understanding his family life. 2) Hungarian cultural background. This strongly impacted on the young Vámbéry and went on to influence his later theories on language as well as foreign policy positions, especially with respect to a lifelong hatred of Tsarist Russia. 3) Muslim identity. Educated in an Ottoman madrasa Vámbéry’s cultural attachment to the Ottoman form of Islam made him an early pro-Ottoman partisan in the West as well as a unique personage who was in contact with movements across the Islamic world. 4) British identity. An advocate of Enlightenment ideas, as a self-proclaimed follower of British values he was popular in England, becoming a sought-after consultant on difficult foreign issues concerning the British Empire, as well as a confidant to high-level politicians and friend to members of the British royal family.

Keywords: Vámbéry, Hungary, Central Asia, identity, Jewry, Islamic world, British Empire
Born as Hermann Wamberger and originating from a very poor Jewish family of Pozsonyszentgyörgy (now Švätý Jur, Slovakia) in old Upper Hungary, in the vicinity of Pozsony (now Bratislava), Arminius Vámbéry spent his childhood in Dunaszerdahely (now Dunajská Streda, Slovakia). According to his own account his father was a devout Talmudist who died a few months before the birth of his son (Vámos 2001, pp. 5-11: Vámbéry 1905, pp. 7-29), though this looks uncertain since recent research into his family discovered that Vámbéry had several younger half-brothers and half-sisters.¹ It appears that he had quite obscure origins. Not even Vámbéry was sure about his exact birth date. According to his own narrative his mother later suggested he was born around the day of St Joseph (March 19 1832). Vámbéry’s mother (originating from a Moravian Jewish family) later remarried and the family moved to Dunaszerdahely. Vámbéry spent his childhood and youth in extreme poverty. Beside harsh financial problems, he suffered from Legg–Calvé–Perthes syndrome from his early childhood, a form of osteochondritis of the hip joint which made him limp until the end of his life (Kiss 2005, pp. 90-98).

Despite these extremely harsh conditions, Vámbéry showed remarkable talent in languages from his early childhood. However, the above-mentioned unfavourable conditions compelled him to interrupt his secondary school studies. The fact that Vámbéry had to earn his own and his family’s living had the result that he never received any higher university degree during the remainder of his life and thus became completely self-taught. Being a child prodigy, however, helped him to acquire knowledge of languages at an early age. Thus, after a brief but humiliating period of manual labour he began to support himself as a private tutor at the residences of local Christian and Jewish bourgeoisie in various Hungarian cities. According to his memoirs, The Story of My Struggles (1905), his progress was such that already at sixteen he had a good knowledge of several languages. The historical milieu in Hungary in 1848-49 surely had a huge impact on the teenage Vámbéry, who became an enthusiastic supporter of the Hungarian revolution against Habsburg absolutism, witnessing and in his memoirs lamenting its defeat by the Russian Tsarist army in 1849. The roots of his ardent Russophobia cannot be separated from these historical events. It was his Hungarian patriotism and his sympathy towards the Hungarian revolution that first raised his interest in early Hungarian history and study of Oriental languages, first of all Ottoman Turkish and then Classical Persian (Vámbéry 1905, pp. 31-56).
After many vicissitudes and hardships the young Vámbéry joined a group of Hungarian émigrés in Constantinople in 1857 to develop his command in Oriental languages. He spent nearly five years there between 1857 and 1862. Due to his excellent and rapidly developing communication skills in Ottoman Turkish as well as other foreign languages, and above all his flexible personality, he succeeded in ingratiating himself with the ruling Ottoman elite and foreign embassies as well. First he entered the service of Pasha Husain Daim as a private teacher of foreign languages. Around 1860 Vámbéry became nominally Muslim under the influence of a certain Mullah Ahmad Efendi. He took the Muslim name Rashid Efendi which he regularly used when negotiating and corresponding with Muslim authorities in the Middle East and later in Central Asia. Though Vámbéry remained an advocate of secularism, never embracing any religion sincerely, he clearly appreciated the opportunity Ottoman society could offer to a foreign immigrant and therefore supported the Ottoman Empire till the end of his life. Thanks to his excellent contacts and his conversion, Vámbéry was allowed to visit the classes of a madrasa acquiring essential elements of a traditional Muslim religious education. It is also important to note that Vámbéry during his five-year sojourn in Constantinople continued his Persian studies which he had started earlier in Hungary. His skills in Ottoman Turkish, Persian and perhaps Arabic followed the methods of the traditional eastern education system prevalent at that time in the Middle East.

