

# THREE DAYS IN THE HILLS OF HUNGARY

*Written by Sam and Katáh*

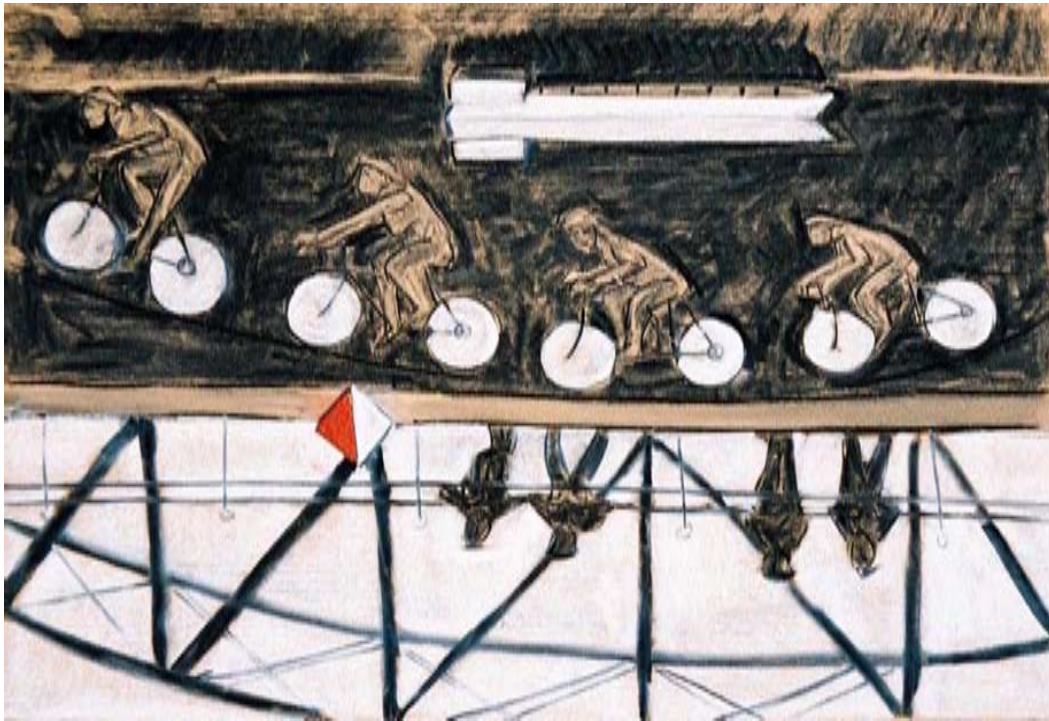
*May, 2006*

*At the Bridge Guard Residency in Štúrovo, Slovakia*

We head off to Hungary in the mid afternoon, and we cross the Danube 4 times on Monday the 9th of April 2006...before settling in for the night on the island of Szentendre ...

First crossing; Štúrovo to Estergom, Slovakia to Hungary, over the Maria Valéria Bridge.

Untold stories, by Sam Kerson



We then race down the bike path! After a week in the studio, painting and writing, it is a thrill to be following the river down stream, moving fast, excited, energized, in good spirits, 3k, 4k, 5k and then...sploosh, the trail dips below water level, we try to ride through and make it, only to encounter more water. The bike path is underwater ahead of us and behind us. We see the highway across some brushy fields to our right and decide to take the shortest route. But the field is wet too and we sink and splash and get spattered with silt deposited during the flooding. By the time we get to higher ground we are wet up to our thighs and the bikes are totally covered with thick sticky mud.

Once on the road, we stop to change our socks and get a bit more comfortable, our trousers will dry in the warm wind. The way to Visigrád is through a deep gorge, the narrow road winds between the embankment on one side and the river on the other. The trees on the slope arch over the road creating a shadowy passage, more, dark than light.

We are lucky today; sand bags from the flood-control are blocking one lane of the road. The highway crew is not in sight but they have put up a traffic light with a ten minute pause, because the road is only one lane, for that distance. What's more, there isn't much traffic, apparently drivers are warned somewhere else, so most drivers choose a different route. Because of the long red-light the cars come in little caravans every ten minutes. We are in very close contact with the car culture and often we are left wondering what the shifting of gears, the smell of burning petroleum and the squeak of brakes means. This road is lined with memorial monuments to loved drivers who ended their lives here. There seems to be a monument every five hundred meters. Because it has just been Easter, each of these monuments is decorated with fresh flowers. Like a tunnel of memories, the shadows and the overarching trees lend to the funereal feeling.

We see farm land and an old fortress on the hilltops above Visigrád. The village is really digging out, kids from school have joined the city workers in shovelling the sand and removing the sand bag dikes they built just a few days ago. We leave the highway and follow the closed roads closest to the shore.

