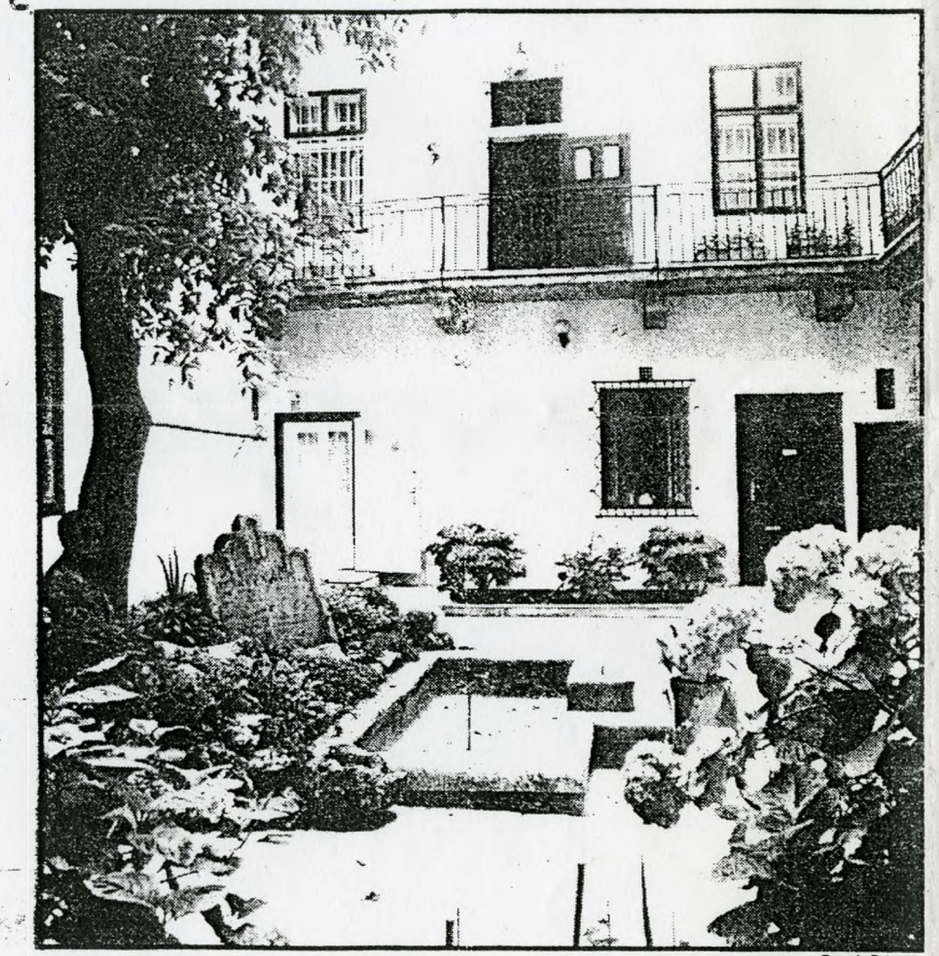
Behind the Facades, Surprises in Budapest

Courtyards are the city's hidden treasures



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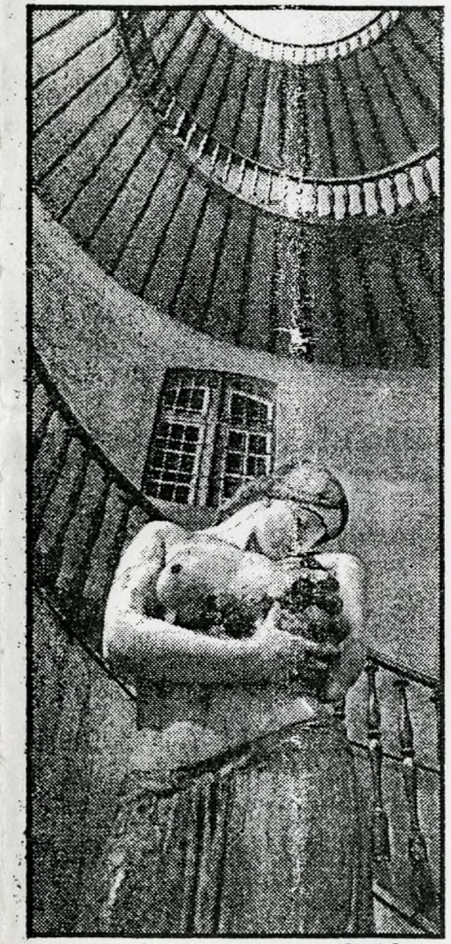

