

DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE NOT SO BLUE DANUBE...

THE GOOD SHIP FIDELIO... 24 SEPTEMBER 2014

When Edith proposed a river cruise on the Danube several visions came to mind on how I might enjoy myself, kicking back and watching the river flow. I would take a small guitar, and a notebook in addition to my regular journal; a copy of the manuscript to peruse and annotate; and a fat paperback history of the Habsburgs by Simon Winder called *Danubia*. Thus provisioned, I anticipated many happy hours choosing from these diversions.

"I am not so sure you will have time to work on all of this," Edith said. "There is a program of day trips organized." She was right: We went on bus excursions, we attended meetings. We ate sit-down meals three times a day. I found it hard to keep up with more than the general drift of conversation in Swiss-German. There were about 120 of us, all taking our meals at once, and the background clamor added to my difficulty.

I had crossed and re-crossed the Danube many times in my years of touring with the Thomm Jutz band. I knew it was not blue, as portrayed in legend and song. Running high after recent rains, the color was more brownish. We locked through a number of dams on our way down from Passau. Sensing that we had stopped, I looked out the window to see a concrete wall inches from the glass. Passing into Austria, we went on through the night, making our first stop at Melk, and our first excursion to the vast Melk Abby. Unable to understand the tour guide, I gazed around wondering why I like baroque music, but find the architecture overbearing. We were only one of a great many groups touring the building, the small part we went through. (Reading Simon's book proved to be an invaluable aid in understanding the function and purpose of this architecture).

Leaving Melk we passed through a stretch of wine country on the left, arriving in Vienna around midnight, where we stayed most of the following day. While I'd played there several times, this was my first time there as a tourist. Again, I made of it what I could, aided by Edith's translating. (I would later learn that Eric Taylor, an old friend from Texas, was in fact playing in Wien that same night, or the next). Returning to the boat for lunch, we went back out on our own for a walk and bought a couple bottles of wine to take back to our room. We left Vienna after dark, a lovely sight watching the city glide by. Passing under a stupendous hanging bridge, the captain made a hundred-eighty-degree salute, turning completely around in mid-river while music played *Wien, Wien nur du allein*.

When daylight came we looked out at a flattened landscape with a screen of trees on either side, Hungary on our right, and Slovakia on the left bank. Coming from America, we tend to think of our major rivers as flowing south; the Danube flows east into territory profoundly different from the country we had left, the eastern frontier of the old Habsburg Empire, brutally contested for hundreds of years. We began to see more signs of civilization, and swinging around a sharp bend in the river, we came to Budapest, where we tied up double-parked alongside another cruise ship.

While we both enjoyed our afternoon bus and walking tour, the highlight of our Hungarian experience came with an early morning trip to the Puszta, and a horse ranch about sixty kilometers away called Tanyacsarda. There after a welcoming drink of apricot schnapps, we were treated to a carriage ride to a pasture where we watched a thundering herd of Lipizzaner horses, with whip-cracking cowboys galloping bareback. Returning to the main area, we toured the grounds, admiring the big-horned Hungarian cattle. Then filing into viewing stands, we watched a stunning exhibition of trick riding in which a man rode standing, straddling two horses while driving three in front, going full

speed. This was followed by a generous snack of bread, cheese, bacon, salami, with both red and white wine to wash it down. To top it off, a gypsy trio played, and after such a treat we felt the least we could do was pay a visit to the gift shop and buy a bottle of apricot schnapps, and some souvenirs. We could have bought a bullwhip too—a whip made for cracking, and not just to hang on the wall. I liked that country; it was like leaving genteel Europe and finding yourself in Mexico.

We left Budapest in late afternoon. Watching a fisherman on the quay I watched his land a big one, whatever it was, large enough to require a net. I took it as a good sign, that the river was clean enough for fishing, even if it wasn't blue. I suppose it was inevitable my thoughts would turn to fishing, and to boats. I hadn't slept on a boat in years, and the rumbling and vibrations from the engines took me back. When I suggested to Edith I wanted to visit the engine room, she told me she was sure that I did not really want to do that. And I guessed she was right. About three-hundred feet long and narrow, with two cabin decks, and an upper sundeck, the boat was called *Fidelio*. On the stern the same was written in Cyrillic script. Flying a blue and gold flag, the ship was Ukrainian, with a youthful crew. Even the captain looked to be no more than mid-thirties.

Neither of us had been to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia and next stop on our return upriver. Electing not to take the tour, we wandered around the old city center on our own where Edith shopped and I drank white wine and watched people go by. (I wondered if the Chinese tourists noticed that all the Slovakian trinkets and souvenirs t-shirts were made in their home country). The next morning we tied up at Spitz, in the Wachau, the same wine producing area we had seen on our way down. We took a walking tour, followed by a wine tasting. A lovely setting, with terraces ascending the hillsides behind, Spitz is also a favored movie location.

Leaving at eleven-thirty, we had a twenty hour run back to Passau, arriving about eight o'clock Sunday morning. It was a lot to take in. I haven't mentioned the food, which was excellent, or our dinner companions, where we got a lucky draw. The crew seemed genuinely friendly. The *Fidelio* would normally have been working the Dnieper River in Ukraine, but had come over to the Danube on account of the war there. I think they were happy to be away from the trouble. They didn't have much time off though, as they were scheduled to pick up a fresh load of passengers and head downriver again that evening.

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Back on the High Rhine in old Diessenhofen now, we're enjoying cool, sunny weather. Upcoming gigs: Saturday, the 27th: Leipheim, (D) www.cfw-koetz.de ... and Saturday, October 4th, Country Night Grindelwald Festival, (CH) www.countrynight-grindelwald.ch ... We leave in a few weeks for Texas. First gig: Thursday, 6th November, with Mike Blakely and W.C. Jameson, Badu House, Llano, Texas www.baduhouse.com ... Hope to see you, here or there.

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