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*Christopher P. Ball is an Institute Fellow studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe.*

## The Battle Mohács: October 23 - 25, 1996

ANTISANANA, Madagascar

November 1996

By Christopher P. Ball

I recently had the opportunity to visit the Mohács battleground, where Turkish invaders, led by Suleiman I ("The Magnificent"), crushed the Hungarian army of King Louis II in 1526. The king and 20,000 of his men were slaughtered. To many Hungarians, that desperate battle marked the beginning of the end of Hungary.

A friend of mine and his wife, András and Judit Király, had invited me to go with them to Pécs, Judit's hometown. From Pécs we would be able to make a day-trip to the battle site, which is only an hour from the town.

### THE 1956 REVOLUTION PLUS 40

The reason that Andras and Judit had time to spend with me was the October 23 holiday. On 23 October 1956, Hungarians began a two-week revolution against the communist regime, run at the time in Hungary by Mátyás Rákosi and from Moscow by Nikita Khrushchev. Since 1989, Hungarians have been celebrating the revolution annually and this year, 1996, a special 40th anniversary celebration was scheduled. Although Hungary's 1956 revolution failed to secure the country's independence from the Soviet Union, it did usher in many domestic changes. The revolutionaries, and Moscow, threw out Rákosi and replaced him with the softer dictator, János Kádár. Kádár brought with him the famed "Goulash Communism" that allowed the population greater personal and economic freedom in exchange for greater compliance and, perhaps above all, no more '56 revolutions to embarrass the Hungarian communists. Some also claim that Hungary's '56 revolution helped crack the ice of the Soviet Union's up-to-then unchallenged reign over Central Europe, thus giving hope to dissidents in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Thus not all was lost, but not all was won, either.

I had already taken part in two 1956 celebrations in Budapest (1994, 1995), and I was not all that interested in seeing what I suspected would be a very boring 40th. Already this year Hungary had bored its citizens with a very unspectacular celebration of the 1,100th anniversary of the founding of the Hungarian state under King (now Saint) Stephen I. In 1896, for the 1,000th anniversary, a lot of money was spent on Budapest and popular measures were taken, such as building the city's first metro (one of the first in Europe). Extensive celebrations carried on for days. In 1996, because of huge government debts (and deficits), minor ceremonies (not really celebrations) took place on the designated day of celebration, one of Budapest's main roads was renovated and that same metro line was cleaned and repainted. This was not only disappointing to the public, but coupled with the year's higher inflation, lower real wages and increased taxes, the holiday intended to celebrate the great Hungarian nation and its history was almost absurd. People drank not to celebrate, but to forget.

For András and Judit, the 1956 celebrations meant a break from work. They would take off half-days as well to allow for driving time to Pécs and back, giving them a total of two full days' vacation. The plan was to leave on the 22nd and

stay the night with Judit's parents in Pécs. We would spend all of the 23rd at Mohács and the countryside, stay that night in Pécs and return to Budapest the morning of the 24th.

### A NOTE ON PÉCS

We arrived in Pécs late in the evening, and I must confess that I liked the place very much. It is a quaint town with a population of about 200,000. Despite its near-city size, it has managed to keep the atmosphere of a small town, existing somewhere in the past. Its winding cobblestone roads are reminiscent of small medieval villages (at least as I would imagine them) and its mixture of architecture, ranging from Roman to Turkish to German to Hungarian, left a mood independent of time and geography.

Aside from the reflection of the occupier's culture throughout the ages in Pécs's architecture, the city has quite a history of its own. It is most famous, though, as a university town. In 1397, Pécs opened up the first university in Hungary and the fifth in all of Europe. It is still one of the major university centers of Hungary, best recognized in the fields of medicine and law. It has much to offer the interested visitor and I plan to return there in February to meet with university students and professors. That visit should provide me with more time to learn about and appreciate Pécs.

We spent the first evening in Pécs eating and drinking to excess, and slept that night at Judit's family's apartment. The following morning we walked through the town for an hour or so and left for Mohács before noon.