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Alexandra Shelley

Left to right, courtyard at 19 Uri Street; Persephone statue by Benno Elkan Roma at 3 Apaczai Csere Janos Street, and residents of the Gozsdu building. Below, Applied Arts Museum.

BY ALEXANDRA SHELLEY

BEHIND the iron gates of Budapest, in courtyards buried within unassuming apartment buildings, offices and universities, a traveler can find forgotten treasures of art and architecture, and footprints of the wars and revolutions that have marched across Hungary for the last millennium.

Unlike the ornate facades of the Hungarian capital's late-19th-century buildings, recently renovated and decked out in gaudy yellows and oranges, powder blues and pinks, the interior yards often remain untouched, their bullet-pocked walls a pentimento of epochs.

Here one can find sculptures ranging from neo-classical Greek gods to a socialist-realist bear on a scooter; an old dungeon; silversmiths' workshops and stables; lush gardens, and the basic component of Hungarian urban landscape architecture: car tires planted with flowers.

The sense of discovery in coming across these is keener for their being completely neglected in the midst of everyday life. And searching for them is a good excuse to stray slightly from the beaten tourist path.

Courtyards tell the story of the evolution of urban Hungary. From the 19th century through World War II, maids and housewives congregated here to use the rug beaters (wooden contraptions that can still be seen) and pass the scuttlebutt.

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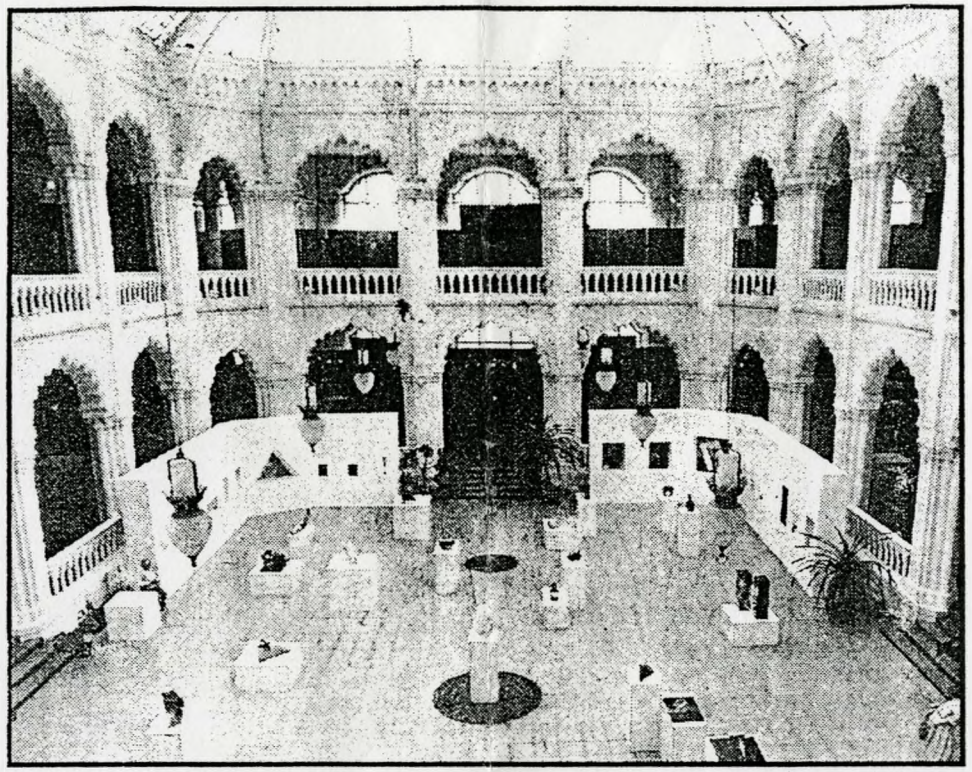

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An interior yard allowed the coexistence within one building of both lower and upper classes — "Park Avenue and the South Bronx in the same building," as one Hungarian professor of urban anthropology, Istvan Teplan, put it. Facing the street were exclusive apartments. But fronting on the interior were small flats whose residents shared one bathroom in the corridor and drew their water from the courtyard well.