There is an island in the river called, Szentendre and we are watching for it. It is a long island, 31 km, and as soon as we see the tip of it, at Szentgyorgypuszta, where there is a ferry landing we stop to see if there is service. The ferry landing is just a barge near the shore with a ramp running up onto it. Considering the level of the water and last week's flooding, we have to ask if the ferry is running and we go into a road house, the door is open and the bar is just inside. Katah practices her Hungarian asking about the ferry. The bar is run by two women, fifty years old, nice looking, friendly, with robust smiles and bright coloured dresses. There is a man, the same age as the women, enjoying their company and he speaks English. He orders us two small beers. He knows about the island, and assures us that we can stay overnight. He warns that the roads are flooded, but adds, not badly. The man is Austrian, a car race organizer and his hobby is bird-watching. He tells us he has been to Mongolia, to Thailand and to various parts of Africa to see birds. The women indicate that the ferry is about to arrive, we have to run off, as we see the ferry approaching.

The ferryboat is petit, two island men operate it, and they know their jobs. One of our ideas for this visit is to inquire about the brother of Geza Herman, a painter we know in Montréal. The crewmen speak German, or should I say, they think we speak German. Katah is determined to inquire in Hungarian; of course they speak Magyar too. One of the boatmen sets the boat on its course then they are both on deck with us talking in this funny mix of languages. They have a few words of French too. We are looking for Geza Herman's brother who was hidden on this island by a family of 5 sisters after the Uprising of 1956. The sisters were running a small farm and they needed a man around the place. This is all we know about him, except that he is still living here. Geza visited with him a couple of years ago, and has shown us videos of his brother. The crossing is brief and we all have a good time playing with words and amusing ourselves with this inquiry.



The Ferry at Szob, by Sam Kerson

The ferry lets us off at Kisoroszi where the birdwatcher told us we would find a very hospitable country inn. We ride past the hostel thinking, it is early and we might go on a bit further. The road is closed because of flooding but we ignore the road blocks. We see that much of the water has drained away leaving the sand bags soggy, heavy and in disorder. Observing the flooded fields and the disorder of the sandbags we realize the dikes were breached. Where the road dips it submerges below the shallow waters. The roads are barricaded at both ends, most cars respect the barricades. We ride the center line. We are enjoying the calmness, the peaceful evening light, and the amber glow of things. The fields are flooded but they are draining.

We ride ten km down the island to, Tahitotfalu but there does not seem to be a hotel or even rooms for rent, so we cross the river to Tahi, where signs promise Zimmer. We follow the signs, but each of the establishments is closed, for sale, or flooded. We ask around, but hear nothing encouraging, so we decide to cross over the bridge a second time and back-track 10 km to the tip of the island, to Kisoroszi, to the country inn. The evening descends as we pedal along; the lights come on in the island villages. We are pumping hard, the bikes are moving fast. Fans of spray reach out on each side as our tires cut through the standing water.

The buildings here, in Eastern Europe, are very substantial and this inn is a million dollar construction, in a Country Inn style. However it is completely new, tiled everywhere, the floor in red hexagons, the walls in the bathrooms are tiled right to the ceilings in white enamel squares. The blonde woodwork is waxed and polished, and each detail is perfect. Even the blacksmith's skills are exhibited with hand made latches and handles, and ironwork grills and light posts. The bathroom fixtures are impressive, spacious showers, and toilets that roar when they flush. What a surprise to realize that the pictures on the walls are articulate well crafted dry point etchings. This country inn offers rooms for 30 dollars a night, private bath and breakfast included! It seems there is some sort of communalism still happening? The town has built a tourist hotel in the spirit of, "let's make sure the tourists have some place attractive to stay"?

By the time we get back to the Inn it is late, the cook has gone home, the bar maid says she can not fix meals. She says, "Please, don't ask me, I can not do it". Fortunately, we have a fat, salami in our bags, so we ask for bread and a glass of wine. She brings square, white, commercial bread, nice and stale, and two large, beer glasses, full of dark red wine, *du vieux rouge qui tache* as the French say! Apparently she was grateful that we did not ask her to cook. When she sees that we have finished eating, she brings us two pieces of apple strudel!

We go back to our room to find there is plenty of hot water. The gushing shower head reminds us that in our modern age the whole world suffers water scarcity. Here in the Danube basin, where we are living, is an exception, especially at this time of year. The entire Carpathian water shed drains into this narrow passage, called, the Danube bend. Water in vast quantities is moving along both sides of this island and there is water everywhere. Historically there are water shortages and the riparian countries along the Danube fight about water, quality and quantity frequently. None the less here in Kisoroszi, tonight, the hot water flows freely and we are enjoying it.

Our room, under the eaves, features the first double bed we have seen since arriving in Eastern Europe; since we have been here we have been sleeping in twin beds, or on twin couches. We know how to enjoy this wider plain of amorous activity we snuggle, and cuddle and make good use of all the space!

