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Between Two Worlds:
Austria's Burgenland

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The Burgenland is historically and geographically unlikely: a misshapen stringbean of a country, one hundred miles from north to south, 38 miles wide at its widest, but squeezed in the middle by a political trick that left it 2.5 miles wide at Sieggraben. It cuts a curious figure on the map and reminds one of the Marches of medieval Europe, territorial frontiers created as buffers against national enemies - Scots, Moors, or Avars.

And that is, in fact, its function. For the Burgenland (which means "Land of Fortresses") divides the western world from Communist Hungary, and its eastern border comprises the entire Hungarian Iron Curtain. Again, as in the days when its castles were built, it is a frontier land, standing guard duty for Western Christendom against an alien, pagan East.

Nowhere is this feeling more overpowering than in one of its ancient fortresses, first built against the Magyars and later manned against the Turks. The castle at Güssing, in the far south, dates from the 12th century and assumed its present form in the 16th, when the Burgenland and its adjoining plains were all of Pannonia that had been saved from the Ottomans. Last week I stood in its Rittersaal - the Knight's Hall - and peered through powerful binoculars far out across the Hungarian plain, while Ludwig Nemeth, curator of the castle, named the Hungarian villages to me - and pointed out the barbed wire, the minefields and the wooden watchtowers on the other side of the border. Through this same high window Herr Nemeth's ancestors had watched - without binoculars - for the white dust in the summer haze that meant the Magyars or the Turkish cavalry was on the move again. On the walls of the Rittersaal were the portraits of the Batthyany family, Hungarian nobles and owners of the castle since the beginning of the 16th century - a fierce, Oriental breed of men staring down from portraits that, as late as Maria Theresa's day, were still distinctly non-European. Behind me, in the next room, Herr Nemeth had laid out on the tables the relics he has collected from around the castle: artifacts left behind by the Illyrians, the Celts, the Romans, the Goths, the Longobards, the Avars, the Magyars and the Turks who have passed this way on their road to conquest. On the whitewashed walls were the penciled autographs of Red Army soldiers, the castle's most recent besiegers from the East.

The border is always close. I have visited it in seven places, from Kittsee in the north, where Hungary and Czechoslovakia come together, to Heiligenkreuz a hundred miles to the south, near where Hungary and Yugoslavia come together, and talked with the Austrian borderguards and looked across at what the Burgenlanders sarcastically call "the Paradise beyond". The Iron Curtain comes in various forms here, according to the whim and budget of the local Hungarian area commanders. There is always barbed wire, usually at least two fences of it sometimes strung between wooden posts, sometimes improved with concrete posts and concrete traps. The tall wooden watchtowers are uniform the length of the border. I have never seen the ploughed or raked fields beyond the fences that are reported from other parts of the East-West frontier, but the Hungarian government has recently announced new and stricter pass-laws for citizens allowed into the restricted zone that extends ten kilometers back from the border. The minefields are invisible, but the Austrian guards assure me they are there, usually between two rows of barbed wire, but sometimes - as by Mörbisch on the Neusiedler Lake - on the Austrian side of the first fence, which is here set back two meters inside Hungarian territory.

At such points the Austrian border guards try always to be on hand, to prevent curious tourists, who ignore the Austrian flags put up to mark the actual frontier (or who take away the flags as souvenirs), from tromping on the mines. The Austrian deer, who come at night, are harder to protect, and four have been blown up this summer near Mörbisch. The loss of one Hungarian deer on the other side proved the presence of a second minefield.

Most of the many roads that once crossed the frontier turn to grass as they approach the border and are closed by barbed wire and mines. Only four crossing points are still open to traffic. In some cases, however - by the old St. Margarethen-Odenburg road, for example - the Hungarians have set their barriers some yards back on their own soil, to enable Austrian farmers to continue to use a country lane that meanders back and forth across the border.

This border, which has assumed such great importance since it became an Iron Curtain between worlds, is not old. It was drawn, and the province was created, in the years 1919-21 - even the name "Burgenland" was invented at that time. It is such recent twists of history that make this land, the least known to Americans of the provinces of Austria, so fascinating.

The Burgenland came to Austria in 1921, a partial and haphazard application of Wilsonian principles and the only acquisition of territory by a defeated power in World War I: 4000 square kilometers and 287,000 inhabitants to balance against the loss of Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, Slovenia, Dalmatia, the Bukovina, Trieste and the South Tyrol. All of these lost provinces had had their German-Austrian minorities, but West Hungary, which had never been a province, was at least 82% German-Austrian and at most 8% Magyar. And the Allies had recently become aware that the Magyar record as oppressors of subject nationalities was the worst in Europe.