In the country's stormy history courtyards have also served as centers of rebellion. After the invention of the vacuum cleaner and the Communist system, grievances (if not rugs) continued to be aired. In fact, Professor Teplan speculates that this architectural device was abandoned during the Communist era precisely to discourage the subversive commerce of ideas.

"The courtyard was an arena of social conflicts," he told me. "The old houses look inside. The new blocks, the housing developments on the outskirts of Budapest, don't look inside — to avoid space where people can gather."

Yet in the old workers' districts of Budapest the interior yards remain an agora. Here children improvise games with scraps of wood and Ping-Pong balls, and old people lean their elbows on the windows sills and call across to each other.

IN one such neighborhood, the industrial district of Jozsefvaros, I pushed open the doorway of what seemed yet another soot-covered building — at 22 Dioszegi Samuel street — to find an oasis of pink flowering hydrangea, roses, tomato plants, acacia trees. A woman asked me what I was looking for. I told her I had heard that the garden here was beautiful. "Well, yes," she said, "nothing else is" — and that was the crux of it: the carefully tended garden was a defense against the squalor outside. (Although some of these courtyards are attached to public buildings, others are private and permission to visit them should technically be asked.)

It is not surprising in a country that since the Mongol attack in 1241 has almost continuously been assaulted by invading hordes, that such fragile beauty is secreted away in the protected interior of the buildings.

One does not have to venture as far as Jozsefvaros to find it. In neighborhoods within walking distance of the downtown hotels, from the old Jewish ghetto to the elegant Castle district, the courtyards provide a glimpse of daily life both past and present.

I began my round of courtyards on the Pest side of the Danube just in back of the Inter-continental Hotel, armed with three tools: a good map of the city (available in most bookstores); a copy of "Budapest: A Critical Guide" (Park/Officina Nova, 1989), a humorous and intimate book by Andras Torok, and enough curiosity to follow the ghostly path of horse-drawn carriages through the carved wooden doors or ornate iron gates.

Reigning over the faded pink alcove and a bank of mail boxes off the courtyard at 3 Apaczai Csere Janos Street is the queen of the ancient underworld, Persephone. An Italian sculptor, Benno Elkan Roma, has depicted her in a dreamy moment — her eyes closed, her head canted, her pink marble lips a lovely contrast to the sleek white of her face and torso. She half-heartedly covers her nakedness with a bouquet of pink, purple and russet roses of quartz and marble. In the courtyard proper, the wooden stable doors and the water trough form a down-to-earth contrast to the neoclassical pretensions of this early-19th-century building.

Walking the few blocks to Kigyo street and 5 Felszabadulas Square, I stopped at the Parizai arcade. The building, built in 1911 by a bank, gives the impression of a Venetian palace. It is characteristic of the turn-of-the-century eclecticism that resulted from the search for a uniquely Hungarian style of architecture, its eastern motifs derived from a theory that the Hungarian people were of oriental origin.

The architect, Henrik Schmahl, took pains to distinguish the internal arcade from the

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mundane shoemaker's bazaar it supplanted. It is difficult to find a right angle in this passageway, with its fanciful carved wooden window frames, balustrades and even telephone booths.

The shops in the arcade are marked with mid-1980's neon signs: pocketbook for a luggage store; book for a bookstore, and harem girl, of course, for the carpet store.

I then made my way down Belgrad street, along the Danube, to Dimitrov Square and what was, last year when I studied there, the Karl Marx Economics University — in the new post-communist world the Budapest University of Economic Sciences. The university occupies a 120-year-old former customs house, designed in a neo-Renaissance style by Miklos Ybl, the Budapest Opera architect.