We are French people, after all, not Eastern Europeans. We are not Roman soldiers like Marcus Aurelius, practicing Stoicism. Sleeping on hard separate couches is not part of our culture.

Breakfast is great, lots of attention put on presentation. There are four kinds of cold cuts, a bright red tomato and a long yellow pepper on each plate, yoghurt, cheese, tea, bread, jam, butter and we order coffee, which is extra. We are enjoying the friendliness of this community, the Hungarians, here in Hungary. The atmosphere is really quite different, the people we meet seem more modern, more outgoing and open minded. On our side of the river it seems that the people hesitate to speak. Not only are they an ethnic minority but they were dominated by the Russians for fifty years. It may be that people in our town don't say much of what might be said, as a habit?

We go to the Post Office to make an ATM withdrawal. The currency here in Hungary is the Forint. By 9:00 we are on our bikes and underway. The road is very quiet, still closed, but today there are highway department trucks and they are picking up the sand that spilled out from the sand bag dikes. The sand bags, especially in their disorder, caused by the flood waters running over them, fill the right lane from the shoulder to the middle of the road. One lane is full of sand bags one lane is flooded with water so we are riding the center line at the edge of the oncoming lane. A car comes up behind us, he wants to pass. We are moving along ok but he is going faster. We pull over to the right of the white line. The outer shoulder of the oncoming lane is flooded so he crowds us as he goes by. He looks at us like we are making things difficult for him; we have to stop till he gets by. Once he has passed he gooses his little grey Honda and jumps ahead of us. He has not gone fifty feet when two large orange trucks come around the corner one hundred meters ahead. There is only one lane open and some of it is flooded and furthermore the road is closed! The Honda immediately pulls over, out of the oncoming lane, right in among the sand bags, cow-towing to these big road machines. We go by him, on the watery side, lifting our feet off the pedals at the deepest part. The trucks slow down, and come to a stop on a bridge over a culvert. The road is flooded because this field to the left can not drain. The workmen are here to open the culvert. The trucks stop on the bridge over the culvert, we ride by them on the center line, before they climb out of the cabs, just as they are shutting their engines off. The Honda waits.

We are on flat ground and there is practically no traffic. We zoom along filling our lungs with fresh air changing our thought patterns! What a thrill the bike is at this hour, the air is rich in oxygen, we can feel it infiltrating our blood and enlivening our brain cells. The energy we put into achieving momentum and the ease of movement brighten our spirits. The bicycle opens our eyes to the sights, puts us in touch with nature. It seems to us that riding the bicycle fills our heads with new ideas, cures our aches and pains, while making us stronger and healthier. Yes, we have overcome various aches and pains by riding the bike. Bicycle riding gets us around, fast enough to cover ground, slow enough to still be in contact with nature and the wild life. During our six weeks of riding we feel a distinct reshaping of our bodies, our stomachs retreat our chests open up and our thighs bulge. We

have color in our cheeks and tans on our fore-arms and noses. Bicycle travel generates no gas bill, it cost nothing to ride. The bicycle does not pollute, does not use gas, makes us healthier and takes us where ever we want to go.

We are still on the Szentendre Island which is embraced by the Great Danube on one side and the Small Danube on the other. We see that on the other side of the Great Danube, to the east, there is a town called Göd! We figure it is worth going to God and sending postcards from there. We imagine we can cross on the ferry, and we ride out to the ferry landing, just west of Vác, only to find that the ferry is not running. It is a large car ferry which may have been damaged in the flood, the workmen tell us, "She won't be ready to cross for another 4 hours." We ride the flood control path to Szodrakos, the next place we see on our map where there is a ferry, but this time, we find no sign of any transport, maybe the landing washed away in the flood? A local tells us, if we want to go to Göd we must try farther down stream.

Each town has a grave yard and they are very colourful. They are looking more and more like gardens, and we decide to stop and get a closer look. Probably due to the high water-table, the tomb stones and the graves themselves are often above ground. Each tomb incorporates a garden plot, an earthy area for planting flowers. Often there are two graves together and the garden plot might be six by six feet. At this time of year, most of graves have been visited and weeded, the perennials are trimmed and many have been planted with fresh annuals, very colourful, pansies, and tulips, daffodils and narcissus. We are reminded how different cultures have different relationships with their dead, for example Mexicans celebrate their Day of the Dead at the end of October, here in Hungary the spring resurrection is celebrated in the cemeteries as well as in the gardens.

Off to the cemetery, by Sam Kerson



The clouds are mounting higher and turning darker, a chilly wind comes up and rain threatens. When the first drops pelt down we stop for lunch and order a goulash soup. This traditional Hungarian soup is served hot and is very meaty and spicy with paprika. The steam from the bowls of goulash fogs our glasses while the rich broth warms us. We try a plate of pasta, it seems to be home made? Some flat square pieces of very thin

pasta covered with a nice rich cream, decorated with pieces of braised bacon.

