HUNGARY

A SHORT HISTORY

NORMAN STONE

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For Anil Seal

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Preface

In the last sixty years Hungary has made world news on three occasions – in 1956, 1989 and 2015 – and her present Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, explains this quite simply: the Austrian border. The first two occasions concerned the Soviet Union, whose army had occupied Hungary in 1945 and forced her into the Communist world. The same might have happened to Austria – Vienna had also fallen to the Russians – but the western Allies had taken most of the country, and in 1955 the Russians withdrew. They recognised Austria as a neutral state, and she began to prosper. The Hungarians would gladly have followed that example, and next year they rebelled, making headlines. For ten days there was an illusion of freedom, but Soviet tanks crushed Budapest. Two hundred thousand Hungarians managed to escape to the west. In 1989 came another headline moment. By then, the Soviet grip had relaxed, and you were not automatically shot or blown up if you went to Austria (although one unfortunate East German somehow provoked a guard and was killed on 21 August). People from other countries of the Soviet bloc could legally go to Hungary, and thousands of East Germans went there on holiday. In 1989 word got out that they would not be stopped if they crossed into Austria. The Hungarian opposition organised a Pan-European picnic, and six hundred people just crossed the border, followed by thousands and

thousands in August. The Communist East German state, which had a smell of brown coal, a stupidity of sloganeering and a bullying frontier system all its own, was hopelessly discredited, and the shock to the Communist system was such that the most famous part of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall, was breached, and East Germany collapsed, followed by other Communist states.

These two moments of Austro-Hungarian history had to do with the decline of Communism. But in the summer of 2015 came another headline moment, when hundreds of thousands of refugees or migrants from the Middle East trudged into Hungary, making for the Austrian border. They were doing this because the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, had invited them. She did not ask the Hungarians' opinion. Overwhelmed by (mostly) young men trudging through from Serbia, Viktor Orbán famously put up a razor-wire fence to keep them out until they could be registered. Official Europe howled with rage, and the Austrian Chancellor, according to a Reuters report, likened Orbán's refugee policies to Nazi deportations – not an obvious comparison. Orbán vigorously defended himself; later on, he said that many places in western Europe had become unrecognisable – he could have mentioned Brussels – and that in fifteen years' time an adolescent born then would ask how this could have happened. No one had voted for it. And he also knew what he was talking about. For Hungary this was a matter of national survival. Her southern border is porous, the countryside flat, an invitation to invasion.

Hungary had already had a Moslem occupation, lasting a century and a half, under the Ottoman Turks. The Turks themselves in modern times have been quite popular in Hungary, for reasons that will be looked into, and in any case, after a good century of westernising reform, are tolerably prosperous, with no compelling reason to migrate. But the back areas of the old Ottoman Empire are on the move – North Africa, the Sudan, Syria and Iraq – and the Hungarians fear being overwhelmed. Their country is not rich. Being a member of the European Union has not been an unmixed

blessing: agriculture has not flourished as it should have done (you can see the difference when you cross the Austrian border), and Austrian banks acquired a reputation for rapacity in dealings with rents and mortgages in Hungary. Freedom of movement in Europe is no doubt a good thing, but it has also meant that more than half a million young Hungarians emigrated, mainly to Austria, Britain and Germany, and the national health system will take time to recover. Viktor Orbán stands up for himself, and now has an international reputation that few leaders of small countries have matched.

The most recent (and best) English-language history of Hungary, by Bryan Cartledge, is called *The Will to Survive*, and that title sums it up. Hungary's survival is indeed strange. The Magyars – their name for themselves – descended on Europe as one of several central Asian tribal federations, called 'hordes' (in Turkish, *ordu*; 'Hungary' comes from 'On ogur', meaning 'ten arrows' in old Turkish, and may have something to do with 'Hun'), and that is where their language comes from. All other such hordes vanished (or almost: there are remnants, such as the Turkish Gagauz – 'Kara oguz' – in Moldova and the Hungarian Csángó in Rumania) as they assimilated with peoples whom they had subjected: the originally Turkish Bulgars became Orthodox and spoke Slavonic. The Hungarians became Christian, but kept their language, and Hungary became a great state in the Middle Ages. Then, after 1526, she succumbed to German-Austrian Habsburg imperialists and Ottoman Turkish imperialists: for well over a century she was a battleground between two world empires. But she was not cut off from Europe, and joined in European movements: the Reformation in particular. The Turks did not bother with Christian divisions, which they could not understand: they only wanted tribute from non-Moslems, and even discouraged conversion to Islam. This gave Hungary her peculiar character, because the Turks prevented the Habsburgs from carrying through the Catholicising and Germanising programme that they implemented by force elsewhere, especially in the Czech lands, and in the eastern part of the country there was an