### MOHÁCS

Probably having seen too many movies about the Civil War, I expected the battle site of Mohács to be a huge empty field with lightly rolling hills of fresh grass and a distant tree line along the horizon. Somehow I imagined a hot day with a clear blue sky. This probably had something to do with the fact that my brother, an avid Civil-War-History buff, would frequently drag unsuspecting family members off to see Civil War sites whenever weekend weather allowed. Whatever my expectations, Mohács was different from anything I could have guessed. In part this was so because my brother wasn't at Mohács making us pose for pictures in front of statues of unknown soldiers (at least, that is, unknown to me). More importantly, however, seems to be that the



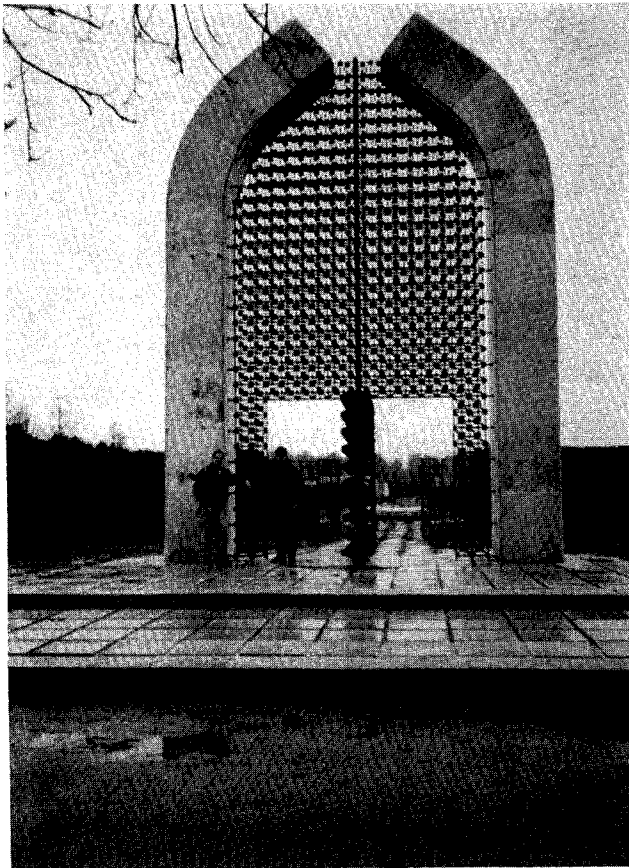
*András and Judit Király in Pécs. In the background, the Cathedral of Pécs. Originally built in the 11th Century, it has been destroyed and rebuilt several times.*

site of Mohács is generally more reminiscent of the cult film "Night of the Living Dead" than the more recent "Gettysburg".

The October morning was cold and damp. Light fog had set in, typical in that area of Hungary for some reason, making driving slow. Leaving Pécs, we entered expansive open land with few trees and very distant hillocks rolling off between the countryside villages. The barren fields reminded me of flat Illinois farm land out of season, except that the plowed-up dirt here was more the color of the red clay we call dirt in Alabama, than the darker earth in the North. We turned onto a small road that cut across a field and drove toward a distant clump of trees. Just when I was beginning to fear that the historical site of Mohács is now the same place farmer John (or, in Hungary, János) plants his corn, we came upon a strange white construction and a parking lot hidden in the small grouping of trees. We had arrived.

In many ways, Mohács is better experienced than described. That is to say, it is the feeling of the place that leaves the strongest impression on the visitor's mind. That being said, I will do my best here to describe Mohács as I saw, or felt, it as well as to explain its more objective significance in regional history.

The car being parked and secured, we walked to the entrance. Two great white cement protrusions stood about thirty feet high, and curved in toward one another at the top like a giant upside-down wishbone. Netted between these outer bones were ten thousand small-bone-shaped pieces of metal linked together by little pins, at the bottom forming a door for entrance. Communists have a knack for ruining perfectly good historical sites, especially those with national significance like Mohács. Having seen the entrance, I was still trying to guess at the socialist wonderland I was about to see.