Spreading our map on the table we ask the waitress how to get to Göd. She tells us where the closest functioning ferry can be found, at Surány, a few kilometres from here. A customer overhearing our conversation asks why we want to go to Göd. We tell him we want to send postcards from there. He furrows his brow, looks serious and says Göd is a very small town; you will have better luck in the town of Szentendre.

The tone of his voice and his look convince us that our idea is a little to *loco*, and we change course and head for the other side of the island. We are calling back and forth as we ride, "oh! Man of little faith!" and, "the road is wide but the gate is very narrow!". We take a ferry at Szigetmonastor, cross the small Danube and we are back on the main land just outside of the famous town of Szentendre.

Outttchhhh! We are back in car culture; we tighten our helmets and hold on to our handle bars extra carefully. Before us we see the head office of The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC). Maybe we should have spent more time at the REC, because Szentendre feels like a big shopping center arranged in historic-preservation buildings. We have heard about this place many times, many people have told us "Szentendre is the jewel of the area", "you must visit Szentendre"! But for us, this is a tourist trap, a theme park shopping mall. A whole town of nicely maintained old architecture devoted to knick-knack commerce. Szentendre sports fifty galleries showing that special kind of art that only a tourist could love. The stony grey facades, the low doorways and narrow alleys, house fifty expensive boutiques which are arranged quaintly between the banks and the bars. It has a Dungeons and Dragons pin ball look; the grey stone background, receding alleys, orange tiled roofs and in every available space, between the cafes and the ice cream stands, ATMs flashing, like rebound bumpers. Oversized, metallic coloured, shiny cars, in bronze, silver and gold, with tinted windows, make their way through the very narrow, cobble stoned streets.

Szentendre feels like everything we are trying to escape. On the other hand we want to appreciate what our friends have recommended; how can we have a good experience? We stop at every corner trying to find something that will strip away our chagrin.

We have been looking for music composed by Béla Bartók . We checked every music store in Bratislava, but we had no luck finding music by this Hungarian composer on the Slovak side of the border, in Szentendre our fortune changes. The CD Café has every single Bartok ever recorded! We have our pick! We listen; there is a superior sound system in this café. We choose, Blue Beard's Castle. The proprietor, who has a sister living in Montréal, introduces us to the string quartets of Zoltán Kodály, Bartók's contemporary, friend and fellow folk music collector. It is easy to imagine the two young music enthusiasts walking over the Maria Valéria Bridge into the country side near the Hron and Ipoly on one of their collecting forays.

It is well into the afternoon when we extract ourselves from the CD Café. The boutique lined streets lead to the church at the top of the hill, just beyond the church we find ourselves on the highway again, at rush hour. This is a main artery into Budapest, we are on the outskirts of the city, and we do everything we can to get out of the traffic, riding the back streets, looking for ways around or through the industrial area or even following farm paths. There is really not much choice. Again and again we encounter obstacles, dead ends and stone walls. Eventually we, like all the traffic, are funnelled onto the road

to Pomáz, and mix into the surging, rushing, circulating stream of grey and blue cars.

## PART TWO, THE CLIMB TO DOBOGÖ-KÖ

A few weeks ago, one of the border guards, we met on the bridge, told us about a certain hill-top in Hungary. He described the area as being the center of the pagan rituals, the place where one can feel the pulse of the earth. He told us, this hill top was the power place of Koppány the pre-Christian leader of the Magyar.

Koppány, by Sam Kerson



There is only one border guard who has a bit of English. This guard looks different than the others. He is in better shape than the rest, many of whom have that, *just twenty more years till retirement*, look about them. It is a terrible job, really, and the boredom drains their spirit. The guard we have been speaking with seems to be the military component of the border post, as he sometimes wears a red military béret. He is interested in English and speaks quite well. He is clean shaven and has chiselled features, good teeth and an easy smile.

As we come into the passport area, out of the dark, he is just backing out of a bus, we recognized each other and he approaches us. He has been trying to simplify our passport process; sometimes he lets us through without stamping our passports. We are talking together about where we have been and what we have been doing.

Katah says, "we are painters".  
Our friend says, "I love painting!"

With the idea of painting in mind he goes on, "Have you been to visit Dobogö-kö?"

"Dubo what!?" We ask!?

The Magyar alphabet contains 44 distinct characters. Besides our twenty six there are letters with accents and letters with umlauts and combinations of letters which together make other sounds. There are many significant sounds that we don't know how to pronounce.

He continues, "...in the ancient times, before the church, Magyars practiced a pagan religion which was centered around the Dobogő-kő. Dobogő-kő means the beating heart. There is a hill, near by; it is not too high, 700 meters, but still, the highest in the area. On top of that hill there is a special, "heart stone", which pulses with the rhythm of the earth".

Perhaps we are a little wide eyed as he goes on to say,

"The Dali Lama came here and he called this place, "The center of the earth".