independent principality, Transylvania, under Turkish protection. It is a spectacular part of the world, a land of forests and high mountains, and if you define Europe's borders in terms of Gothic cathedrals, it is indeed on the edge. There Calvinism, with its ferocious devotion to education, survived in strength, the only place in Europe east of Switzerland where this happened. In the nineteenth century Calvinists played a dominant role in the Hungarian revival.

When the Austrians and their allies in the Papal-inspired Holy League finally won the Turkish wars at the start of the eighteenth century, Hungary was taken over by the Habsburg dynasty, and the title of a good book on this period (by János Barta) is *In the Shadow of the Double-Headed Eagle*, an allusion to the Imperial symbol. There is more than an echo of that term today, as the country is absorbed into the European Union. German and other settlers arrived, and only one third of the country could count as Magyar. The Habsburgs fomented and collaborated with a great aristocracy, and much of the Hungarian nobility, Esterházys and Pálffys especially, went along with this. The towns, such as they were, often used German. However, Hungary always had her separate constitution, and in the later eighteenth century there was a national revival. She clawed her way back, and the language was launched again. A period of reform and revolution followed, and in 1867 the Habsburgs recognised Hungary's right to run her own affairs. She did so very effectively, and modern Budapest is the monument to that era, which went on until 1914. There is another religious theme here: the very large Jewish presence. Jews got on better in Budapest than almost anywhere else in Europe at the time, and a theory went the rounds that they were not really Jews and that they were descended from the Khazars, a Turkish people whose rulers had adopted Judaism because they disliked the Christian attitude to sex and the Moslem attitude to alcohol. Arthur Koestler wrote a book to this effect (*The Thirteenth Tribe*, 1976), although its conclusions are not widely shared. True, Zionism was born here, but the chief Jewish periodical *Equality* editorialised that 'There is only one name for

Zionism in Hungary – treason'. The Budapest Jews contributed an immense amount, from Hollywood to the atomic bomb, and Arthur Koestler's memoirs show their spirit.

Hungary had a good nineteenth century and then a horrible twentieth: murderous defeat in the First World War, a Communist episode in 1919, truncation, by two-thirds, of the country at the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, then another world war, a Nazi occupation and a Soviet one, until finally, on 23 October 1989, she became a parliamentary republic, and the Russians agreed to go. I was there in the Parliament that day, sent by Max Hastings for *The Daily Telegraph*. Fat-faced men with piggy eyes voted for their own extinction as deputies, having made certain of a good sinecure with which to escape; but outside, it was moving to see how people somehow walked differently after the declaration had been made in the Parliament. Hungarians had at last had some good news. True, the end of Communism was ragged and unsatisfactory, but Hungary was able to rejoin the west. The European Union no doubt has its failings, but being able to travel without restriction through almost all areas of the old Habsburg Monarchy is an undoubted plus. In the old days you might have to endure long hold-ups at borders, and the train journey from Vienna to Budapest took eight hours (as against just over three today).