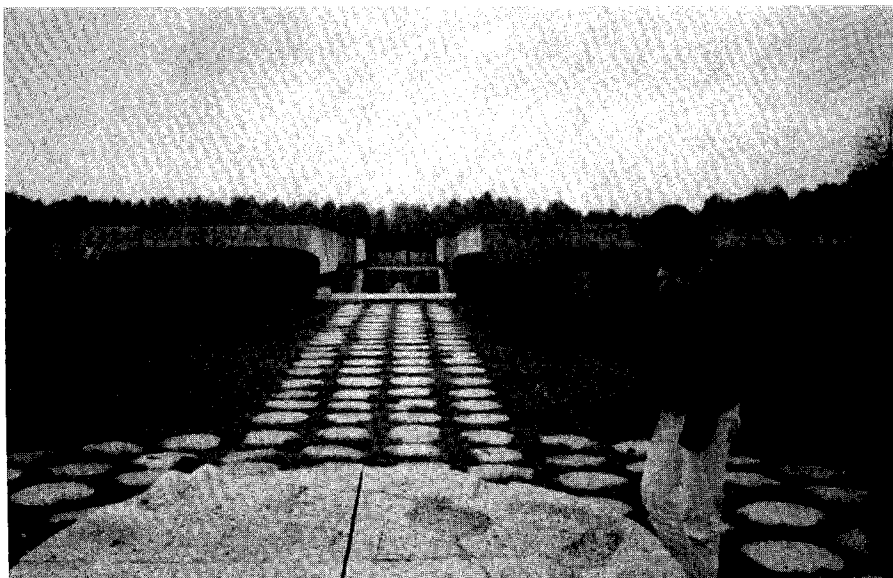
*The "bone-gate" entrance to the site of the Defeat of Mohács*

Passing through the gate of bones, we followed a little path of small cement circles in the ground until we reached a knee-high, circular cement block in the middle of the path. Carved into the top was something barely recognizable as a map of the area and the battle site. We attempted to divine some semblance of a map from the piece of cement butchery. A mountain and river were eventually identified, but not, for example, the battle site where we stood. Realizing the futility of further attempts, we moved

on, commenting on the stupidity of the cement map.

The path continued for a few more feet and then some steps led us down into an open-air, circular pit. Only now, writing about Mohács, do I realize that everything there was circular: the cement map was circular, the little pit we were in was circular, and the battle site itself was not only encircled by trees, but four pathways formed concentric circles around the center to the outer line of trees. In the pit we paid a minimal entrance fee, bought a small information pamphlet and walked around, studying large diagrams on the walls. Each diagram, complete with accompanying text, described Hungarian history before, during, and after the Turkish invasion. In detail, the battle itself was explained, including troop movements and major battle sites within the larger struggle. While the general events have long been recorded, many of the details were only fully understood after archaeologists in the 1970s discovered mass graves and weaponry left untouched for centuries. It was after those discoveries that they organized and maintained the site of Mohács with greater care for detail.

The circular pit of history described the battle itself and related it to political events of the time. But for Hungary, Mohács is more than part of the past. Despite its distant history, it still figures largely in the modern Hungarian psyche for several reasons. First and foremost is that it broke the Hungarian Kingdom into three parts: the Ottoman-controlled middle-Hungary; the western area, controlled by Austria's Catholic Habsburgs; and the Principality of Transylvania, inhabited by Protestant Magyars. For Hungary, this was a deadly blow to the Kingdom formed under Saint Stephen I in 996 and famed throughout Europe for its strength and cohesiveness. After the defeat, the only area of the three that had any significant independence was Transylvania. There, the Transylvanian Prince had to pay annual taxes to the Ottomans and occasionally raise troops for Turkish military ventures, but was otherwise reasonably



*Judit tries to understand the map. In the background, the path leads into the historical pit.*



*The mass grave of the 1526 Battle, uncovered in 1976.*

independent. During this time, while the rest of Hungary was under Ottoman or Habsburg rule, Transylvania became a major cultural center for the Magyar nation and a contributor to West European culture.

