

DAILY NEWS

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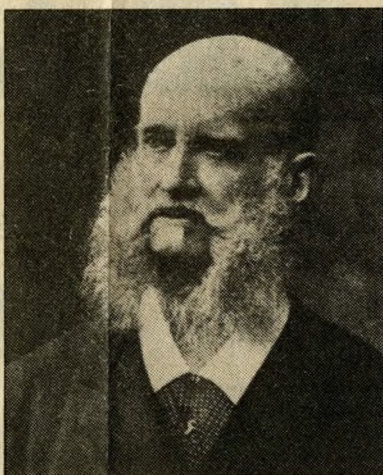
# Budapest's bridegroom

Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky, for 32 years the capital's 'clerk of the works'

Seventy-five years ago died one of the most famous figure in Budapest's history. When he appeared anywhere in the capital, he always caused a sensation. Once somebody stole his overcoat, and from that time on he had all his clothes made from loud checked materials, saying no one would have any use for them then.

Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky was a captain of hussars in the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-49, and after the defeat he was obliged as a punishment to join the ranks of the Imperial Austro-Hungarian Army. Only from the 1860s onwards could he take part in public life: he wrote books, edited journals, sat in Parliament, led the Independence Party, and served as intendant of both the National Theatre (then on a site opposite the Astoria Hotel) and the Royal Opera House.

But for posterity the most significant period in his life came between 1873 and 1905, when he headed the Capital City Council of Works. The establishment of the Council by Parliament in 1870, was an initiative of Prime Minister Gyula Andrassy's after the English pattern, designed to make the formerly separate towns of Buda, Pest and Óbuda into a metropolis on a world scale. Some of the councillors were appointed by the government, the others by the Municipal Council, so that its decisions would reflect the interests of both. It decided everything, from the construction of whole districts to the naming of individual streets. It had funds of its own and responsibility for everything that affected the appearance of the capital. (After the Second World War, the head of the Capital City Council of Works was one and the same person as the government commissioner in charge of rebuild-



Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky

ing Budapest upon the ruins. The Council was abolished in 1948.)

So what was built in the reign of the chequered baron? Almost the entire capital. The Basilica and Buda Castle were completed; the Council saw through the building of the embankments, bridges, the wide avenue of Népköztársaság útja (earlier named after its initiator, Andrassy), the Nagykörút (Grand Boulevard) that circles downtown Pest, the whole of Szabadság tér, Kossuth Lajos tér with the Parliament building, churches, synagogues, the Academy of Music, the Fishermen's Bastion, schools and housing developments (the number of tenement houses rose sixfold). The Council drew up

Budapest's planning regulations, established the gas and electricity networks, built railway terminuses and tramlines, laid the sewage system still in use today—in a word, they did almost everything.

Nor was the capital constructed in a haphazard way. Everywhere we are reminded of their work by meticulous details: fine leaded windows, murals, statues, fountains, cast-iron lift cages, panelling and Zsolnay majolica tiling. Trees they planted still provide shade in József nádor tér, the City Park and many other places.

Guiding, stimulating and directing this great construction boom was the Capital City Council of Works, which was led by Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky for 32 years. Today, apart from certain older buildings, it is Podmaniczky's city that visitors see and fall in love with when they walk through its streets. Another great lover of Budapest, the writer Gyula Krudy, wrote a book about Podmaniczky called "Budapest's Bridegroom". Let me quote a line or two from it:

"He put a heartfelt pledge of earnest into his conception of how Budapest should be built, embellished and elevated to the rank of a world city. Some men never forget their pledges throughout their lives. One such was Frigyes Podmaniczky."

Mihály Ráday

Mihály Ráday, 40, holds a degree in art history and another in film directing and cinematography. After making a number of television documentaries and plays, three years ago he launched a (by now very popular) TV programme advocating efforts to retain artistic old-time features (historic buildings, etc.) of the capital and restore time-honoured street names. It is opportune to mention here that a widespread campaign is under way in the media to have a public square named after Baron Podmaniczky, due largely to Ráday's efforts.