My own qualifications for writing about this go back some way – now, over fifty years. As a very young man I had got interested in the Habsburg Monarchy, especially its army, and in 1962 I asked the British Council if there were any scholarships to Austria. No, came the answer, but as things had turned out, they had just had an enquiry from Hungary about whether British students might be interested in a Hungarian language course – the British Council paying the train fare, the Hungarians doing the rest. I now know that this was a small part of a Moscow-inspired programme of détente, and we had a good welcome. The steam train from the Westbahnhof in Vienna took a long time, with customs and security checks at Hegyeshalom, and you arrived at a dark and dingy

Keleti (Eastern) Station in a Budapest that was also dark and dingy, the buildings still marked with bullet holes from the siege of 1945 and the rebellion of 1956. The Castle was a ruin, and the Elisabeth Bridge had not been reconstructed; there were empty spaces, like bomb sites in post-war London, where the Ritz and the Hungaria hotels had stood. We were put up, rather grandly, in the Astoria (still, mercifully, as it was) and the Grand Hotel on the Margaret Island, also nowadays largely as it used to be. The language course was in Debrecen, at the University, which had monumental buildings, opened, with his usual bad timing, by the last Habsburg Emperor, Karl, in October 1918. We stayed in a spartan agricultural college, and my best friends there were East Germans and Poles. The Hungarians we met were very good – well read, with excellent and humorous English, and I made some progress, though not much, with the language. I went again in 1963, and then had a great stroke of luck. Early in 1964 I got involved in a crazy enterprise to smuggle someone's fiancé out to Austria via Slovakia. We were caught on the border, but my timing had been fortuitous. Three months earlier, and I would have had nine years in a camp. Three months later, I would have been quietly expelled. As things were, I spent three months in prison while the authorities scratched their heads, and I shared the cell with a Transylvanian gypsy who did wonders for my Hungarian.

Back at Cambridge in 1965, I battled on with it for a while, but it was difficult. I had been powerfully affected at the time by A. J. P. Taylor's *Habsburg Monarchy, 1809–1918*, a wonderful essay, and Taylor had taken some of his views from his friend the 'Red Count' Michael Károlyi, whom he described as a saint; and besides, the great British authority was R. W. Seton-Watson, who denounced the Hungarians' treatment of their minorities, who then made up half of the country. In any case, someone said that central Europe was a subject for either the very young or the old man, and I was no longer very young. I had gone to Vienna for three years, working as a graduate student in the war archives, and I can remember

thinking, when I got back to Cambridge, it is either Germany or Russia. I moved on to Russian history, wrote about the eastern front of the First World War and came back to Hungarian history only in the early 1980s, when, as part of the Fontana *History of Europe*, I had the volume covering 1878–1919 to write. By then I had a better appreciation of what old Hungary had achieved, and was no longer starry-eyed about minority nationalism, having had the dismal experience of seeing Transylvania under nationalist-Communist rule in 1982, when you got impetigo from filthy hotel pillows and food poisoning even in hard-currency restaurants. Hungary was much better than Rumania, and I started going back to the country in 1985, when it was already changing fast. I went with a small team from Channel 4 to prospect for a programme about it, and by then Budapest was already involved in a sort of post-Communism that had its surreal side. We were taken through the sleety hills of Buda to an Institute of International Relations for a breakfast meeting. Arriving at one of those grand villas, we encountered treble-locked wrought-iron gates, behind which an enormous dog was howling hatred. A heavily upholstered maid in a white pinny came out, silenced the dog with a chop to its neck, and let us in. We were met by the director, a trade-union war-horse with no languages, and his assistant, a pasty-faced overweight young man who, on my enquiry as to his purpose in this life, answered, in an accent that reminded me of a lorry crunching over gravel, that he did the theory of international relations – but not the theory, the theory of the theory. Before he could go on, we were heartened by the clink of glasses upon bottles, as the maid came back in with the very welcome breakfast nip. By then everyone, but everyone, was cynical about Communism, and was looking for the exit. I was drawn more and more to the country, as were many people with foreign passports, some of whom were taken in by 'reform Communism' much more than the natives were. In Oxford there were well-intentioned seminars on the subject, at which a tubby Hungarian in a shiny brown suit would lorry-gravel his way through a lecture on 'market reform

in a socialist economy', would meet with a thoughtful response and be discovered next day spending his expenses on female underwear in Marks & Spencer. Such people were quite well placed to take over when Communism collapsed in 1989, and official Europe also found it easy enough to go on working with them. The present-day popularity of Viktor Orbán has something to do with this.