"Where is it?" we ask, "We want to see it."

He points into the dark, to the south east.

Katah pulls out her pocket notebook and hands it to him and he writes down the name with the correct spelling.

In closing he says, "When I walk in that forest, the forest of the Dobogő-kő, I feel good in my body and in my spirit."

Thank you, Kösi! Vislát! "See you", we say as we remount our bikes and head back to look at our maps.

Today, a month after this encounter, we begin the ascent, from the other side of the hill, along the road to Pomáz, it is 699 meters to the top. We plan to stop and spend the night about half way up at Pilisszentkereszt. The ride is difficult, it is pretty late in the day, but we are in better shape, and this is the proof! We take off our wind breakers, stick to the edge of the road and we peddle uphill.

There are cars along this narrow road that are just going too fast. There are lots of vehicles but distinct among them are BMW's or other racy sedans, driven by thirty five year old men, and women driving alone, on their way somewhere, and late, apparently. The heavy black cars and the macho style of driving make one wonder?

What are the car companies selling?

Power, in a world of the powerless?

Control, in a world out of control?

Personal space that moves where ever you go?

Access to credit?

A buyable personality? A mask? A persona?

The persona of a well know international character?

German engineering.

Rack and pinion steering, 365 horse power, disc brakes?

Control and power?

A speedometer that says 180 miles an hour?

56 channels?

Our reading tells us that until recently Hungary had the distinction of having more suicides



than any other country in Europe. Are expensive new cars a solution to this crisis?

The road must be theirs. Some of these cars cost more than one hundred thousand dollars. These heavy, powerful cars are going to fast to share the road. If there is a deer in the road, the deer dies, it is taken for granted. If there is a serious obstacle, like an oncoming truck, the driver dies, this too is perfectly commonplace. At this speed there are few choices.

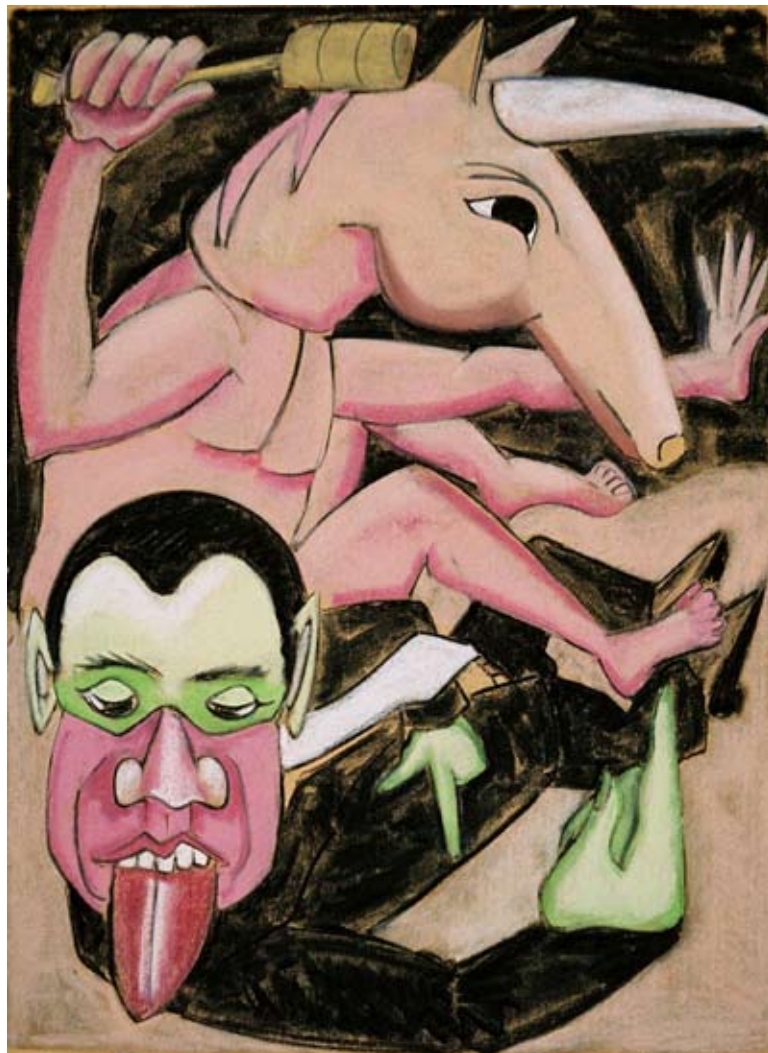
The driver is relying on some power to keep his path clear, the rules of the road or some higher power?

Is this modern religion, or just Russian roulette?

What about the bicyclist?

The bicyclist hears the car approach from behind. He does not see the car till it has swept by. The air turbulence created by the passing machine tugs at his clothes and the vapour of carbon monoxide sprayed out behind fills his lungs.

