

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DANUBE AND BRATISLAVA

The Danube – the second largest river in Europe –for centuries has had an important place in the lives of Bratislava’s inhabitants, influencing their way of life. It was a transport route as well as a border and a barrier; a source of livelihood but also an untamed element threatening people’s lives. The river gave the mid-sized Bratislava the feeling of a big city. When choosing the capital of Slovakia, a very strong argument for Bratislava was the presence of the Danube. The history of the city is closely connected with this big river. The Danube is part of its identity. It remains a stable element in a city which has changed its names and histories.

FROM THE HISTORY

The Danube (Slovakian: Dunaj, German: Donau, Croatian, Serbian and Bulgarian: Dunav, Hungarian: Duna, Romanian: Dunărea) originates at the confluence of the Brege and Brigach rivers in the Black Forest (Germany), flows through southern Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, then for tens of kilometres it creates the Romanian-Bulgarian border and flows into the Black Sea via the Danube Delta at the border between Romania and Ukraine. Altogether it flows through or touches the borders of ten countries. Archaeological finds show that areas along the Danube have been inhabited for thousands of years. People moved along the river in both directions, probably using it for transport. Continuous settlement on both banks of the Danube is clearly documented by the archaeological finds, which are nowadays exhibited for example in the Danube Museum in Komárno. The region from Bratislava up to Štúrovo was inhabited by the Scythians in the 6th century BC. In the second half of 3rd century they were pushed out by the Celts, who already used iron and for three centuries took over the area of modern Slovakia. In Bratislava on both banks of the river there was a Celtic settlement – oppidum. Later settlement by the Romans is documented even in writing. The Danube constituted the northern border – Limes Romanus. In Rusovce near Bratislava there are remains

of a military settlement which was called Gerulata. In Austria not far from the present Slovak border there was a camp called Vinbona and a camp Petronell Carnuntum. From the end of the 4th century Slavic tribes started to penetrate the region. The oldest parts of the city arose on the crossroads of trade routes, one of which followed the bank of Danube from west to east and the other ran from south to north. In 1465 the first university in Slovak territory was founded in Bratislava – Academia Istropolitana. The unlucky Battle of Mohács in 1526 won by the Turks paradoxically benefitted Bratislava. For three centuries it became the capital city of the Kingdom of Hungary. In the 18th century, mainly during the reign of Maria Theresa, Bratislava became the biggest and most important city in the whole kingdom. In that century many splendid palaces were built as well as churches, monasteries and other church buildings, the castle was rebuilt and enlarged, whole new streets grew up and the number of inhabitants tripled. In 1919 Bratislava became the capital city of Slovakia.

THE DANUBE AS A CONNECTING AND DIVIDING ELEMENT

The Danube in Bratislava created (Roman Empire – barbarian tribes) and still creates (Slovakia – Austria) a natural border between territories or countries. On the other hand people also tried to overcome this barrier. Below the castle wall there was a ford leading to the opposite bank of the river. This was because the river spread into several streams and did not have such a well-defined and deep channel as it does today. Bridges were another way of crossing. The first bridge over the Danube was built probably in 1450. It was a floating (pontoon) bridge and it was used for three centuries. Such bridges built on boat-like pontoons were common also in other countries. During winter the Danube froze and the bridge had to be dismantled to save the pontoons from being crushed by the ice. People could cross the river on foot on the ice. To prevent animals from sliding on the ice, people constructed a straw “bridge” on the Danube. They put straw on the ice and poured water on it to fix it to the surface. There was an opening ceremony each year headed by the first wagoner crossing the river. This tradition disappeared when the ice broke in 1626. In order to facilitate the transport of goods on the Danube the pontoon bridge was removed in the 18th century and transport across the river was provided by ferries, so-called flying bridges. In the next century Bratislava returned to the

pontoon bridge. Its middle section was modified in such way that it could be pulled out downstream to let vessels pass. The first permanent (iron) bridge on stone and concrete pillars across the Danube was opened only in 1891 and it bore the name of Emperor Franz Joseph. The bridge served not only for road vehicles, it was used also for rail transport. There was tram traffic, a train to Vienna. A toll was charged for use of the bridge. In 1945 it was blown up by retreating German troops and after its restoration up to 1990 it carried the name Red Army Bridge. Today the Old Bridge awaits an extensive renovation.

In 1972 another bridge was built, with the famous restaurant in UFO shape, then the Harbour Bridge (1985), which carries the Bratislava highway bypass; Lafranconi Bridge (1992) and finally as the fifth one the Apollo Bridge was built (2005). Since the bridges provide connection to the largest district of Bratislava, which grew up on the right bank of the river from the mid-70s, they are used very intensively.

The Danube connected countries and territories and has always been an important trade artery. A significant moment in “passenger transport” occurred already in the 12th century, when ships brought the Crusaders of the Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa of Germany to the meadows and forests of today’s Petržalka. From there the fleet sailed on through the Balkans to the Holy Land. In 1297 King Andrew III allowed the sailors in Bratislava to transport goods from Germany on the Danube in both directions.