I hope with the present book to set out the main lines of Hungary's modern past, since 1848. The Hungarians have been obsessed with their own history, and a great deal has been written – not easy, because for so much of the time you have to refer to other people's history, whether Austrian, Czech, or German. I have used most of these books, but as this one is designed for an English-speaking readership, I have not formally referred to them all. In any case, since there has been a huge and important Hungarian emigration to the west, the English-speaking reader is even rather spoiled for classic books, and I begin my list of sources and recommended reading with some of them.

I have had useful help from many Hungarians and Budapest residents in the course of trying to make sense of modern Hungary. The Foundation for Civic Hungary supported the initial work, and I am grateful to Mária Schmidt for her support. Áron Mathé, editing the manuscript, has helpfully kept a foot on the brake when it comes to my generalisations. George Schöpflin, late of the LSE and now of the European Parliament, has been a constant encouragement, and I have had much sympathetic help from Tom Barcsay, Mark Odescalchi and Pista Pálffy. The London Library also deserves special recognition for the richness of its collection and the helpfulness of its staff. The late Professor Mihály Szegedy-Maszák was wonderful on literature, and introduced me to a Hungarian art form, malicious gossip. The late Gavin Stamp, an old student and friend, was hugely helpful about Hungarian architecture: as enthusiastic about it as he was about Victorian Glasgow. Bálint Varga has kept me going with suggestions as to reading, and I owe much to his supervisor, the late György Granasztói, as also to the former

Hungarian ambassador in Ankara, János Hóvári. At Oxford in the later 1980s many Hungarian students appeared, and I took an interest in them, which has been well rewarded, because several, including Viktor Orbán and Zsolt Németh (whose brother took me to Transylvania), have gone on to great things. It remains for me to thank Paul Forty and Matthew Taylor for their patient and professional editing, my son Rupert Stone for being my target reader and Sebahattin Kanat for general and generous assistance. I should also like to acknowledge the great help I have had from the rector of my university, Bilkent in Ankara, for 'sabbatical leave'.

Hungary is now a small country, but she is, as D. H. Lawrence said of Balzac, a gigantic dwarf, with an interest far beyond her size and the remoteness of her language. All in all, I am very grateful for the strange fate that caused me to be involved with Hungary all those years ago.

CHAPTER 1

The Setting

There is a landmark monument to Great Britain in the middle of Budapest: the Chain Bridge, over the Danube. It was designed in 1839 by an Englishman, William Clark (who also designed Hammersmith Bridge in London), and was put up by Scotsmen under the direction of Adam Clark; it was finished in 1849. It was, for the time, an engineering marvel, suspended over the broad Danube, and was the first permanent link between Buda, the old royal capital of Hungary on the hilly right bank of the Danube, and Pest, on the left bank, where barges were unloaded and the great Hungarian plain started. Pest was developing quite briskly, with a university, a national theatre and a museum, but at the time Hungary was in the backwoods of Europe, and the British arrived to construct bridges, drains and railways (and, on the Pest side of the Chain Bridge, an elaborate Lloyd's Insurance building, the Gresham Palace, now the Four Seasons Hotel). The Chain Bridge amounted to a statement that Hungary was about to be modernised, and for a time the tolls collected from people crossing it constituted a good part of the town's income. In the next generation Pest was a vast building site, and was planned by a body similar to the London Metropolitan Board of Works, its sewage sorted out by the board's chief engineer,

Joseph Bazalgette.[1] At that time London counted as Europe's most go-ahead city, defeating cholera well before any other and, with the 'Tube', pioneering the underground railway. In 1904 a final homage to Great Britain was opened in Budapest: the enormous Parliament, the inspiration of which was the Palace of Westminster, though it outdoes the work of Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin in historicising theatricality and sort-of-Gothic evocations of central Asia.

England was something of a model for Hungary in the mid-nineteenth century, and much was made of the historical parallels. There was an old two-chamber Parliament, called the Diet, from the Latin word for 'food allowance': in modern parlance, 'expenses'. It had had its equivalent of Magna Carta, although the Hungarian version (1222) was mostly designed to lessen the big nobles' power over the lesser ones. There was also a Hungarian equivalent of the landed gentry, the squires, who had given headaches to English kings, and there was a great aristocracy, some of it of medieval origin; some magnates saw themselves as Whigs, defending the nation against a tyrannical monarch. (In 1840 they already had their own grand club in Pest, the National, which was set up in conscious imitation of British examples, where horse-racing and politics were central concerns.) But the parallels with Britain did not really work, for there was precious little of a middle class, let alone a City of London.