So German West Hungary was written down for Austria by the Versailles powers, and the part of it that was actually transferred after two years of Hungarian delaying tactics became the Burgenland.

The background and circumstances of this transfer are more than a matter of historical curiosity, since this border drawn under various pressures in 1921 has now become a border between two worlds, to which the Hungarians are publicly unreconciled and over which the Austrians showed some nervousness at the time of the Hungarian rising of 1956.

(The endurance in unexpected places of Magyar territorial and chauvinist pretensions has been pointed out to me in an article from the 5 November 1958 issue of Magyar Egyseg, a newspaper published by anti-Communist Hungarian refugees in Buenos Aires. The Burgenland Catholic churches, still formally under two Hungarian bishoprics, have been administered since 1921 by a Suffragan Bishop under the authority of the Archbishop of Vienna. As a symbol of Rome's recognition of the present borders, this apparently irritates the Hungarians. Now the present Suffragan Bishop, a Dr. Laszlo of mixed Magyar-Croat ancestry, is in favor of a regularizing of this situation through the establishment of a separate Bishopric for the Burgenland, and this was the occasion for the latest outburst by the emigrees in Argentina, who see in Dr. Laszlo's proposal hidden Austrian expansionist ambitions at the expense of Hungary! To prefer to see these churches under Hungarian bishops seems to the Austrians a curious sort of anti-Communism and a curious sort of Catholicism.)

The territory that is now the Burgenland had been a part of the Hungarian crown of St. Stephen for most of the last thousand years, but seems never to have contained many Magyars. Earlier part of Charlemagne's Ostmark (East March) against the Avars, then part of the Dukedom of Bavaria, it was probably part of a dowry bestowed by Holy Roman Emperor Henry II on Hungarian King Stephen I in the year 1000, when the Magyar king accepted Christianity and a crown from the Pope, and the Burgenland and a daughter from the Emperor. As a dowry, the area should have reverted to Queen Gisela on the death of husband Stephen, but his successor in Hungary held it by force and so came to a series of confused wars with the German Empire. It is unclear where the border lay in the centuries that followed, although the Counts of Güssing at one time (ca. 1300) established virtually an independent principality balanced between Empire and Hungary.

Independent Hungary fell to the Turks in 1526, in an invasion that was broken only before the gates of Vienna. The western Hungarians elected Archduke Ferdinand of Austria as their King, and the Austrians were able to save West Hungary, including the Burgenland, from Turkish domination and for Christianity. But the retreat of the Turks left the area virtually depopulated. For its defence and reconstruction

Ferdinand gave dominion over the Burgenland districts to the most energetic of the Hungarian noble families that had remained loyal to Christianity, the Esterhazy, who had lost their ancestral lands in east Hungary to the Turks. Prince Esterhazy, to re-populate his new lands, invited in Croat farmers (driven from their own homes in the south by the Turks) and Germans from other Habsburg dominions to the west. But it was not until the Thirty Years' War that the area was again placed, at Esterhazy insistence, under Hungarian administration.

It remained what it then became, a land of German and Croat peasants ruled by West Hungarian nobility. These nobles - like the Batthyany at Güssing and Bernstein and the Esterhazy at Forchtenstein - looked out of the castles they built or enlarged atop these easternmost Alps across the plain that their ancestors had conquered 700 years earlier, but which the Turks now possessed. The Burgenland was the frontier of Europe, guarding the approaches to Vienna and the west, astride the ancient trade route from Italy to the Baltic - the Bernstein road that passes through Slovenia and Styria, around the eastern flank of the Alps, through the Vienna Basin and the valleys of the March and the Oder rivers.

When the Turks came again in 1683 to besiege Vienna, some of the castles fell, some of them stood. Then the Turks withdrew, with Prince Eugene of Savoy in pursuit, and the liberation of the rest of Hungary followed. The land was laid waste again, and more Germans - this time from Habsburg lands in Southwest Germany, the so-called Swabians - followed to fill the empty villages. An Austrian-German culture with Hungarian touches flourished, and the Esterhazy court in Eisenstadt became a minor art center, especially for music - here Haydn, who was born in a Burgenland-Lower Austrian border village, did his life's work, while in central Burgenland the birthplace of Liszt can be visited and the German and Magyar memorial plaques - each claiming him - can be compared.

If all this seems an academic re-hashing of Medieval and Baroque history, how else is one to understand this peculiar entity of the mid-Twentieth Century, the Austrian Federal Province of the Burgenland? Many things become clearer: How an area could be under Hungarian administration most of the time since the year 1000 and all of the time since 1646, yet be transferable to Austria in 1921 with full moral justification under Wilson's strict code. How, in a Hungarian landscape, and in villages that belong to the Hungarian plain in their architecture and in their atmosphere, a population could live that is German-Austrian (86.8%) and Croat (11.1%), and only 1.9% Magyar. Why the name Esterhazy is everywhere invoked, and why the present (and last) Prince Esterhazy is still the largest landowner in the Province. Why the people are the most anti-Magyar in Austria and why their warm-hearted hospitality to the Magyar refugees of 1956 is especially to be congratulated.

