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Easter Monday in Székelyföld

BUDAPEST, Hungary

May 1997

By Christopher P. Ball

Every spring the Christian parts of the world celebrate Easter. Each nation has its own tradition and in this respect the Hungarians are no different.

This year I had the good fortune to celebrate Easter with my girlfriend's family in Székelyföld.¹ There they still celebrate Easter the old-fashioned way: with painted eggs and hard liquor (called *pálinka*).²

ON THE FIRST DAY OF EASTER

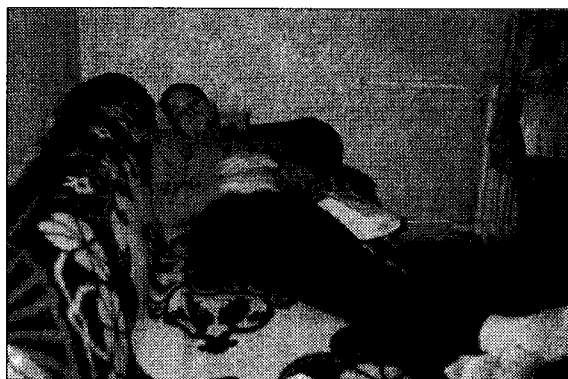
The first few days of the holiday are very familiar to the American. On Good Friday, the people go to church in dark clothes and long faces, remembering the death of Christ. Those of the Catholic persuasion fast, as well.

ON THE SECOND DAY OF EASTER

The following day is, as I suspect it is around the world, a vacuous day. That is to say, it is a day simply put there to fill the time. By definition this day does not exist independently of the preceding and following day. It is, and always will be, the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, nothing more, nothing less. As one might expect, nothing much is done on this day in Székelyföld—or around the world, to the best of my knowledge.

As for me, I slept late. I like to do that when I have the chance. The rest of the day I spent drinking coffee (my other favorite pastime) and talking with my girlfriend's parents: Tibor and Amália Gáll. My girlfriend's name is Emese Gáll.

Last summer Tibor retired at age 62. Things have been more stressful at home ever since. Originally he intended to work part time but his plans fell through. He had spent his whole life working seven days a week, 10 hours a day, for the fallen dictator, Nicolae Ceasescu. Tibor lives in a small apartment in a run-down block.³ He



Ball on the second day of Easter, indulging in his favorite pastime

¹ Literally translated: Szekler land.

² Pálinka is a sort of Hungarian national drink, still commonly consumed in traditional areas like Székelyföld. It is made from fruit, is usually clear, and tastes like something in between flavored vodka and pure grain alcohol.

would like to spend his free time now gardening or making things (he worked as an engineer), but there is not much room for gardening on the sixth floor of a communist apartment block. So, with no extra work opportunities, he just hangs around smoking cigarettes and getting on Amália's nerves.

They probably argue a lot when no one is around, but this is human nature in the Szekler region. The Szekler are simply an argumentative people. History has taught them to be this way. The Szeklers were already living in this rugged basin of the Carpathian Mountains called Székelyföld when the other Hungarians arrived. They like to drink and fight. So the Hungarians basically hired them to live on the easternmost outskirts of Hungary and fight off any invaders, which the Szeklers did very well. They spent their whole existence fighting during wartime, and drinking (and fighting among themselves) during peacetime. When they had the chance they also wrote poetry and music. In these respects they much resemble the Irish.

As the world modernized, so did the Szeklers. Today they no longer fight foreign invaders (at least not since the end of WWII), but rather have developed the ability to argue about anything anytime with anyone. Being perfectionists as well, they practice and hone their skills every chance they get.

On Saturday we argued about everything we could. We argued over how to make coffee, whether or not to smoke cigarettes, the color of the table cloth, how to sharpen steak knives and whether or not it was going to rain, among other things. Nobody ever wins and nobody loses, but I think a lot of steam is released this way. All in all, we enjoyed a traditional Szekler welcome-home, and then drank some pálinka and a few glasses of home-made wine.

ON THE THIRD DAY OF EASTER

On Easter Sunday the weather was warm and bright as it should be on Easter. There was a cheerful church service in the morning and in the afternoon Emese's aunt, a retired school teacher, came over for lunch. She is a pleasant but passive woman who does not excel in the art of arguing. After welcoming the aunt (we hadn't seen her since Christmas) we all sat down to eat a large lunch that would run a close second to any average American Thanksgiving dinner.

We began the meal with two shots of pálinka and then launched the recurring argument over whether I should place my napkin on my lap while eating or leave it on the table as per European tradition. They find my tendency to put my napkin on my left leg a very strange one and cor-

rectly point out that it serves little purpose there unless I am hoping to catch falling food on it. If that were the case, however, they feel I should spread it out across my whole lap instead of leaving it folded up in a little square on my left leg. The chances that falling food would happen upon that one little folded square of napkin are very small. They are of course correct, and I have ever since tried to remember to leave my soiled napkin on the table next to my plate in hopes of overcoming my foolish American ways.

After the meal and the discussion of my napkin problem we all took naps. The aunt went home.