The road to Oxiana and beyond

Upon his return to Budapest in 1861, Vámbéry obtained the financial support of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for a journey to Central Asia, by promising new results in the field of early Hungarian history. He set out for his world-famous trip at the end of 1861. Disguised as Rashid Efendi, a Sunni dervish, he joined a caravan in Asia Minor and in the first months of 1862 he reached Persia. On the eve of Russian conquest, the khanates of Central Asia were openly hostile towards westerners and the endeavour of Vámbéry to visit these areas was deemed to be more than risky. In Persia he faced difficulties in organizing secret travel there, so he decided first of all to visit the most important Iranian political and religious centres in Central and Southern Persia. Still disguised as a Sunni dervish he joined various caravans to Qum,
Kashan, Esfahan, Pasargadae, Persepolis and Shiraz. In his later travelogues Vámbéry
gave a vivid, but highly critical picture of Qajar Persia. Completing his Persian
itinerary, at the end of March 1863 Vámbéry succeeded in joining a Central Asian
caravan which was returning from the Meccan pilgrimage. The most challenging part
of his travels occurred in 1863, when still disguised as a Sunni dervish, and an envoy
of the Ottoman Sultan, Vámbéry journeyed through the areas of the Kara Kum desert
which were ruled by Turkmen nomads, the Khanate of Khiva, and the Emirate of
Bukhara. He visited Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand, and, on his way back, Herat.

While sometimes arousing the suspicions of his fellow travellers and local
authorities, and facing harsh climatic and precarious security conditions, Vámbéry
successfully preserved his incognito, never showing signs of his European descent.
Thanks to his practical and theoretical knowledge of various languages and local
customs he managed to visit the Khivan and the Bukharan courts, where he was
officially welcomed and accepted as the envoy of the Ottoman Empire by the last
independent rulers of Central Asia. During this trip Vámbéry kept secret records
composed in a mixed Arabic script, where Hungarian, Persian and Turkish words and
grammar were used together in order to conceal his European identity. In addition,
Vámbéry collected many unique little known Persian and Chagatay manuscripts,
which later significantly contributed to his researches in the field of Iranian and
Turkic studies (Vámbéry 1864; 1905, pp. 140-175).

Upon returning to Persian soil (Mashhad) in January 1864, he immediately
became the object of admiration both from locals and by western diplomats. Although
he could not achieve much in the field of early Hungarian history in Central Asia, and
was for this reason openly criticized by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences upon his
return to Budapest in May 1864, due to his vast practical knowledge Vámbéry soon
proved to be a valuable source of information for the British government. On arriving
back in Pest, he recorded the details of his journey and produced important material
on the geography and ethnography of Central Asia as well as what would later
become his primary field, eastern Turkic philology. Shortly after his travels he
produced two detailed travelogues about his adventures (Vámbéry 1864; 1867). These
colourful narratives brought Vámbéry much fame and helped lay claim for his
membership among the great classical explorers. He spent nearly two years in
England between 1864 and 1866 where in the eyes of the public, still terrified by the
execution of Stoddart and Connolly in Bukhara, these stories made him something of
a heroic figure (Alder and Dalby 1979, pp. 214-234). He became a close confidant of the British royal family, maintaining cordial relations with Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales (302-39).

**Later years**

Returning to Hungary in 1866, Vámbéry was soon appointed to the Royal University of Budapest, where he founded the first ever department of Oriental philology in Hungary starting as an unsalaried lecturer (Privatdozent), rising to associate professor in 1868 and full professor in 1870. He taught there from 1868 until 1905, when he officially retired from teaching. His teaching activity comprised both different Turkic languages (Ottoman Turkish, Chagatai, Tatar) and Persian studies (Alder and Dalby, pp. 245-267). In this activity his work was of primary importance. Almost all the later generations of Hungarian Turcologists and Iranists were either his pupils or the pupils of his pupils, including: Turcologists Ignác Kúnos, József Thúry, and Gyula Germanus, and Iranists Vilmos Bacher and Sándor Kégl, all of whom subsequently became important scholars (Sárközy 2005). Even the young Ignaz Goldziher, who later became highly critical of him for both personal and scholarly reasons, studied Ottoman Turkish and Persian with Vámbéry (Dabashi 2009, pp. 51-79). In 1872, Vámbéry and several other scholars founded the Hungarian Geographical Society of which Vámbéry became its first president. He was elected a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1860 and in 1876 to regular membership. He became an honorary member of the Academy in May 1893 and a directorial member in May 1894. In 1881, Vámbéry was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Royal University of Budapest (Kakuk 1971).