The border on the western side of the Burgenland of today was the pre-1918 border between the Austrian and Hungarian parts of the Dual Monarchy. In the north it is largely traced by the

Leitha River, an insignificant tributary of the Danube, and so the non-Hungarian half of the old Monarchy, which never had a proper constitutional name, is sometimes referred to as "Cis-Leithanian Austria" in the books. At Bruck-an-der-Leitha on the road to Budapest and at Wimpassing on the way to Eisenstadt and Ödenburg one used to cross the border, and the villages on the far side bore Hungarian names in those days. One cannot cross this little river today without thinking that, had it not been for this unexpected application of Wilson's principle of national self-determination, here would be the Iron Curtain, and the Germans of Eisenstadt, the Croats of Parndorf and the Magyars of Pullendorf would live under quite a different political system. It is a useful reminder of the role that chance plays in history.

But had the Wilsonian principle been fully applied, and had the Magyars not been so stubborn in resistance, the Burgenland would be larger, and a more rational unit.

The zeal of Magyar chauvinism and the extremes to which Magyarization policies were taken in Hungary after 1867 are well known in America. Although the Magyars numbered only 43% of the population of pre-1918 Greater Hungary, Magyar was the sole legal language and the only language of the schools. In the Burgenland the Germans suffered as much from these policies as the Rumanians in Transylvania, the Slovaks in Slovakia, or the Serbs in the Banat. I have talked to older Burgenlanders, educated before the First World War, who still count and do sums in Magyar and who read more easily in Magyar than in their own German. It was the language in which they were taught.

Mute evidence of the sufferings of the Burgenlanders under Magyar rule are the demographic statistics of the district since 1880. In that year the population of what is now the Burgenland was 270,100. In 1923, the first census under Austrian rule, it stood at 285,700, despite a strongly positive birthrate-deathrate ratio in the intervening years. The difference: between 1880 and 1890, 13,700 Burgenlanders emigrated, most of them to America; between 1891 and 1900 some 18,600 left, and from 1901 and 1910 over 31,900 (well over 10% of the total population). Between 1910 and 1923 another 20,300 emigrated. In the total period, from 1870 to 1951, some 146,000 Burgenlanders left their homeland, and as a result the province counted at the last census only 21,800 more inhabitants than it had had in 1870 - the most emigrants and the smallest population growth in Austria.

With the end of the First World War both halves of the Habsburg Monarchy disintegrated and the Succession States began to quarrel over the spoils. In Hungary Count Michael Karolyi founded his ill-fated Republic and, in a desperate effort to hold the lands of the Crown of St. Stephen together, he proposed to create an "eastern Switzerland" in which the nationalities would all have autonomy and there would be no more Magyar chauvinism. One of the entities to be created was the "Autonomous Government of German West-Hungary", with its capital at Ödenburg, the most important town of the area. The autonomy promise was renewed by Bela Kun when his Soviet Republic replaced Karolyi's bourgeois one.

In Paris German West Hungary was already written down for Austria and included in the Treaty of St. Germain. The Bela Kun interlude, however, delayed signature of the corresponding Treaty of Trianon(with Hungary) until 1920, and the new Hungarian government delayed its ratification until 1921. Meanwhile, the Burgenland remained under Hungarian occupation. In the eastern portions of the disputed territory, Allied commissioners sent to draw the boundaries had been royally entertained by the local Magyar nobility, whose deeds to the land were brought out to prove that the land was Hungarian, not German. Included were most of the important towns, including St. Gotthard, Güns, and Steinamanger (once the Roman Sabaria, now the Hungarian Szombathely). But in the west, where many of the peasants were already employed across the border in Lower Austria, no intimidation could persuade them to call themselves Hungarian.

When the new province, still including Ödenburg as its capital, was finally scheduled for transfer to Austria, the authorities in Vienna were instructed by the Allies to carry out their occupation with police (Gendarmerie) only, and without the Army. But when the Gendarmes crossed the border, they were met by regular and irregular units of the Hungarian army, who opened fire. The most serious incidents were in Agendorf, near Ödenburg, and at Bruck-an-der-Leitha. The Gendarmerie retreated, and the Hungarians in the Seewinkel district, near Andau, dispatched a telegram to the world that disturbingly foreshadows October, 1956: "Communist firebrands are setting upon the people who, despairing, take up arms and appeal for weapons." The firebrands were Austrian police, in the service of a moderate Socialist-Catholic coalition government in Vienna. But some of them who were captured were alleged to be carrying Communist literature and were hanged.

