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ON THE HUNGARIAN REACH OF THE

DANUBE RIVER

brown eyes black, extinguishing all the golden sparks.

"Take it away!" he burst out with the cruelty of adolescence. "You have no idea about these things!"

"Look here, Frankie," the furrier continued, his voice soft, "I thought you'd be pleased... Baron Bánhidý wore this hat once..."

"Don't try to make a clown out of me, I say!" the gentleman son shouted at the furrier, and knocked the hat out of his father's hand so that it rolled under the table.

The furrier bent down, took it up, wiped the dust off it with his elbow, then sneaked out of the room, his head bent. There was mortal pain in his eyes when he looked at the bed once more:

"I wanted only to please you, son."

The brat dropped his head on the pillow, and, grumbling, pulled the blanket over his ears.

* * *

The gent's hat sunk deep deep down into the ocean of time. Only twenty years later did it come up to the surface when the gentleman son of the furrier's paid a visit to his parents, to kiss the hands of the old man and the old woman. He was a mature man in those days, with silver streaks shimmering in his black hair—the marks of God's caress.

The old furrier was just sprinkling his tiny vineyard. He was doing it in a uniform required by this operation—trousers tucked up, a patchy shirt, a butt on his back. However, on his head he wore a bowler that had taken on a sky-blue colour from the spray that had crystallized on it. Now this was a piece of equipment not prescribed by a vinegrower's regulation.

"What a strange hat you have, father!" the silver-haired, tired son addressed the white-haired, merry-eyed old man.

A cloud of shame and sorrow dimmed those merry eyes.

"This was a gentleman's hat once, son. A Baron something or other wore it, I forget his name. He wanted to become MP, but..."

He didn't continue, but went over to the other tract, to pick some Emperor's plums for his son.

"For I know, son, that even as a little boy you didn't like any other kind of plums."

The hands of the son went up to his eyes as if suddenly a flashlight had flared up in front of him. He saw himself on the straw couch, a sleepy schoolboy with dishevelled hair, and saw afresh the mortal pain in his father's eyes, a pain that had waxed into shameful sorrow with age. A great pain shot through his heart and in that moment he would gladly have given all his remaining years to have put on that gent's hat at the age of fourteen.

Translated by Péter Balabán

The Danube, Europe's largest river after the Volga, cuts across the territory of eight countries. Along its 417 kilometre stretch in Hungary lies a variegated and colourful landscape. The river flows placidly as it enters the country, winding and twisting its way along a narrow mountain-enclosed bed, then, sweeping grandly, runs at the edge of the Lowlands, winding round sandbars and islets. The river cuts through hills and plains, bisects the capital, skims past

industrial settlements and encircles wild-life reservations. Ocean-going ships ply its waters, and when the river overflows its banks, whole villages are liable to be swept away. The Danube signifies Hungary's past and present.

The article reprinted here, on Denmark's great story-teller Hans Christian Andersen, is the first in a series which our magazine will bring you on the Hungarian stretch of the Danube River.



A FAIRY-TALE WRITER

Hans Christian Andersen was a famous writer and an experienced traveller when, in October 1840, obeying the call of his itinerant nature, he once more set out to see the world. From Copenhagen he took a boat to Kiel, and a few days later arrived in Hamburg, where a pleasant surprise awaited him: the Hungarian musician Ferenc Liszt was to give a concert in the City of London Hotel. Liszt's performances were by then the talk of Europe's music circles. His critics still put him second to the Austrian pianist Thalberg, but Andersen called him the *Orpheus of Our Age*, whose music evoked a chain of poetic thoughts in him:

"A sea of sound came swelling towards me, its turmoil reflecting all the sentiments of an ebullient spirit and all the problems of life. I saw politicians who, under the influence of Liszt's music, understood why placid burghers had seized arms, enraptured by the sounds of the Marseillaise and, leaving their homes and their country, had gone to do battle for a cause. I saw staid Copenhagen citizens with the mist of the Danish autumn in their blood, who under the influence of his playing became political bacchanals . . . As for me, I heard the overture to my impending journey — the

booming organs of the German cathedrals, the roar of avalanches toppling down the Alps, Italy dancing in carnival splendour . . . Vesuvius and Etna were aflame, and far off in the Greek mountains where the ancient gods have long died, the Last Post was now blown. I was submerged in a flood of unfamiliar sounds, reminiscent of the East, the Eastern land of phantasy that is the poets' second homeland."