A puritan, hardworking and energetic figure, Vámbéry continued to follow events in the Middle East and the Islamic world remaining extremely active in the last decade of his life. Living in his third-floor flat in the former Emperor Francis Joseph Alley with its fine panoramic view on the opposite side of the Danube river and the Buda hills, the old dervish still travelled widely in Europe, maintaining his intimate contacts with the British royal family and intelligentsia as well as with the Ottoman court in Istanbul. He remained very active in scholarly terms as well, producing several important works. Among others, mention should be made of three
monographs penned by Vámbéry in his last year. His famous autobiography, *The Struggles of My Life* published in 1905 (first in English, then in Hungarian), contained many detailed stories, facts and legendary adventures from his life. *Western Culture in Eastern Lands* (published in English and Hungarian in 1906) represents another influential and voluminous treatise on the future of different areas of the Islamic world and the role of western powers in its development. His last academic work entitled *At the Cradle of the Hungarians* (in Hungarian), was edited and published posthumously in 1914, the year following his death. According to the foreword written by Rusztem Vámbéry, the manuscript was discovered near the deathbed of his father.

**The ideological crossroads of Vámbéry’s personality**

1. **The Jewish Vámbéry**

Not only was Vámbéry an unusual and extraordinary personality, in his lifetime his homeland was also undergoing significant changes. In the 1830s, around the time he was born, Hungary was an undeveloped rural country under Habsburg potentates; he died in 15 September 1913 on the eve of the First World War, by which time it had become a semi-independent part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Budapest and other urban centres were rapidly developing with rising middle classes and a growing liberal intelligentsia opposed to ruling conservative elites. As a young Jew, Vámbéry received a traditional orthodox religious education (though not to the highest level), but ambiguities concerning his family’s origin as well as their poverty could have cast an early shadow over his relations with the Jewish community. Personal problems of early self-identification were further exacerbated by public signs of a serious illness causing him to limp till the end of his life. These experiences along with the sporadic outburst of anti-Semitism in the larger non-Jewish environment undoubtedly helped produce an early self-consciousness and an assumed personal flexibility. These characteristics served Vámbéry who was forced to apply refined methods of dissimulation in order to make his living in harsh conditions.

Without doubt, the young Vámbéry was a strong character who managed to absorb different elements into his personality. None of these cultural and social
influences were, however, decisive and he succeeded in adapting various identities according to the situation. This was achieved by the total control and suppression of his emotions and reflexes of the kind he later mastered when preparing his famous Central Asia trip. For instance Vámbéry wrote in his memoirs that by binding his arms in Persia he wisely learnt how to conceal his emotions even in his dreams. All his actions, including his marriage were ruled by cold logic allied to an exceptionally high level of intelligence, and a refined sense of self-adaptation to the changing circumstances.

Vámbéry never totally lost his contacts with his Jewish identity though, as he expresses it several times in his memoirs, he regarded himself as a secular person and an ‘enemy of all positive religions’. In the eyes of the ruling conservative political circles of Hungary, however, Vámbéry was always considered a Jewish liberal intellectual. Outwardly he showed little interest in practicing Judaism, although his Jewish origins were often a subject of public discussion in Hungary. For instance, they were openly debated when he was appointed to the professorship of Oriental philology at the University of Budapest in 1868, only one year after the so-called Jewish Emancipation Act was passed by Hungarian lawmakers. This legislation created a great opportunity for Hungarian Jews who were allowed to occupy prominent positions in the cultural and economic system of society, while political power remained largely in the hands of the Hungarian aristocracy. Before 1868 only Christians - mainly members of the Catholic Church - had been allowed to have a professorship at the University of Pest. Vámbéry’s appointment therefore caused a great stir as he was the first non-Christian professor. Nevertheless, it remained the case that anti-Semitic propaganda and personal accusations levelled against Vámbéry on account of his lack of proper education often intermingled in this heated polemics.