Around 1530 Hungary fell to foreigners.

This happened quite suddenly. In the Middle Ages Hungary had counted as a Great Power, and fought Venice for control of the Adriatic; her kings in 1102 also became kings of Croatia and Dalmatia, whose power ranged from Bulgaria to the Czech lands and even Poland. That in itself was anomalous, for the Hungarians (they called themselves Magyars) were not originally European. They had arrived in Europe from central Asia in the later tenth century, in what might be called the last barbarian invasion, and for a time they, good horse-archers, terrified Europe. (The name Hungary may have

something to do with 'Hun', and Attila became a popular first name.) They had come from central Asia, and their language has grammatical parallels with Turkish; the Byzantines called an eleventh-century king 'Prince of Turkey'. All other such central Asian invaders were absorbed in the end by the host places: the Bulgarians, originally Turkish-speaking, adopted Orthodoxy and Slavonic, and other incomers, such as the Jazygs or Cumans, leave a trace only in place-names (in Hungary, anything containing 'Jász' or 'Kun'). But the Hungarians set up a powerful kingdom that adopted Christianity early on, the language survived, and it was the local Slavs who assimilated. In the era of the Renaissance, Hungary flourished, but something went wrong: over-mighty barons, peasant revolts and, on the Balkan doorstep, the Ottoman Turks. In 1526 the battle of Mohács found a badly led Hungarian army facing more than twice its numbers, with professional janissaries and first-rate artillery. The king himself was killed. From then until the end of the seventeenth century Hungary dissolved into three parts.

The largest part, the flat land east of the Danube, of which Buda was the chief town, was taken by the Ottoman Turks. They had, historically, a bad image: if a town resisted them, it was severely punished, but Hungarian legend and literature remembers many episodes of resistance: the wine Bull's Blood, *bikavér*, drunk during a siege of the northern town of Eger, is supposed to have strengthened the defenders so that the Turks were amazed by its alleged qualities (though in this case the episode was invented by a later poet). On the other hand, when the Turks took over Balkan places, they were often supported by the Orthodox, whose chief enemy was Catholicism, and for the first generation or two they operated a functioning state. However, it was a war-zone for much of the time, and agriculture in the Central Plain, the *Alföld*, was primitive, the great river Tisza creating malaria-ridden swamps. Hungarians were caught 'between two heathens in one homeland'. Around 1600, probably because of the great price inflation and climate change that afflicted southern Europe as a whole in the later sixteenth

century, the great empire of Süleyman the Magnificent entered a slow decline. It was exposed on too many fronts, especially the Persian one, and its inventiveness waned. Maps and telescopes had, of course, been essential for navigation, but these disappeared, as the religious authorities said that searching the secrets of the stars was blasphemy, that God sent earthquakes as punishment. The then Sultan, exhausted by his harem – another fateful invention of the late sixteenth century – gave way, and the telescopes vanished from their tower in Beşiktaş. The Turkish navy from then on was not much of a threat to anybody. The Ottomans also lost control of their forests, which in Hungary, as in central Anatolia, were destroyed by goats and by peasants cutting down trees incontinently. When the Habsburgs took Ottoman Hungary in the course of a quarter-century war around the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was a war zone, depopulated and primitively farmed. But a large part of the Hungarian population had much more time for the Turks than for the Habsburgs, whose ways they feared.

