

Komárom and Komárno - A twin city on the Danube

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Anyone using the windy Elisabeth Bridge to cross the Danube between the towns of Komárom and Komárno will soon find themselves in a different country. Today, the river separates the once unified city into the Slovakian town of Komárno and the Hungarian town of Komárom. Not that you necessarily get the impression of being in a different country once you cross the border. Above all, this has to do with the fact that, no matter which bank of the Danube you find yourself on, the majority of people speak Hungarian. Regardless of which side of the river you are on, most of the people living there are Hungarian - and even Slovaks living here can, for the most part, speak Hungarian.

The Danube has acted as a border ever since the peace treaties were signed at the end of the First World War. With the emergence of the Czechoslovakian state, much of the former Hungarian territory shifted to its neighbour. Including the part of town on the north bank of the Danube.



Komárno on the Slovakian side

Today, Komárno, which is located on the Slovakian side, has almost 40,000 inhabitants and is virtually twice as big as its twin city. At the same time, Komárno is the most important cultural centre for the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. This is particularly noticeable in the old quarters of town where monuments to Hungarian poets and kings can be found on every corner. All of the productions performed at the theatre, which was named after Hungarian romanticist Mór Jókai, are done in Hungarian - for inhabitants on both sides of the river. The prerequisites for this were only recently established through the conclusion of a long-term bilateral treaty on the material promotion of cultural cooperation between the two nations. After years of Slovak policy viewing the cultural needs of the Hungarian minority not just with scepticism but even with suspicion, cross-border cooperation is being stepped up in a number of areas in the light of EU enlargement.

Despite selling out each production, the theatre's director, Tibor Tóth, is nevertheless dissatisfied with the level of interest shown on the Hungarian side. "We only get 90 visitors from Komárom on a regular basis. That's far too few." The director sees hope in the benefits that accession to the EU will bring both countries and therefore both towns. "From 1st May onwards, all people need to cross the border is an identity card. Before that, people living in

Komárom had to carry their passport with them if they wanted to go to the theatre on the other side of the river."

More recently, even town hall meetings in Komárno are held in Hungarian - with the consent of the Slovakian town councillors. "Relations between the Slovaks and Hungarians who have been living in the town for a long time are very good. Few prejudices exist. Extreme elements can always be found somewhere, however. They just don't play a big role here," says Mihály Mácza, deputy mayor of Komárno.

The pride of the inhabitants of Komárno is the Hungarian-speaking Selye-János University which recently opened. The university, which is named after the world-renowned doctor and native of Komárno, is largely financed through Slovak state funds. A total of 300 students registered with the three faculties in the first year and the university aims to raise its number of new students per year to 2000. In spite of the zestful cultural life, the town still needs to combat some deep-rooted economic problems. Following the political turnaround, the major industrial plants were shut down.



The Elisabeth Bridge over the Danube

In the mid-1990s, the shipyard, the largest employer in the town, laid off thousands of workers. Shipping traffic on the Danube suddenly ground to a halt as a result of the war in Yugoslavia and, as a consequence, the market for ships virtually fell through the floor. The rate of unemployment currently stands at around 25 percent. As a result, many sought to find employment in the Hungarian town of Komárom where the situation was totally different. Over the past few years, Komárom has become a flourishing economic region due to two major investors, Audi and Nokia, opening their production facilities nearby. The plants are also attracting the workforce from across the Danube. Every day, they commute across the bridge to reach the Hungarian town. There are no language barriers and the employers are grateful to be able to find such a well-skilled workforce.

In spite of certain worries, the mayors of the twin city view the future with optimism. Through the accession of both Slovakia and Hungary into the European Union, both towns will have extensive aid money available to them for urban development. Plans are already on the table to build a new bridge. The old Elisabeth Bridge alone is no longer sufficient to manage the surge in cross-border traffic. Every day, hundreds of eager shoppers cross the border from the Hungarian side to Komárno where they pay less for food and petrol.

The twin city of Komárom/Komárno invested a great deal of time and effort in preparing for its accession to the EU. A lot needs to be done since history has certainly left its mark on the Danube town. Komárom/Komárno used to be known as the "city of fortresses". Today,

the same 40 kilometre or so fortress structure which spans the twin city's border is in terrible condition. The fortress which once was considered "impregnable", where Turks, Hungarians and Austrians once fought, has not been able to withstand the onslaught of the elements at least. These days, visitors to the fortress are confronted with a somewhat pitiful image. The walls are crumbling and a large portion is overgrown with grass. Until now, the towns had not been able to raise the funds for the maintenance work. Now, they hope to improve the situation by jointly nominating the fortress for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In doing so, it is hoped that this unique tourist attraction will regain its erstwhile splendour.

As of late, the northern part on the Slovakian side can boast another sight. In the heart of the old section of town where, only a few years ago, a shrouded square used to frighten off visitors, there now stands a new, colourful building complex. The so-called Europe Place which surrounds



The Europe Place in Komárno (Photos: Csaba Habik)

the square was designed and built by ambitious architects so that the facade of each house reflects the architectural style of one European country. Among others, there is a French house and a Dutch house. Even spiritual Europe has been afforded its own monument: the Vatican House which, on the inside, presents itself as being very worldly, where, as fate would have it, an amusement arcade does its business. A bakery has made its way into the German house. The Slovakian, Hungarian and Austrian houses nestle in side by side and are a reminder of the era of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, friendly coexistence and the closely knit relations between the different nationalities. Efforts are now underway to rekindle this tradition of cohabitation. Accession to the EU provides the best possible prerequisite for realising a dream that many citizens hold, namely that of reunifying the two halves of the city.

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