One must note, however, that Calvinist Hungarian intellectuals showed more sympathy towards Vámbéry than the Catholic groups and at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences these Calvinist scholars actively supported his career.² Vámbéry most likely converted to Calvinist Christianity to be more accepted in Hungarian society though he never became a devout Calvinist. The Calvinists had themselves suffered much from state organized repressive measures led by staunchly Catholic Habsburg emperors and clergy in the previous centuries and certain anti-Protestant limitations still existed in Hungary in the first half of the nineteenth century. Therefore the
common basis of a persecuted religious minority along with their puritan liturgy could have made Hungarian Protestants more sympathetic than other Christian groups in Vámbéry’s eyes. Such was his enthusiasm toward his Calvinist co-religionists, that his conversion was ridiculed venomously by his famous contemporary and perhaps sternest critic, Ignaz Goldziher, who described Vámbéry as ‘a Jewish dervish who attracted the Calvinists’ (Alder and Dalby, p. 294).

As is well-known Goldziher had a very controversial relationship with Vámbéry. In their scientific interests they had much in common, but their personal characters as well as their sense of Jewish identity differed significantly. Goldziher always remained officially faithful to his Jewish faith and never converted to Christianity. Unlike Vámbéry, Goldziher came from a well-to-do Jewish family and enjoyed the benefits of a careful education. Social status and attachment to Jewish identity perhaps helps to explain their later conflicts. Though it was Vámbéry who discovered Goldziher as a child prodigy it was said he prevented the younger man from gaining a position in the department of Oriental philology. They had a protracted debate which culminated in several scandalous comments in Goldziher’s private diary cursing Vámbéry as an ‘evil monster’, and ‘liar dervish’. On the other hand Goldizher regularly relied on Vámbéry’s data when he needed help in the field of Turcology (Dévényi 2014).

Vámbéry’s marriage represents another element in his highly complicated and unusual Jewish identity. Great free-thinker though he might have been publicly, in his private life Vámbéry was thought to be much more conservative and faithful to particular religious traditions. In 1868 he married Kornélia Arányi-Rechnitz who was herself of Jewish origin and the niece of the famous Hungarian-Jewish violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim. His marriage was a major step-up for Vámbéry since Kornélia’s stepfather Lajos Arányi (himself of German origin) was a prominent professor and expert in embalming. As far as we know, the marriage was unhappy and apparently not too much love was lost between Vámbéry and his wife. The couple produced one son, Rusztem Vámbéry. Though Vámbéry had his son baptized a Protestant Christian, in his upbringing and education he showed strong signs of a conservative orthodox Jewish patriarch. First, he prescribed Turkish lessons, wishing to see his son become his successor in Oriental studies, which the young Rusztem very much disliked. Vámbéry also implemented rules for his supposedly Jewish diet which once again upset the boy. He selected Olga Vámossy as a wife for Rusztem, but when he started
showing real emotions towards the girl this fact greatly angered his father who did not attend the wedding ceremony in 1899 and almost disinherited his son. Family ties were formally cut and Vámbéry only forgave Rusztem when his first grandson was born in 1905, when he insisted on his absolute right to name the child. The same family scandal recurred in 1907 when the second grandson was born. Arminius and Rusztem each had their own names for the boy who was finally given both, though later he preferred his third name, Robert, thus avoiding further complications. Later sources suggest that Rusztem rarely spoke favourably about his father - an obvious sign of his reservations regarding his father’s excessively stubborn and conservative character (Alder and Dalby, pp. 468-472).

In his later years one can detect a short-lived sympathy towards Zionism when Vámbéry was asked by Herzl to support the Zionist case in the Ottoman court. Though Vámbéry first promised much help to Herzl who courted him with appeasing words, he apparently never fully embraced Zionist ideas and he severed his contacts with Zionists after a financial debate with Herzl (Alder and Dalby, pp. 367-388.) In his older years Vámbéry was surrounded by a small group of young Hungarian liberal intellectuals of Jewish background such as the famous Vilmos Vázsonyi, a future politician and minister who acted as Vámbéry’s personal secretary for a few years (p. 482). Thus, throughout his life Vámbéry did in some respects preserve his Jewish roots, though quite independently from his own intentions it was often outward social and political circumstances which made his Jewishness apparent. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay brief mention must be made of a highly critical essay about Hungarian Jewry penned by Vámbéry which was published posthumously. In this essay entitled, From the Memoirs of a Tatar, he exerted sharp criticism of the social conditions of Hungary as well as the intolerant attitudes of the ruling conservative circles. In addition Vámbéry did not hesitate to hit out at the alleged negative influence of the Jewish bourgeoisie. In a quite dramatic tone he hinted to a possible future catastrophe in Jewish-Hungarian coexistence, a prophecy which was fulfilled tragically during the Second World War.
2. The Hungarian Vámbéry