Like the wild life, we do everything we can to get off of their roads, to get out of their way and to protect ourselves from their recklessness. Like the wildlife, we are some times unable to avoid sharing space with them and like the wildlife we realize and feel our vulnerability.



Once we pass the turn off to Csobánka, which we later learn is a rich suburb of Budapest, the worst of the traffic is over. Old red Ladas with four workmen, one in each seat, lunch boxes on their laps climb the hill 55 km an hour. When the Lada passes there is room on the road for both the car and the bike. It is obvious to the bicyclist that these roads were built for the Lada.

We continue climbing, the roads are carefully engineered, never very steep but steadily rising, a group of young bicyclists pass us, they seem to be between 12 and 15 years old, and at the most weigh 100 pounds, 46 kilos each! These youngsters are riding mountain bikes and they just glide right by us. It is a nice long climb, a steady climb, not overwhelming, one after another, up, up, up they go with their bright yellow and blue spandex team outfits.

In the parking lot of the shuttered and closed hotel, at Piliszentekereszt, we look at each other and acknowledge that we have not seen a single sign for Zimmer. We ask a local guy where the Zimmer is. He indicates that we should just go on to the Dobogő-kő. We have been riding since nine in the morning we are feeling it in our legs, we mount up and start the final 7 km climb of the day.

At about 1200 feet we enter a hard wood forest, good sized trees evenly spaced, a green and grey presence along the road side. The quiet of the forest reaches out from among the trees and wraps around us. Darkness has arrived and it has started to drizzle, but we feel fine, have we entered the aura of the Dobogő-kő?

We reach a crossing, at the crest of the hills, 2 km up to the knob of Dobogő-kő, but there are brand new signs that say 600 meters down, the Estergom side, to the Shaolin Village Center? A car, coming from the direction of Shaolin Village, stops in the fog at this hill crest intersection, we ask the driver if he knows about the center and if he is sure the center has rooms for rent.

He is not a decisive man, but in very good English, he gives us a strong indication, that maybe, we can probably, sleep there.

The rain, the fog, the dark...only 600 meters downhill, it is too tempting, we decide to go! We have not resolved our lighting problem but we do have a head lamp with us and an idea of how to use it. We put our one head lamp on Katah's helmet, facing back behind us. The lamp is really strong and we are happy to see that this will at least announce to an oncoming driver that we are out here.

With our light behind us, Sam sets out into the rainy night, the road is steep we see nothing. Cautiously, picking our way along; is this the road? Why don't we see the lights of the village? Should we turn back? Should we turn onto this descending dirt road? Like mountain climbers we are reluctant to give up any altitude. We know we have arrived when we see, life size, plaster sculptures of men fighting, surrounded by lions, and monkeys. These figures are in dioramas and they are softly lighted to show off their pink and blue biceps and thighs. With long sticks and marshal gestures, one muscular man dominates another.

Greeting us, just outside of the main building are two teenage boys who tell us, "Shaolin is closed. Closed at 8:00pm." The boys fire up their noisy little moped engine and rev it, to scare off the demons perhaps. As they go they shout, "Dobogö-kö, just three kilometres!"

We decide to knock at the door, no answer, we knock again, and then we hear sounds coming from the back door?!...The cook is cleaning out his kitchen. He has a friendly face and comes around to the front door. He speaks no English, but we manage to make ourselves understood, we would like to spend the night. He calls in a woman, with a great head of very dark hair; she seems to be in charge. Sizing up the situation she says, "No, there is no room." We are startled! It is raining significantly now, it is dark, foggy and we are now 3 kilometres from the next hotel.

Sam is reasonable, and tries to speak to the lady manager, in Spanish! He explains that we are knocking at their door because they put up brand new, freshly painted signs at the intersection above saying that they do have rooms, and that they are open! The woman has studied Italian, to our surprise, and has understood Sam! The cook and the manager consult and decide there is one room available for us, for one night only. We are so relieved! We walk right in, and ask if we can also have something for dinner, the *plat du jour* will be fine. The friendly cook says, "Just wait one moment" and goes back into his kitchen to prepare us a full meal! This meal includes "Budapest ratatouille" a very enjoyable mixture of sautéed greens with ginger and soy sauce! We really have fun practicing our Italian, not that we have that much, but we have a lot more Italian than Slovak, Hungarian and German put together. The hostess proposes a few words and we re-arrange them and use them, vino tinto, poco dopo, bene! bene!, allegro vivace artisti! Amore!!

Shaolin Village represents itself as a meditative retreat centre, but clearly the monks are out tonight, as the TV is on in the dining room, there is music from a popular Budapest station playing covers of Carlos Santana's, Corazone Espinado, in Hungarian. Our manager serves us red wine and there is Johnny Walker on the shelf...the cook comes back after his chores and smokes a cigarette while talking with our hostess at the bar!

