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Walks in Budapest



The point where one of the largest avenues, Rákóczi Street, cuts the Little Boulevard

The Little Boulevard

Big Boulevard, Little Boulevard: they are like the white semi-circles marking the fifty and sixty metre distances at disc-throwing contests. The athlete, of course, should be hurling his discus from the Pest end of the Elizabeth Bridge, and he would have to be a giant, for the Little Boulevard encircles an entire town,

the old Pest, along whose one-time city-walls it runs. Two hundred years ago people were still shooting wild duck outside this wall, but since then both cities and athletic records have grown . . .

For five years I knew only one third of this four-kilometre-long irregular semi-circle—the



View of Deák Ferenc Square with the church without a tower in the right corner

other two thirds, as far as I remember, I hardly ever visited. As a first-year university student, I used to walk over from Buda to Pest on the Freedom Bridge which had been badly damaged by the war and was mended with makeshift boards. At the Pest bridgehead the enthusiastic liberal arts student should have cast an appreciative glance at the one-time Customs House (today the University of Economics), one of the masterworks of Miklós Ybl, a famous architect active between 1870 and 1874, though in actual fact the enthusiastic but forever hungry student was much more interested in the next building, then in ruins, the Market Hall and its environs—despite the fact that in those days only beans and maize flour were on sale at exorbitant prices (not long after you could get hot sausages and mustard, wrapped in newspaper).

After this bit of “window-shopping” at the market I used to amble along what is now

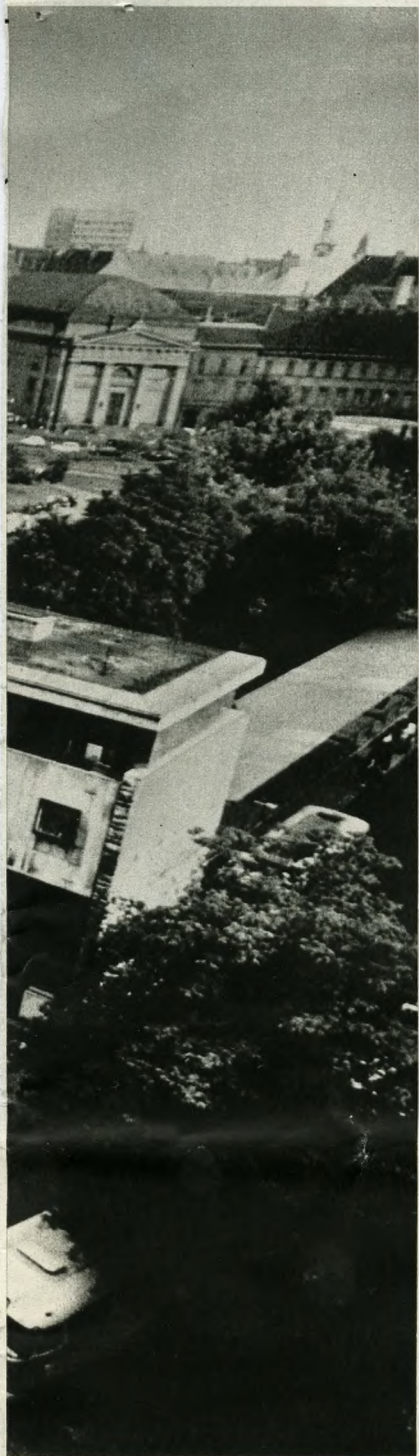
Tolbuhin Boulevard. Here there was always a crowd: shifty looking types selling flint and saccharin—illegally, and in the doorways, black market traffic in other treasures, for instance, tobacco and cigarettes. The black market has long vanished, the shifty looking men too—most of them; nonetheless, this short stretch of the Little Boulevard lined largely by neo-classical houses on one side has somehow retained for me to this day its rather vulgar, aggressive, entertaining crowdedness.

From Tolbuhin Boulevard I stepped into the spacious bleakness of Calvin Square. In those days it looked very decrepit and unfriendly; today it is whole, one of the busiest thoroughfares in town, but still unfriendly. The screeching of trams, the roaring of trucks and the din of Diesel buses—this is one of the busiest roundabouts in Budapest, the junction of five major routes. The small neo-classical Presbyterian church withdraws modestly at

the southern corner of the square. A hundred and fifty years ago, when it was built, it was the most important building in the square. To my mind it still is, but its unpretentious beauty is noticed by very few people.