However before the beginning of steam navigation the rapid flow of the Danube usually allowed only one-way traffic.

The first steamboat arrived in Bratislava in 1818. However in those days the Danube was not regulated for water transport and there were even several islands in it, which were part of the ford and enabled people get to the other bank. Later, due to the expansion of water transport they were removed. From 1836 regular ship lines began operation between Bratislava and Budapest. There were also cruise lines to Vienna. From 1891 three ferries called “propeler” plied between the banks of the Danube, from early morning until late at night, throughout the year until the river froze. They were a very popular attraction, as not everyone had the possibility to use long-distance transport. The small steamboat which came into service in 1911 currently serves as a gallery. Since 1978 it has been replaced by a catamaran ship with two diesel engines.

Of course, the river served not only for entertainment but also for transporting goods. Bratislava sailors obtained their statutes from the city council already in 1936. The Danube still serves for transporting goods and tourists.

SOURCE OF LIVELIHOOD

In medieval Bratislava fishermen had the most important profession together with vine-dressers and craftsmen. Fishermen rowed into the river at night and cast fishnets, which they drew out in the early morning. The fish caught were kept alive in special boats with a perforated bottom until they were sold in the market. From the 18th century the sale of fish was concentrated in Fish Square, on Fridays and Saturdays. Fishermen sold either by themselves or they were hired by bigger businessmen who even used to rent a part of the river giving them exclusive rights. The fish were sold not only in markets but also in specialized stores (e.g. Karas on the site of today's Manderlák). Carp, pike and catfish were the main fish.

Fishermen, water sprites and fairies were common fancy costumes in balls and carnival processions in Bratislava. The top event was a fish feast on Ash Wednesday. The grand historical processions of fishermen have been revived in the International Festival of Water Sprites, which has been held in Bratislava at the end of May or beginning of June since 1998. Later a competition for the best fish soup was added.

Another tradition, which existed from 1922, has been revived recently. It is the launching of a wreath with a candle using a wooden board onto the waters of the Danube on the Feast of All Saints, in memory of all those who perished in them.

The older generations recall clean water in the river, which sounds incredible today. They say it was safe to drink the water from the Danube branches. This statement is proved by the abundance of fish in the Danube as well as its natural swimming pools.

The Danube also provides other material that could be exploited in large quantities, namely gravel and sand. Most of the quarries were situated in its upper and middle part. The amounts needed to be quarried were determined in order to keep the waterway in good condition and arrange the regulatory works. After the construction of dams the situation changed. Extraction of these materials must be consistent with

the preservation of channel stability and security of the waterway. The extracted material is used mainly for construction purposes.

DANUBE RECREATION

On hot summer days the river provided pleasant refreshment. The most famous was the Lido swimming pool on the right bank. It represented a modified coastline, the gravel beach reached far into the river at low water levels. There were wooden changing cabins, sun beds and a small pool. There were also places for volleyball and other sports, a playground for children, a rose garden. The place provided plenty of possibilities for active recreation. In the mid-30s two swimming pools were built. The Lido gradually decayed till the 80s and has not been renewed. People used to bathe also in the branches of the Danube; one behind the Lido was particularly popular. Meadow, and sand and gravel beaches along the Pečnianske arm of the Danube were a water paradise for swimmers and kayakers. On the left bank small lakes were created by gravel dredging and during summer these were crowded with children and adults. Another recreation possibility was the wooden spa. It was a rectangular wooden structure on floats. In the middle there was a pool with a bottom and with flowing water. The pool was surrounded by wooden cabins and there was a terrace in the side of the river. They were divided into male and female sections. Tickets were purchased for two hours and the lifeguard sold bottled beer, soda or traditional crackling scones (oškvarkové pagáče).

Bathing was allowed only in assigned places, but not everyone respected the rule. There were adventurers swimming across the river, even up to today's Lafranconi Bridge or the Park of Culture and Recreation (PKO) where the Lido swimming pool was located. This was also a way of avoiding the entrance fee – one man took all the clothes and paid the fee and the other came by swimming down the river. Another amusement for young people was a wooden board tied with a rope to a tree on the bank. Standing on it young men tried to reach the middle of the river. However there have also been a number of tragic cases when rapid currents carried along incautious swimmers. This was the case behind the Lido beach where the river turned sharply right.

Watermen also belonged to the Danube and its branches. Bratislava Rowing Club was established in 1862 and in 1896 they built

a boathouse in the style of a romantic hunting castle. Unfortunately, it was demolished during construction of the New Bridge. However, the functionalist buildings of the German Rowing Association and the Slovak Rowing Club from 1931 still stand next to each other on the right bank of the Danube. The Dunajčák Kayak and canoe club was established in 1924 and is the oldest continuously existing boating club in Slovakia. Its boathouse was built in the 30s at the Lido swimming pool. In 1932 a division of the Kayak club was formed in Bratislava, with a boathouse on the left bank at the embayment in Karlova Ves. The clubs contributed to the lively social life and the watermen used to sail not only on the main stream but also on the many branches and their coves. Besides training and sailing, people met in the club houses. This was part of the rich club life in Bratislava between the wars.