ALTHOUGH this year the school was shorn of his name and the Marxist curriculum, Karl Marx remains in the glass-covered courtyard. His somewhat tortured contemplative look seems to have deepened as the rapid democratization of Hungary took place before his unblinking bronze eyes.

In this hall in the past two years he has seen a succession of speakers indicating the waning of his power, from President Bush to the Dalai Lama to Prince Charles, to, in the spring of 1989, the leaders of the relatively obscure opposition group, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (hashing out a platform and thanking supporters). Not two years later the Democratic Forum is the leading power in the freely elected Hungarian Government.

Walking to Calvin Square and then along Muzeum Avenue, I came to the narrow streets of what was once a working class Jewish neighborhood, behind the Dohany Street Synagogue.

At 18 Dob Street is the Gozsdu building. Seven linked courtyards form the spine of this former dormitory complex built in the late 1800's by a childless Romanian judge, Elek Gozsdu, to house visiting Romanian students.

Some of the small jewelers workshops that lined the courtyards before World War II have been supplanted by what at first appear to be similar businesses — carpenter, hairdresser, dressmaker — but on inspection turn out to be affiliated with the Nepszinhaz, the People's Theater, making costumes, sets and props.

Major acts of Hungarian history have played in the Gozsdu courtyard. One of its groaning wrought-iron gates was the border of the Jewish ghetto during World War II.

During the 1958 revolution it was a headquarters for Hungarian insurgents. Russian tanks leveled the building next door and the struggle is spelled out in the bullet holes in the walls.

In a courtyard at 29-31 Kazinczy Street, behind a cavernous Orthodox synagogue with a crenelated roof, is the Hanna kosher restaurant. The smells of kosher cooking, the clank of pots on stove burners and the shouts of children in recess from Talmud-Torah class recall a time before the Holocaust when more than a thousand worshipers came to the synagogue each week.

One of the older men dining at the Hanna restaurant told me his was the first wedding held under the courtyard's wrought-iron canopy, or huppah, after the war. In Hebrew letters on the huppah's frieze is one of the blessings of the ceremony: "The voice of joy, the voice of rejoicing, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride."

Tucked under the courtyard's entranceway is the Sasz Chevra temple. At dusk each day, the murmuring of prayers come from its open door, through which can be seen the clocks that mark the different times of sunset — the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath — in major Hungarian towns.

From here I took a taxi toward Margit Bridge and the Buda side of the Danube, asking the driver to wait for a minute while I stopped in at 13-19 Palffy Gyorgy Street, a huge block of apartments built in the 1950's for military personnel. From the courtyard one feels the full monolithic weight of what Budapesters call the Stalinist Baroque style. On one courtyard wall are two bas-reliefs in bombastic, socialist-realist style: a soldier leaves for war, bidding goodbye to his wife and his flag-waving baby, and a worker in overalls reads to a child dressed in the uniform of the Communist youth group. But what about the bear on the scooter? In the center of the courtyard, this sculpture, although in the same realistic style, is an inexplicably whimsical deviation.

Crossing the Margit bridge I got out of the taxi at the Lukacs Spa, 25-29 Frankel Leo Street. Its swimming pools and medicinal hot baths scented with camomile are a traditional meeting place of journalists and politicans — in these waters much of the country's policy has been brewed over the past century.

On one of the courtyard walls, just below the statue of St. Luke, are plaques donated by thankful spa-goers from faraway lands. They describe in lurid detail the illnesses supposedly cured by the Lukacs. "An enormous cramp was in my back for months. And this bath relieved it," wrote one Hungarian visitor in 1898. "God's blessing on this miraculous place!"

These waters are said to have been sought out as early as the first century by the Roman legions. The present neoclassical complex was built during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in the mid-19th century. It is ironic that after the Hungarians paid dearly to free themselves from the domination of Vienna, the state spa authority recently sold half of the Lukacs to an Austrian concern. Habitués speak nervously of price increases.

But, for the moment, a weary tourist may still buy a ticket to the two swimming pools for around $1.25. The sulfurous spring water is also sold in the glass-walled drink hall near the courtyard entrance. A giant mug said to cure arthritis can be had for 1 forint (about 2 cents) — although its faint rotten-egg smell may intimidate some visitors. I had no choice but to finish mine as the woman who draws the water explained proudly that families from the countryside take home liters of the stuff.