"LIKE DENMARK IN SUMMER. . ."

Andersen reached Ferenc Liszt's homeland in summer 1841, after a lengthy detour through Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey and the Balkan Peninsula, and a no less adventurous voyage up the lower reaches of the Danube. "Some officials near me were talking Latin, and this awakened me to the fact that I was in Hungary," he wrote in his diary. In Hungary Latin was the official language of the public administration right up to 1836, and in fact continued for several decades after.

Andersen arrived in Hungary in good spirits, aboard the SS Galathea. A Hungarian fellow-traveller, on discovering that the foreign gentleman was of Danish nationality, immediately started speaking of Tycho Brahe, of Schumacher and of

Oersted. ". . . His warm words were music to my ears, and the vast green expanse looked just like Denmark in summer." The author was an enthusiastic patriot and, when overcome by the intensity of his emotions, his thoughts always turned to his homeland. "Hungary, at least the Danube region, seemed quite Danish in character," he wrote.

They arrived at Mohács in the morning. Andersen was a well-read traveller and he knew that the area of Mohács was associated with one of the greatest catastrophes in Hungarian history—the loss of the Battle of Mohács in 1526, leading to almost two centuries of Turkish rule and a halt in Hungary's development that could not be remedied for centuries.

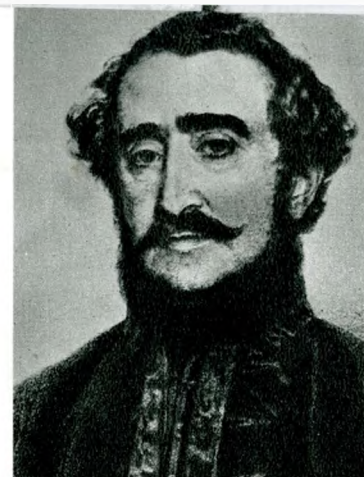
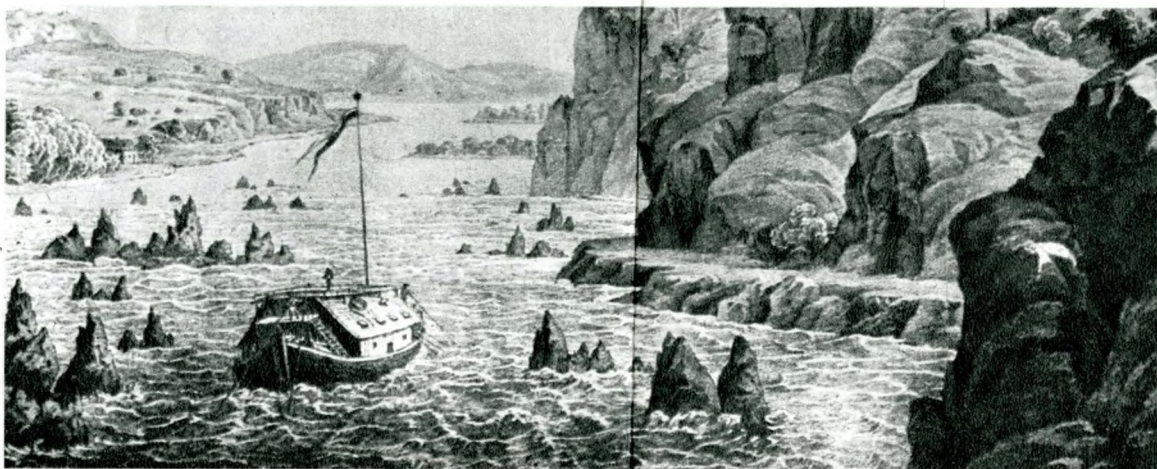
"WHAT LIVELINESS!"