The Habsburgs had the smallest part of divided Hungary. The slain king left no direct heirs, and his dynasty died out; the crown was taken by his sister's husband, Ferdinand of Habsburg, the German Emperor. With that, Hungary's fate became entwined with that of Germany. In the sixteenth century the Habsburg dynasty saved at least western and northern Hungary from the Turks, lands that modern Hungary has mainly lost (they are now in Austria or Slovakia or the Ukraine), and the price was loss of independence. Ferdinand, whose base was Austrian, was German Emperor, and the Habsburg family at the time, by a set of unique twists, ran Spain, much of Italy, the Netherlands and Spanish America. The Austrian branch of the family had inherited various archduchies, which now largely make up the territory of modern Austria, and it also – though with less secure title – ruled Bohemia, the Czech lands, sometimes calling Prague the capital, rather than Vienna. Hungary therefore became part of the Habsburg Empire, and the relationship between Czech Prague, German Vienna and

Hungarian Budapest is a main theme in what follows. There were, of course, many other peoples – called 'nationalities' – in the Empire (in 1914 mobilisation posters went up in fifteen languages, including Yiddish).

By 1610 the Habsburg Empire had become a spearhead of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and the Thirty Years War (1618–48) tore Germany apart, leaving, in the exhausted end, a mainly Catholic south and a mainly Protestant north. The Habsburgs applied a sort of formula. The Church acquired enormous lands and power, still reflected in the giant monasteries that you can see at Klosterneuburg or Melk, on a bend in the Austrian Danube above Vienna, and in Prague. The Jesuit Order cleverly converted local aristocrats, and the Habsburgs rewarded their collaborators. They had to retake the Czech lands from Protestants, whose lands they seized, and the great Bohemian families were often German in origin – the Schwarzenbergs, for instance, who had ninety-nine castles. One more, and they would have had to supply an army for the Emperor. Their crest shows, apart from the double-headed imperial eagle, a raven, pecking the eyes out of a dead janissary, for in the seventeenth century these noble families were heavily involved in Turkish wars as well as German ones, and were given preferential treatment when it came to land grants. The Habsburg part of Hungary received something of the same formula, and grand aristocratic families did well, the grandest being the Esterházys and the Pálffys: big estates, worked by serfs who were required to do the lords' bidding. The Church also had preferential treatment, and a Counter-Reformation got under way: three dozen Protestant pastors with their families were marched to the galleys in Naples, from where they were rescued by a Dutch expedition. In Italy and Spain the Counter-Reformation encouraged, as Indro Montanelli says, 'monstrous inequalities', recreating 'a feudal-type society in which the closed caste of privileged ecclesiastics and laymen towered over the rest'.[2]

But there were severe limits as to what could be done through the Church Militant. The Protestants in Hungary had a safe haven.

Protestantism was stamped out almost everywhere, except in pockets, between Switzerland and eastern Hungary, of which the Principality of Transylvania was the chief part. In the Turkish-occupied central areas (the largest third of the country) it survived, chiefly because the Turks mainly just occupied the towns, and anyway were as bewildered by Christian divisions as Christians are bewildered by Moslem ones. A Turk could make no more sense of disputes as to whether Jesus Christ was a Real Presence at Communion (the Catholic idea) or not (a Protestant idea, though with disputed modifications), just as Christians can hardly understand the difference between Sunni and Shia Islam (something to do with whether the Prophet's son-in-law should have succeeded him in the seventh century). In their part of Hungary the Turks were quite indifferent, and when Protestants and Catholics asked the Pasha of Buda to mediate as to which had the right to a church, he just accorded the nave to the one and the choir to the other.[3] But these now weird-seeming quarrels were symbols of much deeper differences, affecting even the architecture, and especially the schools.[4] Protestants were literate, reading the Bible in their native languages. The Catholic upper classes, Jesuit-trained, were also literate, but not their serfs. A Catholic church was an elaborate affair, all baroque whorls, cherubs, gilded statuary, with a crowd of beggars outside. Monks ran the pawnshops as charitable institutions, and these are known in France or Italy as 'Mounts of Piety'. The Protestant churches were plainer, and the Calvinist version was a grim box, with another grim box attached, marked 'school'; begging was severely discouraged, and pawnshops (or 'pledge houses') were run by pawnbrokers of uncharitable disposition. Calvin himself, at Geneva, just removed the children of the poor from their parents and put them into a school.[5] His followers at Amsterdam invented the workhouse, where the lazy were put in a cellar that gradually filled up with water. They were given a pump to save themselves from drowning, and thereby to learn the work ethic. Hungarian Calvinism was very demanding: Péter Bornemisza gave two-hour