FROM here I took the tram at the foot of Margit bridge some five minutes to the last stop, Moscow Square, and caught the Castle Hill jitney to Szentharomsag Square.

Anyone who has gotten this far deserves to duck into the cozy Biedermeier interior of the 180-year-old Ruszwurm pastry shop, 7 Szentharomsag Street. From here it is a short walk on Uri Street to No. 19 (although almost all of the Castle district's restored Gothic and Baroque houses are worth exploring). Inside this house, built on the medieval ruins of an Italian warlord's mansion, is a courtyard whose white-washed walls, balconies and low archways evoke a Mediterranean serenity.

In the courtyard's rock garden, underneath a sundial painted on the wall, is the tombstone of Izabella Lenkey, daughter of the then-owner. The girl died at age 22 in 1850. Her fiancé, forced to flee to America after participating in the failed Hungarian revolt against Austrian rule, wrote the poem on her gravestone. "Two things were aflame in your youthful heart. Your fatherland and its son, your betrothed" it begins, ascribing her death to the defeat of both of these.

When I inquired about the poem, a gracious elderly lady cooking lunch at an open window welcomed me into her apartment. Mrs. Bela Borsos sat down with me at the dining room table and, in a profound silence broken only the ticking of a deep-lunged clock, she wrote the verses.

How did she know this by heart? Time has blurred beyond recognition the words carved on the tombstone. Her great-grandmother was Izabella Lenkey's sister, said Mrs. Borsos.

As I stood once again in the sun-filled courtyard after an afternoon touring these sanctuaries of the past, it struck me more strongly than ever that history does not end with the final chapter in the textbook. ■

Budapest

Dennis Degnan

Two-story courtyard at 22 Dioszegi Samuel Street.

Budapest

Andras Bankuti for The New York Times

Plot 301 memorializes the revolutionary dead.

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grave of one Peter Mansfeld. On it is tacked a photograph of a boy with movie star good looks. Peter Mansfeld was 16 when the Soviet soldiers pulled him in, but could not be executed because he was a minor. He was kept in jail and killed on his 18th birthday.

Meanwhile, the Communist sculpture park, scheduled to open this May in a Budapest suburb, will hold a collection of some 60 Communist-era sculptures that presided over the squares and parks of Budapest, from Marx and Lenin to Ho Chi Minh.

"The people don't want to have to run into these sculptures every day," said Attila Zsigmond, a member of parliament and director of the Budapest Gallery, which is overseeing the exile of the Communist sculptures. We could melt them down, he said, "but a country cannot erase its history.... We suffered through these four decades." The facade of the five-acre sculpture park, Mr. Zsigmond said, will be in a columned brick Stalinist Baroque style whose grandeur is illusory; behind it will be a tiny ticket booth. Visitors will then walk through an exhibit of historic photographs showing the original unveilings of the sculptures. In the park itself, some sculptures will be arrayed in a long row behind the figures of the two flag-waving Russian politicians who will lead the charge into a brick wall just in front of them.

If by evening you've worked up a hunger for a truly post-Communist dining experience, Marxim, on Kisrokus Street near Moscow Square, is a popular "socialist-realist pub," in the words of its young owner, Zoltan Czvitus.

The only sign outside the small basement restaurant is a stylized red star. Across the cobblestone street is the huge Ganz-Ansaldo electrical transformer factory, a white elephant working at greatly reduced capacity. Marxim, which opened a year and a half ago, is furnished in industrial gray, with bar stools, ventilation pipes and ashtrays of lipstick red — "a cozy color, the color symbolizing Communism," said Mr. Czvitus, who is an art historian.

Young Hungarians eat pizza at booths separated by barbed wire, beneath photographs and banners from the heyday of Communism and a three-foot-high red star with a picture of Lenin that once hung in the Ministry of Industry.

Mr. Czvitus distances himself from politics: shouting over Pink Floyd on the tape player, he said, "Our first ideology is catering." ■