Vámbéry did not leave untouched the puzzle of his Hungarian identity. There is no doubt, Hungary and Hungarian identity made a strong impact on Vámbéry throughout his life. From his early childhood to his last days he spent most of his life in Hungary and very quickly learnt not only German which was his original mother tongue, but also Hungarian. The glorious and overwhelming moments of the Hungarian revolution of 1848 followed by the shock caused by the Russian invading armies and the beheadings of Hungarian revolutionaries by the tsarist army in 1849 had a deep impact on the teenage Vámbéry. His first impulses were his own pro-Hungarian emotions which induced him to carry out his researches in the field of Early Hungarian history and motivated the young Vámbéry to pursue his studies in Oriental languages (Turkish, Persian and Arabic), which started around 1850. As a romantic revolutionary the young Hermann Wamberger hungarianized his German name in 1858 and became Arminius Vámbéry (in Hungarian: Vámbéry Ármin). Interestingly this step was made in Constantinople in 1858 when Vámbéry published his first ever scholarly work: a dictionary of German-Ottoman vocabulary. It was perhaps the patriotic influence of the sizeable diaspora of exiled former Hungarian revolutionaries in Turkey which prompted Vámbéry to hungarianize his name.

Vámbéry’s Hungarian patriotism never ceased to exhibit itself in spite of occasional setbacks and misunderstandings with the ruling conservative elites of Hungary. His Calvinist friends represented the first group of Hungarians which remained very close to Vámbéry and continued to do so until the end of his life. On the other hand, he remained an avid supporter of Austria-Hungary and strongly believed in the territorial integrity of the multiethnic pre-1920 Hungary. In this sense he closely followed Hungarian political thinking of the late nineteenth century though as an advisor he was much less favoured by Austro-Hungarian authorities than by their Ottoman or British counterparts. From a British perspective, he was a staunch conservative imperialist who actively supported the idea of the glorious British Empire, dismissing British liberals for questioning the role the Empire played in the world. Vámbéry’s imperialist and conservative views appeared wherever separatist movements questioned the unity of a larger empire. Therefore, he vehemently defended both the unity of old Hungary before his English counterparts and equally disliked movements for Irish independence inside Great Britain. Furthermore, he
argued for the implementation of British values in India as well as defending the idea of Ottoman territorial integrity against the Russians. In his conservative views we cannot separate British imperialist tendencies, Hungarian patriotism rooted in the revolution of 1848, or his ardent Russophobia, along with a less engaged but still constant pro-Ottoman attitude. It was Vámbéry’s inflammatory Russophobia based on his Hungarian patriotism which led him to the British camp after 1864. He might have shared his information with the Russians upon returning to Tehran, but he swiftly refused the invitation of the Russian ambassador appearing instead in the British embassy.

Vámbéry’s Hungarian contacts look much more complicated in the second half of his life. Unlike Ottoman and British political circles, later generations of Hungarian politicians did not rely on his extremely useful information after the foundation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. Although he was regarded as a celebrity in Hungary after his Central Asian trip, Vámbéry was more influential in academic circles and among the intelligentsia than at the highest levels of Hungarian diplomacy. He was said to be deeply offended when the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy seized Bosnia from the Ottomans in 1878 and none of the leading Austro-Hungarian decision makers asked for his advice in this matter.

As for the reasons for Vámbéry’s popularity in Hungarian scholarly circles as well as among the ordinary people to this day, we must stress that this has been effected by his conclusions in the field of early Hungarian history which have made him exceptionally popular particularly in right-wing circles. From his studies of various Turkic languages, Vámbéry concluded that the Hungarian language and people have more in common with Turkic than with Finno-Ugrian languages. His views aroused harsh debates and his linguistic research was ultimately proven false. As a supporter of a possible Turkic origin of the Hungarian language, Vámbéry gained much sympathy from the general public (who still believed in the ‘more glorious’ Hunnic or Turkic origin of the Hungarians than in that of ‘the poor fishy and lowly ancestry’ of the Finno-Ugrian people). However not from his colleagues: his efforts to prove the Turkic ancestry of the Hungarian language were fruitless and he suffered a serious academic defeat in his polemics with linguists József Budenz and Pál Hunfalvy. Although Vámbéry was an extraordinary polymath in the practical knowledge of various Oriental languages (once claiming he was well versed in more than thirty
languages), his lack of a systematic linguistic education and his general neglect of the scientific methods of western linguistics significantly contributed to his false conclusions on the origin of the Hungarian language. Later, Vámbéry gradually accepted its Finno-Ugrian origin, but he still maintained the theory of the strong ethnic and cultural influence Turkic tribes exerted on early Hungarians.