Hungary's division was clearly important, but its effects have lasted much longer than the division itself. For me, Stephen Borsody, author and historian, explained the effects of Mohács best when he wrote:

"The Magyars, enjoying comfortable ethnic majority before 1526 [the Defeat of Mohács], were reduced to a minority by the end of the eighteenth century. Apart from the enormous population losses in the Magyar heartland, two more reasons accounted for the diminution in the relative numbers of Hungary's Magyar-speaking people. One was the natural increase of non-Magys in the

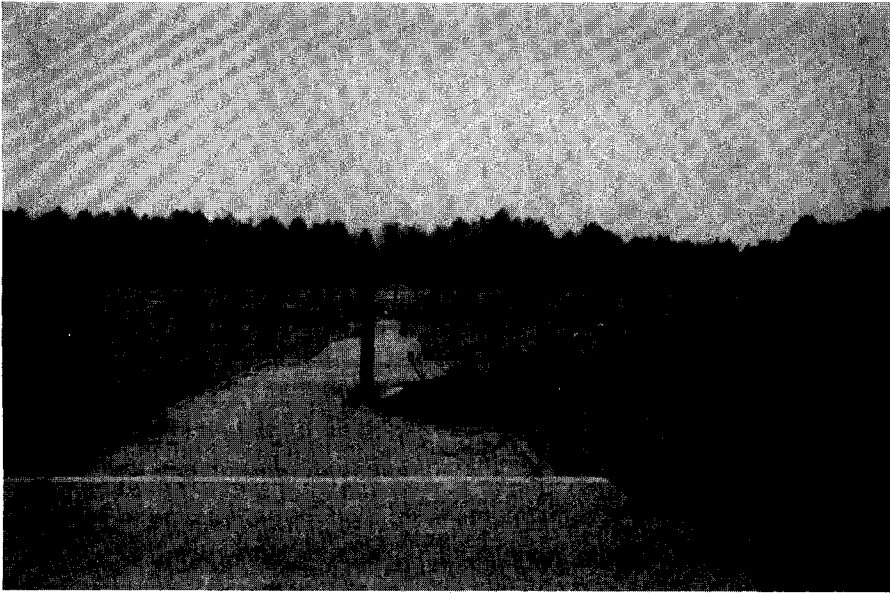
territory spared from the ravages of the Turkish wars; the other was the massive influx of foreign settlers after the expulsion of the Turks. The latter occurred partly as a spontaneous migration into underpopulated parts of Hungary from the Ottoman Balkans, but mainly as a planned policy of colonization by the Habsburgs. The dramatic shift, at the Hungarians' expense, in the ethnic composition of the Hungarian state led to the nineteenth-century nationality struggles which, if not the sole, were one of the principal causes of historic Hungary's demise."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the change in ethnic composition of Hungary led to further trouble during the rise of nationalism in the 19th century. When the rise of nationalism in Europe reached Hungary, where Magyars were no longer the strongly-dominant majority, the only



*Hungary torn into three parts in the second half of the 16th century.*

1. Borsody, Stephen, ed. *The Hungarians a Divided Nation*, Yale Russian and East European Publications, No.7, New Haven, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988, p. 8.



*The battle site, littered with wooden memorials and the open earth bleeding onto the walkway.*

way to maintain power and national identity was by breaking away from Austria, resulting in the 1848 Revolution and War of Independence. This was coupled with harsh measures designed to keep other ethnic populations under control, encouraging them to side with the Austrians against the Hungarians. This harsh repression in the 19th century is often called "Magyarization" because the emphasis was on forcing the minorities to assimilate to the Magyar culture, society and language. Today it is often referred to and remains one of the contentious aspects of Hungary's relations with its neighbors Slovakia and Romania.

After W.W.I and W.W.II, during negotiations with the Western victors, both these countries cited the 19th-century Magyarization of their nation as one of the reasons to receive segments of Hungary as a form of compensation for past ethnic wrongs. Today, when Hungary argues for greater tolerance and language rights for the Magyar minorities in Romania and Slovakia, Hungary's own record of intolerant Magyarization is often referred to, taking much wind out of Hungary's occasionally self-righteous sails.