The nap on Easter Sunday has, I believe, great importance. In the first place, it is necessary for the same reason it is in the States after Easter lunch or Thanksgiving turkey: due to the massive amounts of food consumed, one is not able to do anything other than watch TV and sleep, usually in that order. In Székelyföld, there is a second and perhaps more important reason. That is, to rest up for Easter Monday, when the real work is done.

ON THE FOURTH DAY OF EASTER

From Good Friday to Easter Sunday any average American would feel at home in Székelyföld. Many of the traditions are the same or at least very similar to the ones in the States. Just take a normal American tradition, add a little extra alcohol and an argument, and you have the Szekler version of the same affair. To the best of my knowledge, however, we don't celebrate Easter Mon-

day in the United States. At least, that is, I don't recall ever celebrating it where I came from, but then again I try not to judge the rest world from the privileged perspective of an Alabamian.

According to tradition, on Easter Monday Szeklar men go out to visit all female relatives and other acquaintances. The women stay home and welcome the male guests. I suspect that historically it provided a way for the communities to keep in close touch with each other.

In a traditional farming community, the woman would usually stay home and work, cooking and cleaning, or perhaps gather in a group with other women and sew or wash clothes. The men naturally went out together to work in the field or perform some other form of manual labor. The men in one group thereby kept in touch with each other and the women (in a separate group) kept in touch, but there was little crossover between groups.

Holidays provided a chance for crossover. This is the only



*The Gáll Family from left to right:
Aunt, Emese, Amália and Tibor*

³ A block is what socialist apartment complexes are called. The name comes, I suppose, from the fact that they look like large rectangular blocks set on-end. They closely resemble the buildings in American inner cities.

holiday where the two groups separate and purposefully go out to visit those outside the circle of the immediate blood relationship. Christmas, for example, is a more family-oriented holiday than Easter among Hungarians.

Why this crossover function occurs in Spring seems to relate more to the Hungarians' pagan roots than to their Christian ones. It is, I believe, purely a matter of convenience that it occurs around Easter time.

Spring is often associated with fertility, particularly in agriculturally-based societies where farmers must "impregnate" the ground with crop seeds every Spring. Many societies have fertility rituals in Spring and, I believe, the Hungarians' Easter Monday, called "*Locsolás*" (literally translated: splashing of water or other liquid), is, in this respect, a fertility ritual, although not fully recognized as such any more.

Rather than dress up for visiting guests, the women on this day dress down in clothes that can be dirtied and easily washed. In addition, they clean the guest room and put out a table covered with pastries, other finger food and bottles of *pálinka*.

The men, on the other hand, dress up in their finest clothes and carry a bottle of perfume with them on their rounds. Again, modern practice deviates slightly from tradition in that men used to carry water (often in buckets). When a man arrives at a house, he first wishes the women a happy Easter, then splashes (thus the name *locsolás* in Hungarian) her with perfume and kisses her. After this, he is invited inside for some shots (notice this is plural) of *pálinka*,



From left to right: Emese, Tibor, Béla Bácsi (literally: Uncle Béla), Amália and Irénke Néni (literally: Aunt Irénke). This is a rare occasion where the women accompanied the men on a visit. The bottles of *pálinka* are on the floor.

snacks and then they have a friendly chat, or argue if they are close enough friends. Otherwise, everything is very cordial and almost rehearsed: sit up straight and properly, kindly accept all alcohol that comes your way and then ask, "how is the family? your work? your husband? etc.," politely check your watch, comment on how many other houses you need to visit, grab your coat, wish the hostess well and head to the next stop.

The younger men are also required to recite a little poem to the women before they splash them with perfume (or water). The poem is usually humorous and occasionally risqué. Being only 24 years old, and looking even younger, I too was required to recite a brief poem although in years past I had been exempted due to the language barrier. This year's poem played on the similarity between the word to splash (*locsolni*, in Hungarian) and to taste (*kóstolni*, in Hungarian), was very short and went something like this: This year I came here of course to splash (*locsolni*), but chiefly find *pálinka* to taste (*kóstolni*). Not Shakespeare, but sufficient to earn some kisses on the cheek and a few shots of *pálinka*.

Before leaving the house, the men (usually the younger ones) also receive a red Easter egg from the women. The Szeklers tell me that the egg relates to the traditional pagan connection between fertility and Spring. I must confess, however, that even after eating the egg I experienced no noticeable changes.

One final note: I have estimated that the rate of *pálinka* consumption is about one shot every ten minutes. Also, the length of stay at the first house is approximately ten minutes, but lengthens exponentially at each successive house, resulting in (and resulting from) greater *pálinka* consumption. For this reason, the least-liked people are visited first while the stay is still short, and the more-liked people later when the stay is longer and the loosened tongue of the *pálinka*-consuming men is less likely to offend.

This year, Tibor and I left the house for the *locsolás* around 1:00 p.m. and stumbled home sometime before midnight. We had visited more than ten houses and had drunk countless shots of *pálinka*. The women (Emese and her mother), too, had been receiving guests and drinking all day. We all promptly went to bed and slept late the following day.

ON THE FIFTH DAY OF EASTER

I think on this same Tuesday every year no one argues. Silence fills Székelyföld. Once again, Easter has come and gone.



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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 studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without 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]

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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

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