3. The Muslim Vámbéry

Another exciting dimension to Vámbéry is his Muslim identity. That Vámbéry had a specific Muslim identity is beyond doubt. His thorough knowledge of Islamic culture, customs, manners and traditions was complemented with the traditional religious education he obtained in an Ottoman madrasa after 1857; indeed this was not unfamiliar to a person like himself who had received a similar Jewish religious education in his early childhood. In Turkey Vámbéry formally embraced Sunni Islam which he later carried on as a disguised dervish in his journeys in Iran and the Central Asian Khanates. His skill of pragmatic self-adaptation, his sharp memory and experience in Ottoman court ceremonies, as well as his adeptness at changing identities facilitated his acceptance as a Muslim among his Turkish supporters, some of whom held distinguished rank. For his part, Vámbéry greatly appreciated that as a newcomer to Ottoman society he could quickly rise to such a prestigious position and later spoke highly about the flexible character of Ottoman social institutions which – unlike those of Hungary or England – did not prevent him from so rising.

The depth of Islamization of Vámbéry was so overwhelming in the eyes of his Muslim contemporaries that soon after his return to Europe several of his Muslim sources believed that he was a disguised Christian who in his heart remained a faithful Muslim. According to Alder and Dalby (p.456) there were Muslims in different parts of the Islamic world who strongly believed in the puzzling myth of a certain ‘Bambera’ who as true Muslim went into hiding in Western countries where disguised as a Christian he successfully preserved his Islamic faith. A legendary story this might have been, but it was one Vámbéry could have fuelled himself in order to confirm Muslim assumptions about his Islamic identity. In his house in Budapest he frequently hosted Muslim visitors many of whom may have regarded him as a true follower of Islam living in a predominantly non-Muslim country. His close contacts with high Ottoman figures and visits to the Ottoman court continued well into his last years,
keeping the seemingly omnipresent Vámbéry up-to-date with current political and social affairs in the Ottoman capital. At the peak of his popularity in the Islamic world, during the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909), he was regularly received with musical fanfare at the main railway station in Constantinople.

Vámbéry’s pro-Muslim feelings are quite obvious from the following excerpt from a letter written in 1900 to Sir Thomas H. Sanderson: ‘When an occasional cry was raised in some Turkish, Persian and Arabic publication for freedom, law and order…I felt compelled to render what assistance I could’ (Vámbéry 1905, p. 486). Vámbéry also took the opportunity to spread the seeds of western scholarship in the Ottoman court. It was possibly he who first introduced the ideas of Pan-Turkism and Turanism in late nineteenth-century Constantinople and drew the attention of leading Ottoman politicians to Asiatic people as alleged relatives of the Turks, as is clear from this letter written to Sir Thomas H. Sanderson in 1900 mentioning the meeting of Sultan Abdul Hamid II with some Japanese aristocrats: ‘I drew the attention of the Sultan to the race affinities existing between Turks and Japanese as members of the Ural-Altaic family’ (Csirkés and Fodor, p. 56). As a pro-Muslim partisan, Vámbéry had a strong preference toward the Ottomans whose culture, in his eyes, represented the most forward-looking and most modernized variant of Islam. He had much less sympathy for the Iranians, as was obvious from his Persian travelogue which presented a vivid, but highly critical portrait of Qajar Persia which he reproved for its moral debauchery. On the other hand, Vámbéry spoke highly about his meetings with various high-ranking and knowledgeable Shiite clerics, as well as about Persian culture and monuments (Vámbéry 1867; Alder and Dalby 1979, pp. 65-106; Vásáry 2007; Sárközy 2008, 2013). His pragmatic approach and protean facility to embrace new identities is clearly manifest in his gradual acculturation to the non-Ottoman Shiite reality of Qajar Persia.