As the travellers approached Pest, more and more passengers joined them at each stop. All were heading for Pest, for the famous Midsummer Fair of June 8th. On the third day after their departure from Mohács they arrived in Pest. "The Hungarian flag was hoisted on the ship and Pest emerged from the thin mist. Buda was still hidden from us by the high St. Gellért Hill, where a flag was hoisted to greet the

Vác as seen from Hell's Island.



ON THE DANUBE



Count István Széchenyi. His name was on everyone's tongue.

View of the lower reaches of the Danube described by Andersen.

steamship and its passengers, the visitors to the Fair . . .”

Andersen went into a detailed explanation of the colours of the Hungarian flag and the national coat of arms, and he also knew of Gellért Hill that “. . . it was from here that the heathen Magyars cast St. Gellért into the Danube.” How glad he would have been if someone had told him that according to the popular belief witches were in the habit of meeting atop Gellért Hill . . .

Budapest was at that time still called Pest-Buda, and consisted of two independent townships. Andersen's diary presents an attractive portrait of the early nineteenth-century Pest-Buda. Here are some excerpts:

“Pest is a city of palace after palace! What liveliness and busy traffic! Hungarian dandies, tradesmen, Jews and Greeks, soldiers and peasants mill in the streets. The Midsummer Fair! On the opposite shore, at the foot of a high, grass-covered hill, there are colourful rows of smaller houses, with some rows reaching up to the top of the slope. This is Buda, Hungary's capital. Over the green gardens rise the white walls of the citadel—the Hungarian Acropolis. The two towns are linked by a boat-bridge. What a throng and a noise! The bridge sways under the carriages, soldiers are marching, bayonets glinting in the sunshine; a procession of peasant pilgrims is just passing over the bridge, their Cross sparkles and their songs can be heard at a distance. The River is teeming with ships and smaller vessels . . . All rejoice and celebrate, the bells are ringing, for it is Whitsun!

“We disembarked, sought a hotel, and found one. It was large, magnificent, and terribly expensive. There are no fixed prices in Pest during Fair time. As we walked about the city, it was as though we were



Picturesque bluffs in the Kazan Straits on the Danube.

seeing Vienna, at least in part . . . Here, too, at one of the street-corners, we found the ‘iron tree-stump,’ just as in Vienna. It is the last memento of the primeval forest that once lined the banks of the Danube. At one time every journeyman used to hammer a nail into the tree, as long as there was an inch of space on it, and the wood had not been filled with iron; now it consists of one mass of nails! Hercules himself never had a finer club. There is no trace of the great flood. The houses have been restored, and now everything is newer and greater . . .”

SZÉCHENYI'S BOOK ABOUT HORSES

The traveller visited the theatres, heard Mendelssohn's Oratorium in a concert

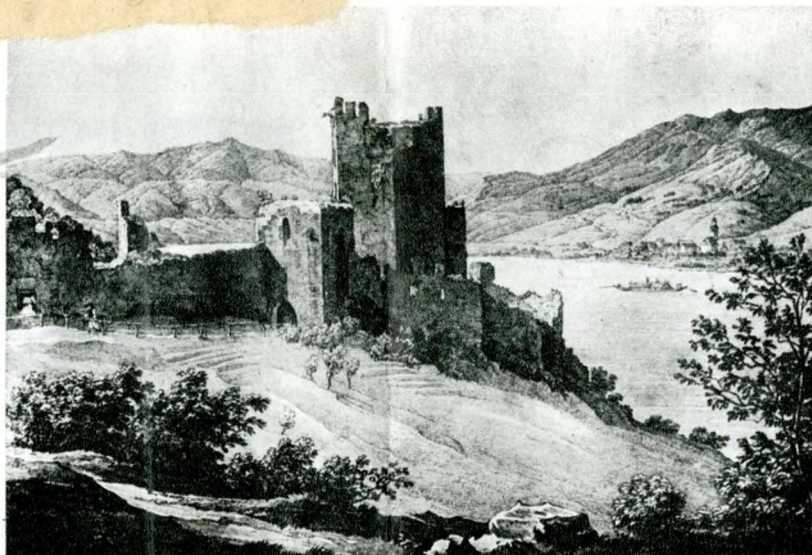
hall, and attended a performance of Scribe's play *A Glass of Water* at City Theatre. He praised the many newspapers, periodicals and books. “I was asked whether any works of Hungarian literature had appeared in Danish, but I knew of only one: Széchenyi's book about horses.”