We find our cabin, and Sam jumps into the shower. Meanwhile I re-arrange the room to my liking, pushing the couches together and killing the giant cockroach. The hot water tank is the size of a garden watering can, so it doesn't take very long before Sam comes back. I have hung our clothes to dry on chairs, on the doors, or on shelves as the light has revealed an ant colony. The sheets are clean, and even with the extra fauna around us, we fall asleep quite quickly.

By 11 o'clock we are awake again, the rain water coming off the roof and down the aluminium drain pipe, is making a racket! We get partly dressed, hats and shorts and shoes and go outside. We change the angle of the elbow which changes the tone; we think it is an improvement. Before long we get dressed again and this time we just take the elbow out, silence returns to the forest and we sleep through the night.

In the morning, each piece of clothing, one by one has to be shaken and beaten to get the ants out.

The sky is still overcast, but the rain has stopped, and we are ready to make our ascent towards the Dobogö-kö. The road is easy in the light of day, after breakfast and a good night's sleep, we push our bikes some of the way and when the incline is not too steep, we ride. We are therefore, travelling very slowly and really have time to feel and enjoy the environment. The forests are of beech and oak, beech nut trees just like we see in the eastern forests of North America and Turkish oak. They are not really old growth, but they look like it because the undergrowth has been completely cleared away. This is a cultivated forest and what ever does not fit the mould goes straight to the stove! The forester selects the trees that have some fault and the woodsman cuts them down. We are at almost 700 meters; the trees are all the same, the same color, the same size, the same configuration, grey green, burnt umber. The floor of the forest is bright green but there are islands of wild flowers in profusion, a carpet of Bulbous Corydalis and Helleborus Purpurascens, paint the forest floor violet and blue with white accents.

Curious, we have seen so much wild life, but here in the forest we do not see a single creature?

People say that this mountain radiates energy because there seems to be a concentration of tectonic forces intersecting here, or because there is a dormant volcano hidden in the hillside topography. As we approach the crest of the hill the road is lined with retreats of one sort and another. The signs say we are riding the caldera of a mid-Miocene volcano 18 to 16 million years old.

Our friend at the border told us specifically that there is a stone which sounds the heartbeat of the earth, and other people have confirmed that idea when we mention the Dobogö-kö, but as we get closer the actual stone becomes elusive. There are no signs pointing out the heart stone.

The air is thick with mist the sky has not completely cleared, but near this peak most of the clouds have lifted and we can see a spring green view of the hills, buds and opening leaves, we are looking over the tree tops, at the Danube bend below, and the Borzsony mountains to the north. A very nicely dressed, trim and thoughtful young man, with a neatly clipped beard is visiting the peak when we arrive. He is an urban fellow, here from Budapest at a conference at the Hotel Nimrod studying the Essene Gospels. When we ask him about the heart stone he says it must be this one at the very top, the Dobogö-kö, the pulsating stone, when you put your ear to it, you can hear and feel the heart throb of the earth.

We sit on the stone take off our helmets and our sun glasses and press our ears to the cold stone, listening. We stop wiggling, we stop talking. We concentrate; we get more and more silent. We hold our breath, we can hear the forest, we hear the birds singing and we can hear the air moving, after a while, we become very aware of the rhythmic beating of our own hearts!

At the Nimrod hotel we are about to ask directions to the cafeteria when a cook, dressed in white, with checked trousers and a tall paper hat over his red hair, hears us speaking English. He forgets his errand and lets us know he speaks English too. He asks, if he can do anything for us. He seems to be last-night's cook's brother! We ask about the cafeteria, we would like a coffee. With open arms he sweeps us into his train, with a passionate smile and an outgoing gesture he says, of course! Right this way! Follow me!!!

We seem to have a way with cooks; this is our third personal encounter with a cook. Gabor sits with us in the very lively coffee shop full of young religious aspirants; they are drinking juices and holding their finds, stones and sticks from the forest in their hands. The coffee shop is all glass on the south side and the sun seems to animate the conversations that are going on all around us.

Gabor tells us with much energy how busy he is, they have a full house, he needs help. Is he about to recruit us? He bounces from his chair when someone brings him an order sheet, and tells us he will be back shortly. He sends the barman with our coffee, as he leaves. Shortly he comes back to tell us how he loves receiving mail in English, and reading letters in English, so we ask for his address and tell him we will write to him! The address he gives us is the Hotel Nimrod, so we ask, Nimrod, the tower of Babel?

No, he says, Nimrod the biblical hunter, at first this was a hunting lodge, only recently has it become a theological retreat.



Sunday Goose, by Katah

The sun is out the sky has cleared, "its fresh!" Katah says, "about 65" I say. We ride with our handle bars together, shoulder to shoulder, as we go through the village on the crest of the hill, talking about the Dobogő-kő. Did we miss it; the heart beat of the world, or is it only a figurative, poetic idea?