The Defeat of Mohács continues to play a significant domestic role in Hungary's cynicism toward its own nation and history. This was well phrased by Professor Sándor Borsányi in a recent lecture when he said:

"Hungary has not won a single war since the defeat at Mohács in 1526. In addition, every one of Hungary's major allies has also suffered major defeat and collapse. First the Ottomans were driven out of Europe. Then the Habsburgs Empire, followed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was defeated in World War One. After that, Hitler's Germany was defeated in the Second World War after Hungary became its ally. Next came the Soviet

Union, and we know what happened to it. It, too, collapsed in 1989. And now we want to join NATO! No wonder the west is so nervous about expansion!"<sup>2</sup>

The lecture hall roared with laughter, but for Hungarians the jest contains a painful grain of truth. Today's Hungary still thinks of itself as a defeated Hungary. Its people have been beaten down and occupied by the Turks, the Habsburgs, the Germans and the Soviets. In a region of the world where history plays such an important role, this is not soon forgotten.

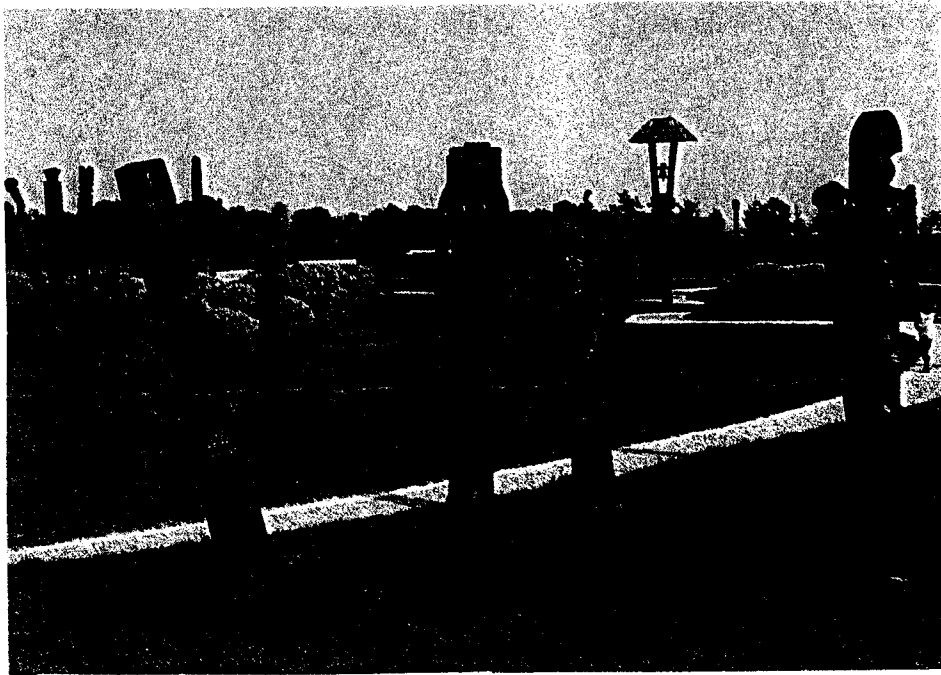
Back at the Mohacs monument, we stepped out of the little historical pit and entered the actual battle site. The first impression is one of confusion, coupled with an unnerving feeling that starts in the pit of the stomach. The field opened before us, a huge circular plain scattered with painful thorns of wooden memories jutting out of the ground.

The walkway led straight to the center through an empty field intruded upon by these seemingly randomly-placed wooden poles. Patches of ground were cut out of the terrain and overturned, the raw earth spilling out like open wounds. Sometimes the patches contained flowers; sometimes not. The red dirt from these wounds consciously bled into the walkway, forcing us to step carefully around them — in part respectful of the memorial, in part from disgust. The image that seemed most relevant to me then was one of us walking on the back of a giant dead man, one perhaps fallen in battle onto the spears and weapons that lay strewn about.