In his last years Vámbéry developed a growing interest in the heterodox Iranian sectaries, the Babis and Baha’is, demonstrating a fascination for their teachings on social equality and liberalism. In his writings he occasionally considered Babism/Baha’ism as a Muslim reform movement. He had a good relationship with Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne who played a major role in introducing Babi-Baha’i ideas into western intellectual circles. At the very end of his life in April 1913 Vámbéry met the Baha’i patriarch Abdul al-Baha. Later, in a
penultimate twist in his religious views he declared himself in a letter a convert to the Baha’i faith (Alder and Dalby, pp. 482-484; Sárközy 2012). A man who had followed Judaism, Christianity and Islam finally embraced a cosmopolitan creed which he believed enhanced social values and equality rather than theological innovation. However, that did not prevent Vámbéry from requesting simple Protestant last rites and indeed only Calvinist religious songs were chanted and no signs of other religious communities were to be seen during his short, private funeral in September 1913.

4. The British Vámbéry

He was a useful source of information and had the ear of the Sultan. It was accordingly usual to pay for his journeys to Constantinople, whence he sent back many reports of the feelings at the Porte on political affairs…Professor Vámbéry, of the University of Budapest, was one of the greatest Turkish scholars of the nineteenth century; a strong friend of this country, and a bitter enemy of Russia (Csirkés and Fodor, p.56).  

These are the words of Stephan Gaselee, Librarian and Keeper of the Papers at the Foreign Office on the contribution of Vámbéry as a British agent. Among his many alter egos mention must be made of his British identity. A free-thinker who from his youth had admired Enlightenment ideas especially those pertaining to equality and social justice, Vámbéry developed a strong admiration for British society helped by an inveterate hatred of Russia which was rooted in its brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1849. His official Protestant faith was another factor that helped him to be viewed more sympathetically in England.

As for the beginning of his British contacts, Vámbéry could have gained a degree of popularity among British diplomats as early as 1857 when he started working as a language instructor for Ottoman aristocrats and different embassies in Constantinople. However his British ties were reinforced after his Central Asia journey when the British ambassador Charles Alison hosted him in Tehran and he was asked for information on three British military officers missing there (W.H. Wyburd, Arthur Connolly and Charles Stoddard.) Alison actively supported Vámbéry and provided him with letters of recommendation which opened for him doors to leading politicians (Lord Palmerston, Lord Strangford). After 1864 he spent nearly two years in England during which period he had further intimate discussion with British statesmen, wrote numerous letters and delivered many lectures. On his arrival he needed lessons in
etiquette and though he had hopes of obtaining a position in a British university according to some reports his English was far from perfect and his writing had to be heavily edited (Mandler 2014, p. 94). All these factors added to his lack of a proper education helped prevent him gaining a British academic position, which his memoirs show caused him some distress. Nonetheless he maintained a pro-British stance up to the end of his life and regularly visited London until as late as 1911.

Vámbéry not only expressed his views frequently in newspapers and in books, he also became actively involved as a political agent for British interests. From the mid 1870s he was employed officially by the British Foreign Office, which eventually led to the deterioration of his fame in some Middle-Eastern countries decades after his death (Mim, 1985). Due to his exclusive connections to the Ottoman court especially under Sultan Abdul Hamid II he was valued as an agent and a go-between (Fisher and Best, pp. 81-110; Alder and Dalby, pp. 389-461) and was generously paid by the British Foreign Office. An estimated sum of five thousand pounds was given him under the heading of ‘travel expenses’ which was later converted into a regular allowance and in his last years a life pension (Csirkés and Fodor, p. 56). At the peak of his influence Vámbéry may have played an active role in the solution of the so-called Panjdeh incident in 1885 and helped fix the new borders around Marw (Merv) between Afghanistan and the Tsarist Empire (Alder and Dalby, pp. 389-430; Fisher and Best 2011, pp. 81-110.). There are unconfirmed reports about a possible second Persian trip in this period, which can be linked in some way to these political events.

It is also known that Vámbéry was consulted before the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 which caused a temporary deterioration in British-Ottoman relations, when it may have been that he played a key-role as mediator between London and Constantinople. He produced other important reports on different issues, such as the Armenian question (Fodor, pp. 49-62), the Iranian situation during the tobacco protest in 1891 (Csirkés and Fodor, p. 55), British-Indian Muslim relations, and the turbulent political situation in Persia after the Constitutional Revolution broke out in 1906. Nevertheless his fierce anti-Russian stance sparked significant criticism against him even in British and Ottoman political circles. It appears Vámbéry’s role gradually diminished after 1890 though he continued to send regular reports to the Foreign Office until his last years. Newly emerged letters from the Vámbéry family archive (Sárközy 2014) confirm his close relations with high-ranking British Conservative
statesmen such as Arthur Balfour and Lord Curzon. He also maintained friendly contact with the British royal family; he built an intimate friendship with Edward VII, and regularly corresponded with Mary Teck (who had Hungarian ancestors), the wife of George V. Upon the birth of his first grandson George in 1905 Vámbéry sent a letter to the Prince of Wales asking him to become the godfather of his grandson. In this letter addressed to the future George V, Vámbéry assured the Prince that all of his family members were faithful Protestants. During his meetings with the British intelligentsia he got to know among others the Irish novelist Bram Stoker, author of the famous Gothic horror novel *Dracula* published in 1897; Vámbéry is often credited as the main source of information for Stoker on Transylvanian history (Alder and Dalby, pp. 462-467).