The name of Count István Széchenyi (1791-1860) was mentioned a great deal. The “greatest Hungarian,” as he was called, was one of the initiators of the national reform movement. All that he had seen during his journeys abroad led him to try and change his country's backward condition, and win the support of the landowning class for his schemes. After his tour of Britain, he became the founder of horse-racing in Pest. “My Hungarian acquaintance

talked of Széchenyi with great enthusiasm. This enthusiasm was not surprising, for the plans of the great reformer, and his slogan: "Hungary was not, but shall be!" served to enlist the best Hungarians of the era for his movement. "Széchenyi's portrait decorates the window of every bookshop—it was also there in the cabin of the ship that took us up the Danube." According to his biographers, Andersen met Széchenyi personally in Vienna in 1846.

WHERE GÜL BABA SLEEPS

From Pest, Andersen crossed over to Buda, where he visited the famous grave of Gül Baba. The "Father of Roses" whose coffin is said to have been accompanied by Sultan Soliman the Great, rests on Buda's Hill of Roses. His sepulchre was a popular place of pilgrimage even at the beginning of the present century. The ancient shrine made a deep impression on Andersen, and his rich imagination led him to write in his diary: "We brought a greeting to the Turkish saint from the East, from venerable Constantinople. The greeting of Mohamed's green banner. But who is that, lying there, prostrate on his face? On his head there is a brimless, white felt hat—is this not the man I saw in the mad dance of the dervishes at Pera? Indeed, he is a dervish! He has come here on foot, through mountains and plains, to a foreign land and a Christian city. Now his pilgrimage is at an end. As a memento, he hangs a gaudily painted wooden sword on the wall, then, prostrating himself, whispers: 'There is no other god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.' It is evening. The red sun sets. The Son of the East rises silently



The ruins of Solomon's Tower at Visegrád.



An old fortress on the Lower Danube. Engravings from the 19th century.

from the grave and goes out on the terrace—he has come here alone, to this most distant of all shrines. Now he bows his head and says another prayer. Further off, a local burgher stands and watches the strange traveller in astonishment. An hour

before midnight every night, an unhappy ghost appears here—that of a giant Turk. He lifts the largest cannon, places it on his shoulder and walks round the wall with it. When the clock strikes twelve he replaces the cannon and disappears. Is it with him that the pilgrim wishes to speak tonight? There is silence on the terrace, and silence down in the small sepulchral chamber where Gül Baba sleeps."

Shortly after his return, Andersen's travel diary was published first in Danish, then, in 1843, in German. He prefaced the chapters on his Danube journey with the words: "This theme of the Danube, and the variations of its banks, I dedicate to my friends, the princes of the piano, the Austrian Thalberg and the Hungarian Liszt."

Hungarian readers first came to know Andersen's name in 1858. The first translator of his fairy tales was Julia Szendrey, the widow of Hungary's greatest poet, Sándor Petőfi. Andersen's works have since appeared in innumerable editions, and are among the most popular in Hungary. His stories, written with profound humanism, teach and entertain successive generations.

László Rapcsányi

View of Pest from Buda when the city was still separated into two parts.