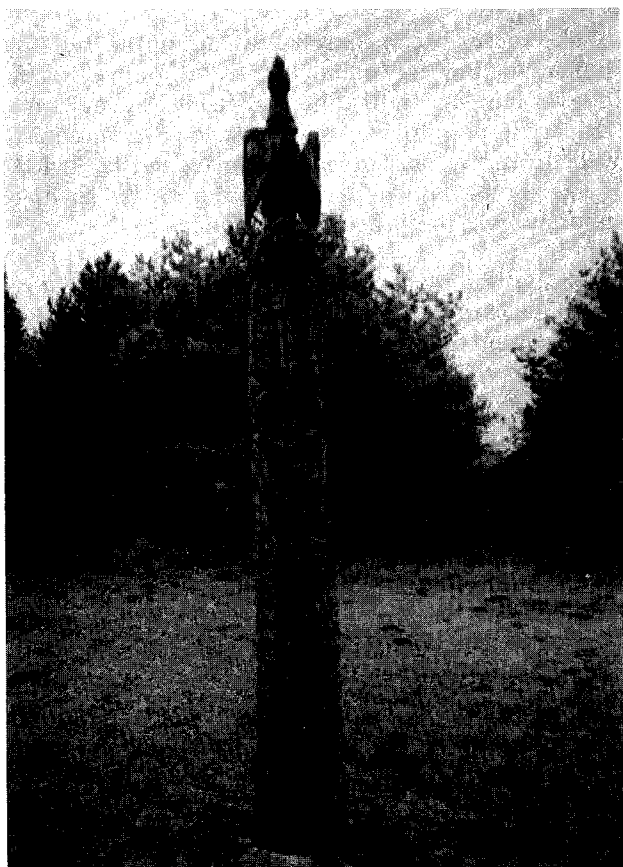
Aside from the gaping wounds of earth, the area was smooth and kept clean. It was oddly littered with wooden poles protruding at odd angles as though they pushed through the flesh of the battleground of their own

2. Notes from a lecture for foreign students given by Dr. Sándor Borsányi at ELTE University, 13 December 1996.





*The wooden ghosts  
of the Battle site.*



*Close-up of one of the wooden memorial poles*

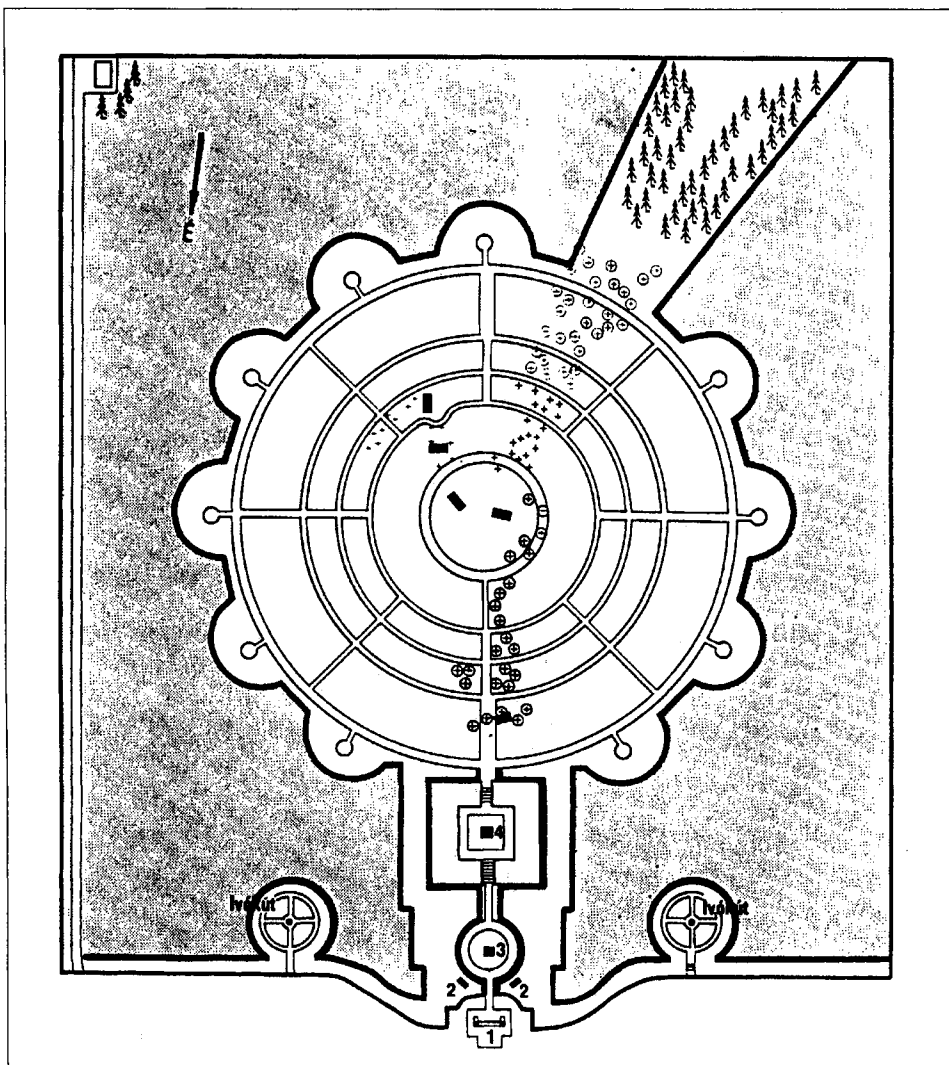
volition. Each post was carved into a symbol of the battle in some way. Some were of horses, others warriors, others weapons. Still others were entire scenes of warfare, with the whole tormented mass of battle carved crudely in their dark-wooden sides. The only element common