**Conclusion**

Vámbéry’s personality was as complex as his scholarly legacy, and many of the facets discussed above still await further research. He had a fascinating life with many little-known episodes and junctures. As scholar, explorer, close friend of different royal circles, informant of the British Foreign Office, his highly complicated identity crossroads made him a unique and at times controversial personality. He still remains a puzzling figure whose influence in a variety of fields has only recently begun to be recognized by modern scholarship. On occasion in his writings Vámbéry reflected on his various identities. One of the most striking instances of this can be found in *My Wanderings and Experiences in Persia*. Safely returned to Iranian soil to the city of Mashhad from Central Asia, he felt a strong sense of relief:

Only Muslims are allowed to enter the shrine of Imam Reza. Hindus, Armenians and Jews cannot gain a sight of it, since even the influence of their eyes could be unclean for Muslims. As for Jews I have to mention that a man belonging to the sons of Israel who had accompanied me in Bukhara caused me astonishment in Mashhad. Upon meeting him again I addressed him: ‘Yahoodi, Yahoodi’ and he replied: ‘Hajji, do not call me Yahoodi here, outside of Mashhad I belong to my tribe (Jews), but here I should pretend to be a Muslim!’

It was entertaining for me, that in Mashhad I was considered by my fellow pilgrims to be of Bukharan origin due to my garments and my speech– since the dialect of Central Asia had become part of my personality. Though I protested that I was the son
of elegant Istanbul, my fellow pilgrims answered: ‘O we know well the people of Bukhara, here in Mashhad you wish to change your character, since you fear revenge because of your cruelty (in Bukhara)’. I was thought to be a Bukharan in Mashhad, a Mashhadi in Bukhara, and when travelling other people considered me a Russian, European, or simply a mystical character. O, what kind of identity can people create for me? In Asia everything becomes an incognito – and a traveller above all must have an incognito! I travelled with these people for six weeks, some of them told me that they were mullahs; others said they were pilgrims or merchants. Some told me they were father and son or brothers, but when arriving in Persia where Central Asian terror ends, this whole scenario completely changed. Those who had been thought to be beggars became rich merchants, the merchants became poor adventurers and these transformations were so perfect and deceiving, that one hardly dared to greet his hitherto closest companions. Strange delusions permanently surrounded us.

My heart started beating vehemently when I thought about my imminent departure from this world of delusions and dissimulations, to move towards the West where my homeland is, the much coveted goal of my desire, which – despite all its sins and abuses – is far superior to the ancient East. (Vámbéry 1867, pp. 361-364).

Vámbéry’s feelings of relief, frustration and issues concerning his personal identity are clearly intertwined in these anecdotes. In this memoir nearly all the different layers of his aforementioned identities can be discovered: his Jewish roots, his Muslim background and finally his European origins are mentioned – the latter he deemed the most important at that moment since the audience for this book was European. On the other hand, Vámbéry might have chosen another conclusion if it was addressed to his Ottoman supporters and not to British or Hungarian ones. From cradle to his grave his life bears witness to such slippages in identity.

Notes

1 It appears that Vámbéry’s closest paternal relatives lived in Nagykanizsa, a city with a significant Jewish population before 1944 in present-day southwestern Hungary. Many of these relatives later rediscovered their famous elder half-brother and remained in contact with Arminius Vámbéry. In his official biography, however, Vámbéry states that he was a posthumus child of his father. According to his autobiographical notes his father predeceased
his birth perishing in the last outbreak of cholera plague in Hungary in 1831, however, the testimonies of his younger siblings contradict his story, reasons of which are still unclear.

2 These Calvinists had actively supported Vámbéry in his early career. One notable pro-Vámbéry figure of this group was János Arany, the famous Hungarian poet.

3 London Foreign Office 800/33.

4 London Foreign Office 800/32.

5 The present author’s translation from the Hungarian.

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