The paper discusses the political views of János Asbóth, an outstanding representative of the nineteenth-century Hungarian Conservatism, explained in his various works. Asbóth’s Conservatism cannot be characterized by Friedrich A. Hayek’s terms as ‘fear of change’ or ‘fondness for authority’; it rather shows similarity to Edmund Burke’s attitude. Asbóth clearly considered progress the task of the human race, but he wanted progress to be continuous and organic. He might be regarded as a disillusioned Liberal too, since his Conservatism seemed to be based on the criticism of Liberalism, which he did not think could cope with the challenge of Socialism. On the other hand, he thought that Conservatism was more flexible an ideology, since it started from given circumstances and focused on the needs of the state and its citizens, while Liberals started from principles, which involved certain goals. The paper also discusses Asbóth’s criticism of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the relations between political and cultural Conservatism.

"We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion; and if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still"  
(Mill 1963, 142).

Conservatism is a term that can apply to moral, legal, religious, political, and cultural phenomena. My investigation will be limited to the last two of these fields and to the activity of János Asbóth (1845–1911), the author of the manifesto Hungarian Conservatism (1875), a two-volume analysis of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1887), and numerous other works. I wish to avoid both the preconception that “one of the fundamental traits of the conservative attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of the new as such” and the idea that its two other characteristics are “its fondness for authority and its lack of understanding of economic forces” (Hayek 1978, 400). More to the point, I reject those definitions of Conservatism that are based on the premise that the Conservative attitude towards the other is tied to “its hostility to internationalism and its proneness to a strident nationalism” (Hayek 1978, 405).
Instead of using the term in the more restricted sense of designating “a political philosophy that attributes incomparably greater value to institutions and practices of society that have evolved historically than it does to the societal models of individual political thinkers” (Gassenmeier and Gurr 2004, 117), I would characterize Conservatism in a broad sense as an ideology based on the “idea of inheritance” (Burke n. d., 216), implying that the history of our predecessors can be read as our own history. To conserve values means that we try to discover the legacy of the past in the present. Asbóth’s early travel book, published in 1866, was dedicated to “a respect for our ancestors” (Asbóth 1866, 1: 330) and Darvady, the hero and narrator of his only novel A Dreamer of Dreams (published at the very end of 1877), portrays himself as someone who “is looking for the old in the new” (Asbóth 2002, 125). A Conservative is often inclined to view his own fate as a story that happened before. When Darvady falls in love with a celebrated prima donna, he relives the experience of Antony and Tannhäuser, the Shakespearean hero’s love for Cleopatra and the Wagnerian hero’s devotion to Venus, “feeling a magic that contains damnation” (Asbóth 2002, 155).

Conservation implies continuity. In the second book of Asbóth’s novel, both the revolution of 1848 and the oppression that followed its defeat are presented as ruptures. It follows from Burke’s principle of “at once to preserve and to reform” that “time is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at” (Burke n. d., 383–387). Accordingly, the Hungarian author approves of the abolition of serfdom but regards it as a shortcoming that “it happened as a radical change and not as an organic evolution” (Asbóth 1892, 16), so that the Hungarian nobility found it difficult to adjust to a suddenly changed milieu. In his judgment, a state of equilibrium is endangered by both stagnation and rupture, and the latter is often the result of the influence of “fanaticism” (Asbóth 1872, 191), a term borrowed from Burke, who condemned both the “fanatics of slavery” and the “fanatics of popular arbitrary power” (Burke n. d., 28). As a Conservative, Asbóth distrusted all fanatics who secularized the ideal of salvation. He argued for “a progress based on internal and organic evolution”. “Great and lasting prosperity can be reached only in a conservative way, by the efforts of several generations”, he remarked (Asbóth 2002, 104).

Undoubtedly, the survival of a Romantic legacy is responsible for the belief that “ideas, especially in the humanities, are comparable to organisms. After a painful birth, they may become powerful and will inevitably decline” (Asbóth 2002, 250). Asbóth’s contempt for what he labeled as inorganic in the culture of the Bavaria of Ludwig I may remind us not only of the opposition between organic Greek and imitative Roman cultures formulated by Friedrich Schlegel and later by Ferenc Kölcsey, in the essay known as National Traditions, one of the programmatic statements of Hungarian Romanticism, published in 1826, but also of Burke’s cultural warning against inoculating “any scion alien to the nature of the original plant” (Burke n. d., 234). In his book on Italy, Switzerland, and Bavaria, published one year before the Ausgleich of 1867, Asbóth made the following statement: “If a human being, a plant, an art, a craft, a people, a country, or a city does not develop gradually from the inside, relying on its own energy, if greatness is imposed on it (…), a fundamental flaw will be de-