among them was that they all revealed nightmarish images of death and suffering. The effect was that of thousands of horrified men dying in pain, blending together in heaps of wooden flesh. Together with the patterns of torn earth, they formed a memorably contorted face of the battle that so devastated Hungary.

At first glance, each post seemed to stand randomly askew. Confusion congealed around the middle of the field, embodied in these tortured wooden souls. After wandering in silent appreciation for some time, we began to understand the pattern to the madness. The little pamphlet we bought with our tickets turned out to be useful.

Near the entrance were the representative posts of the mass burials and the Hungarians who died. They all leaned in different directions as though falling in battle. Then, approaching the middle, were two larger poles on either side of the walkway. One was the Hungarian King, Lajos II (Louis II) who died in battle. The other was Sultan Suleiman I, the Turkish victor.

Crossing the field, we examined a wide range of poles that changed in representation from mostly Hungarian to a mix of Hungarian and Turkish warriors and finally, near the opposite end of the field, mostly Turkish invaders. All were leaning with purpose, none able to stand straight under the burden of battle and death. There was only one small patch of poles near the center that stood peculiarly erect, representing the Transylvanian soldiers who never arrived at the battlefield in support of the Hungarians. The pamphlet explained that they had arrived in Hungary, but held back from the battle. Perhaps they knew it would be futile. Perhaps they had already struck a deal with the Turks, securing a semi-independent



*Map of the battle site. The Turks invaded from the east, marked here by pine trees. Note 1 is the "bone-gate" entrance, 3 is the cement map and 4 is the pit of history. The five small, shaded rectangles are the locations where mass graves were discovered in 1976. The circles and small pluses represent various troop movements.*

Transylvania. Whatever the reason, they never arrived at Mohács and their poles will stand forever upright in the midst of their fallen neighbors.

The battle site is encircled by a distant ring of trees, which eventually left us feeling trapped within the confines of the battle itself, and with its wooden ghosts. As if on cue, the weather was also beginning to worsen, filling the air with a thin mist that was thickening into rain. We left Mohács in silence and thought. Crossing back through the historical displays, the cement map and finally through the gate of bones, I couldn't help but think how fitting they all were now. Their peculiar absurdity seemed to fit harmoniously with the entire memorial area. All together, the site seemed to confuse and suck the life from the those who dare to visit.

The Battle of Mohács was not pretty, and neither is its memorial. It draws you into its horror, forcing you to feel its uncomfortable memory in a way that one does not soon forget. The protection of the car, with its soft seats and heater, was a much welcomed retreat.

We arrived back in Budapest later the following afternoon. Nothing had changed while we were gone. The 40th anniversary of the 1956 revolution had turned out to be as unspectacular as the 1,100th anniversary of the founding of the Hungarian state. I was not surprised. I think Hungarians today are tired. After years of division, of communism, of the uncertainty and difficulties inherent in transition, they are tired of struggling just to tread water and survive. They are ready to relax, not rebel. Perhaps one day they will be afforded that luxury. □

# Institute of Current World Affairs

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### Institute Fellows and their Activities

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Christopher P. Ball.** An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**William F. Foote.** Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

**John Harris.** A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John

reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Pramila Jayapal.** Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators and manager of a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

**Randi Movich.** The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

**John B. Robinson.** A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

**Teresa C. Yates.** A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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