The other Succession States saw these Hungarian moves as a first page torn out of the Treaty of Trianon and hurriedly offered Austria armed assistance in the Burgenland. But Vienna remembered that in 1919 Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia had proposed that the Burgenland, with its Croat minority, be divided between them to provide a "corridor" connecting the north- and south-Slav worlds. If Slav troops entered Ödenburg, when would they leave? The offer was declined.

Instead, an Italian offer to mediate the dispute was accepted, and the Hungarians agreed to clear the Burgenland and turn it over to Austria if a plebescite would be held in the Ödenburg area, under Italian supervision. This plebescite is listed as one of the first grand political frauds of the inter-war period, complete with intimidation on the one hand and dead and imported voters on the other. One objective observer reported evidence that regular Hungarian soldiers stationed in nearby Raab were ordered to Ödenburg to vote. The result: 65% in favor of Hungary and a westward bulge in the Austro-Hungarian border that squeezed the Burgenland down to 2.5 miles wide at one point.

"Now Austria has only the cheese-rind," the Hungarians declared, and there is evidence that they waited for the rind, too, to fall back in their hands. The Burgenland was emasculated of all its important towns, including its capital, and of all its through road and rail connections. (Even today, in the age of the Iron Curtain, the train from north Burgenland to south Burgenland passes through this Hungarian bulge and the city of Ödenburg. It can be traveled without passport or formalities, but the carriages are locked before entering Hungary and unlocked when they are back on Austrian soil, and no one can enter or leave in Ödenburg.) Already neglected under Magyar rule - as were all the fringe areas inhabited by non-Magyar peoples - the new province could look for little help from the bankrupt, demoralized Austrian First Republic, and so it entered the Second World War still very much a depressed area.

With the rest of eastern Austria, it suffered heavily from the war and from the first years of the Soviet occupation. Because the province belonged to the Soviet Zone of occupation, almost no ERP-help came its way, and (with Lower Austria) it did not share in the Marshall Plan boom. The Austrians themselves hesitated to pour any of their limited investment funds into an area where all the major capital goods, including the forests and the best farmlands, were administered by the occupying power as "German assets" (DR-11). (The extensive lands and forests belonging to the Esterhazy family were taken over by the USIA organization as "German property" because among the Esterhazy titles is a German baronetcy - or so I am informed. When the occupation ended in 1955, these properties were put in trust for Prince Esterhazy, who was then in a Hungarian prison, but were returned to him when he came out during the 1956 revolution. He now lives in Switzerland, and since his nephew and only direct heir was killed in an automobile accident last year, the family that has been so intimately connected with Burgenland history since the 1520's will end with him.)

On the other hand, Burgenland officials, however strongly anti-Soviet, have been eager to add that the occupying power never "laid any obstacles in the way of the efforts to reconstruct the roads, dwellings, schools, hospitals, etc., and always behaved quite correctly in accord with the terms of the Control Agreement."

Just over a year after the occupation had ended, the Hungarian revolution exploded across the eastern border. A few months earlier the barbed wire and mines and watch towers of the Iron Curtain had been cleared away, in the relaxed atmosphere of the summer of 1956 that preceded the outbursts in Budapest, and the Burgenlanders and their neighbors across the frontier had been engaged in a warm exchange of contraband - Austrian shoes, woolens and consumer luxuries going east, Hungarian hams, salami, and poultry going west, a small border traffic in the same sort of goods that the two countries had naturally exchanged for a hundred years before there was an Iron Curtain.

Then, suddenly, it was no longer contraband, but refugees, that flooded west. Nervous for fear an incident on the border would give the Russians - so recently away - an excuse to come back into Austria, and never consumed with a great love for their former Magyar taskmasters, the Burgenlanders opened their doors to the emigrees in the generous ways that James Michener and others have reported. Among the refugees came many Germans from Sopron (Odenburg) and Szombathely (Steinamanger), for whom - as for the Budapest Jews who had been Party members - the issue was a national more than an ideological one.

Now the border is quiet again. On May Day, 1957 - the International Labor Day - the reconstructed Iron Curtain was completed, and today there are no more contraband and very few refugees. The farmers are concerned with this summer's unusual bad weather, the rain that drowned their wheat, the hail that beat their vineyards and tore their tobacco. But they remain very conscious that they live on the eastern frontier both of Germantum and of the non-Communist world.

The castles that look out across the plain, beyond the barbed wire and the watchtowers, are there to remind them. This border is new, this frontier is ancient.

Sincerely,

Dennison Rusinow

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