In winter months the frozen Danube branches and lakes were particularly popular. They were used for skating, curling and hockey matches. It also happened that the main stream of the river froze and a thick layer of ice covered it completely so that it was possible to walk on it safely from one side to the other. This happened for example during the heavy frost in 1927 and 1928, and also in 1963. However, the Danube covered with ice evoked fear rather than sensation because in spring it could result in flooding. Thus, for example, in 1956 due to concerns that the ice could damage the bridge pillars an aerial bombardment of the river was ordered.

Many memories are associated with a ship cafe called Boon, which was anchored on the left bank at today's Slovak National Gallery. It was an old unused ship painted white. On the stern there were round tables with umbrellas. Some visitors considered cutlery stolen from the floating café as a valuable trophy, until the owner grew desperate. To prevent such thefts he ordered special cutlery with the inscription "Stolen from Boon". However this only increased the "demand" for this original souvenir. Many artists, celebrities and students used to gather here. It was sunk by allied air raids on the Apollo refinery in 1944.

FLOODS

The Danube, like many other major or minor rivers, has always posed the threat of flooding for people living on its banks. Floods occur for two reasons. The ice floods happen when the ice begins to thaw and the floes start moving, in some places obstructing the flow and the

water then spills over the edges. The summer floods are caused by the large flow of water after heavy rainfall – these can be anticipated and therefore people can prevent the damage more effectively.

From history we know of several floods threatening the inhabitants of Bratislava, the largest being in 1899 and 1954. In recent years there were floods in 2002 and 2006. The flood marks on historical buildings of the city bear witness to them.

To prevent floods, embankments were used. It is very likely that the first dikes date back to the 13th century. Systematic building of embankments occurred only in the 17th century. Already in those times a director of dams was elected in Bratislava county. Significant modifications to the bed of the Danube were made according to plans by the Italian engineer Lafranconi (the fourth bridge in Bratislava bears his name) at the end of the 19th century in order to prevent floods and build a navigation channel. Recent measures against floods were carried out in 2004-2010 in the form of protective walls and mobile barriers. The flood in 2002 was a very strong impulse for this work.

WATER RESOURCES

Thanks to the Danube, Bratislava has sufficient and good quality drinking water sources. The first pilot well was dug on Sihot' island in 1882. Municipal waterworks began operating in 1886 and drinking water has been flowing through the pipes ever since. Thanks to its good quality its needs only minor adjustments. In addition, the city has several other and younger water springs – Island Meadows (Ostrovné Lúčky) in Rusovce, the spring in the Pečniansky Forest and on the Sedláček's Island at Devínska Nová Ves, which with its four wells is the smallest one. It is worth noting that the most abundant water source is found in Slovakia in Rusovce; it has a capacity of 2,650 litres of water per second, although only about eight hundred is currently used.

BRATISLAVA AND THE DANUBE TODAY

From the mid-20th century the Danube began to gradually disappear from the life of the city. The regulation of its flow, embankments and water pollution led to a decrease and even elimination of the once very common phenomena such as bathing and recreation or fishing. The Danube became more a barrier to be

overcome by bridges, and a dangerous element, from which people need to protect themselves. Moreover it formed a strictly guarded border with Austria at its upper stretch.

After the regime changed in 1989 and especially since the turn of the millennium, the Danube gradually started to enter the life of the city. The reason is the revival of the old city traditions – e.g. the International Festival of Water Sprites with the best fish soup competition, or the annual laying of wreaths on the water surface on the All Saints Feast. There are also commercial, or marketing efforts that seek to exploit the potential of the river. For example the city beach with transported sand has opened on the right bank of the Danube every year since 2007 during the summer months. In 2010 two commercial projects were opened on the left bank – River Park and Eurovea with retail shops, office premises and apartments. Especially the latter managed to bring life to the waterfront and create a recreation zone there. They gave people physical access to the water by constructing an attractive green waterfront with extended terraces. The new building of the Slovak National Theatre and the statue of a national hero located nearby also contributed to the creation of a new city district here.

People are exploring the magic of the Danube also thanks to the attention that is currently devoted to preservation of the floodplain forests and their rich fauna and flora. The international cycle route, construction of houseboats in branches of the river, introduction of a regular daily connection to Vienna by the Twin City Liner and other activities support the tourist potential of the river.

The river Danube and its banks have dominated the city of Bratislava. It is a border but also a link between countries, nations and people. In the past it offered food to fishermen, pleasure from bathing in river pools or in the river branches, a pleasant time spent in the Boon ship cafe or in the Aucafe restaurant on the banks of the river, romantic ferry and ship trips. Apart from the pleasant events, old Bratislava citizens can still remember also the horrors of the flooded Danube.

The Danube was and still is an important part of the life and identity of Bratislava's inhabitants. It is therefore very gratifying to see the current trend of bringing it back into the life of the city.

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