Behind the facade of the several-storey houses to the north-west of the square stand the one-storey houses of the old town centre. At one time ever-hungry artists, virtuous citizens and virtuous girls inhabited the area. By the time I was at university, the starving artists had moved elsewhere, the virtuous citizens had become extinct, and I’m told that since then even the virtuous girls have moved—to a more fashionable district allegedly.

Leaving Calvin Square, the student found himself in a different world. This is the stretch of the Little Boulevard called Museum Boulevard: a realm of science and intellect. The building of the National Museum, set in a small park, dominates this part of town, and,



A part of the Basilica

The beginning of Tanács Boulevard

Shopping in the sun



however frivolous the thoughts of the student may have been up till then, here he could not help thinking of the historical significance of the museum. It was from the steps of this museum that Petöfi and the revolutionary youth sparked off the liberation struggle of 1848. And a clearer and more everyday recollection was of the Széchényi Library housed in the Museum, in the reading room of which I spent so many afternoons—out of a sense of duty, or for the pleasure of hard work. After the Museum came the huge brown block of the university... I would enter the cool hall and climb the wide marble stairs... (Today I wouldn't be entering this building: the Liberal Arts Faculty has been moved and the conquering natural sciences have taken over the entire block.)

Even in those days I didn't always go into the university. If I had the time I crossed to

the other side of Museum Boulevard, the part lined by book shops. Here, on the ground-floors of attractive houses, most of them built in the romantic style, there was a succession of second-hand book shops (it is still an area of book shops today). André Chenier in an old ribbed leather binding; a creased folio-format volume of poetry by Attila József; a shrapnel-torn Oxford Book of English Verse. We knew the proprietors of the book shops by name, and they allowed us to browse freely among the books, though we very rarely bought anything.

Beyond the University, at the end of Museum Boulevard, stood the building of the first National Theatre. Today there is an empty lot in its place. This is where one of the biggest streets of Budapest, the Kossuth Lajos—Rákóczi Street cuts across the Little Boulevard. Opposite the empty lot stands the Hotel Asto-

The National Museum

Photos: Károly Hemzö



The side of Tolbuhin Boulevard which backs on to the centre of town



A new building beside the old city walls



ria, with its old-world atmosphere passed down from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

For five years I never walked further than this along the Little Boulevard. And since then I only go down it by car, bus, or tram. I have no personal connection with this section. Why should I have? The next stretch, Tanács (Council) Boulevard, is a business section. After about a hundred metres of straight road, it unexpectedly broadens into something like a square, whose two sides form a contrast with their rather astonishing blocks. On the one side there is a row of single-storey shops taking the place of the bombed building of the Budapest Municipal Council, and on the other side is the huge block skirting Imre Madách Square, intended in the 1930's to form the "bridgehead" of a new avenue, before the plan was done away with by World War II.

Tanács Boulevard ends in Deák Ferenc Square. At one time the city walls ended here, curving down towards the Danube. Inns, shops and stalls stood here, and the fish market, conveniently sunk underground. Today it is a half-open area looking onto a big parking lot, the long-distance Bus Terminal and Engels Square. The finest building in this spacious square is the neo-classical Lutheran church built in the first years of the 19th century and converted to its present form in the second half of the last century.





View of Calvin Square

If you look at the city plan, you get the impression that this is actually the end of the Little Boulevard. If the boulevard were a regular semi-circle—which it isn't—it would swing off to the Danube at this point. But in practice—and in the conventions of Hungarian usage—Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Street also forms a part of the Little Boulevard, although this part of it is the continuation of the oldest of the main northern avenues of the city. It is a straight, wide street; its old glory is still marked by some of the surviving restaurants, one-time inns into whose courtyards the traveller could drive his carriage. Today it gains a new kind of importance through the various specialized shops, selling wood, iron and metal products, and vine-growing implements.

The most striking building of this stretch of the Little Boulevard is the Basilica, a Roman Catholic cathedral, the biggest church in Budapest, which was completed in the early part of this century. Regrettably it shows its back to Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Street, but its big dome still rises commandingly from among the houses of the neighbourhood.

Ending in this irregular tangent, the Little Boulevard finally runs into the Big Boulevard at Marx Square, a busy junction point close to the West Railway Terminal, and the two wind as one towards the Danube to link up with Buda via the Margaret Bridge across the river. The student did not frequent this part of town much either during his five years at university: there was no library, no food, no women to attract him here, so what would have been the point in coming? Later he became familiar with it but that is part of another sentimental journey.

Imre Szász

Facade of the Market Hall



Inside the Central Market Hall