We have a 700 meter downhill ride to the Danube! It is Wednesday morning, traffic is light. The passage is just amazing, full bodied forest, luscious green, darks and lights, the trees alternate with the spaces. The tree and the not tree, rush past, we can feel the two different rhythmic patterns, one on each side, as we descend.

Is this the sacred grove of the pagans, arboretum, peaceful, meditative hill top, grove of sacred trees? We pronounce the name of the shaman Koppány. Our bikes pick up speed, effortlessly; we cruise through the woodland. We have chosen a path where our bikes take advantage of gravity; we have coordinated our route with the natural forces. We are in synch with a natural force. We are travelling a path that gives more power than it takes. Thrilling at the speed and the contour of the road we release our brakes and roll along silently, weaving through the forest, in and out of the sunlight, feeling the fresh air rushing around us.

At Pilissentlelek the forest opens on a high valley, with a village of mountain houses. The houses are a bit in the distance, our road stays on the hills above. The descent has been so breathtaking that we come to a rest at the road side belvedere where we can focus on the vista. The village lies along the banks of the river at the bottom of the valley, fields radiate out from the village and roads lead to the forest above the fields. Agriculture in the Pilis Mountains! We are admiring a very old symbiotic system of humans in balance with their environment.

Dodging the occasional pothole, staying out of the sand along the roadside, forgiving the occasional car that intrudes on our rêverie, we lower our heads stretch our backs toward a more aerodynamic posture and weave back and forth in long arcs along the yellow line. We are at the foot of the Pilis in about 25 minutes!

We have been in the hills outside of Estergom, but not this far south of town. We have seen the Suzuki plant with our binoculars, but now we are going just along the perimeter of this immense complex. This plant sold over one hundred and twenty thousand cars in 2004 and sales are on the rise according to economists. Our sources say this plant produces a new car every other minute?

After being in a "no market" economy, during communist and socialist times, Central and Eastern Europe have become the second largest consumer market in the world, after China. The EU offers real big bucks to investors while local governments offer very inviting tax breaks and high unemployment as incentives.

It is our understanding that in the old regime, in the time of the Socialists, the time of the Russians, the people had jobs, but were not considered consumers, therefore their labour resulted in infrastructure work; buildings, housing, schools, flood control projects, agricultural cooperatives, industries. Today, in this capitalist economy, the individual is not only a worker but each and every one is now a consumer. For them to consume they need jobs, industrialization is seen as the way to provide the jobs. Once they have a job, they can also have credit and participate in the consumer economy. Cars are seen as the best and most profitable consumer product.

At this time, over 25% of Hungarians have registered a car. But, still, the market is far from saturated and Suzuki et al are in full swing!

Actually, we read, the Germans have the tightest grip on the market, and that most of the cars are produced in Russia, Poland and the Czech Republic. Magyar Suzuki's plant surface area including parking lots and buildings is easily 15 hectares.

While we think about alternatives such as bikes, solar collectors, hydro electric plants, wind power; the industrialists are gearing up to make more and more petroleum guzzling, pollution producing, bone crushing, debt and profit makers, steely little Subarus and Fords, Suzukis and SUVs, consuming natural resources from all over the globe like there will be no tomorrow, putting a demand on the petroleum markets and fattening the profiteers who ask, how much blood will you pay per gallon?

Into the city we go, dodging traffic, enjoying the maze of back streets in Estergom. We notice a marble hand, sculpted in relief, and attached to the wall, the hand is part of an antique sign that shows the highest point the flood waters of the Danube have ever reached, 1.7 meters or five and a half feet, above street level, and it happened in March of 1838.

We take our time strolling over the bridge, pushing our bikes, looking up and down stream, watching the barges which come from Izmajil in the Ukraine, 1500 miles down stream. We descend slowly toward the border guards hoping our friend might appear. We need to ask more specific questions about the Dobogö-kö. He is not there we have not seen him in a couple of weeks. We cross through the border, we get stamped out of Hungary, and we get stamped again, back into Slovakia.

Blind Musicians by Sam Kerson



We park our bikes at the Maria Valeria Bridge Guard residence, in the early afternoon. Gyuri has sent us an e-mail, inviting us to an art opening. We just have time to take a short nap, get washed and walk to the city gallery. The theme of the exhibit is Egyptian sculptures and the entertainers are a group of blind musicians, playing antique instruments including a pig's bladder, with great gusto.

*Sent from the Bridge Guard house in Štúrovo (Párkány), Slovakia  
by Sam and Katáh  
May 2006*

*Note: All images in this account were created at the Štúrovo Bridge Guard Artist residency, thanks to the Štefan and Viera Frühauf Foundation; the originals are pastel on paper, 45 X 60 cm (18 X 24 inches).*

[www.dragondancetheatre.com](http://www.dragondancetheatre.com)    [www.samkerson.com](http://www.samkerson.com)  
[katah@dragondancetheatre.net](mailto:katah@dragondancetheatre.net)