



FOUR SEASONS GRESHAM PALACE

B U D A P E S T

The Pearl of the Danube



How does one capture the tale of two cities that now crescendo in modern Buda and Pest? Historically seized and carved up by the Turks, Austria, Nazi Germany and the USSR, all are now gone but for the native Hungarian: who were left to organize their occupier's retreat, redeem their inalienable rights, connect their two magnificent cities, and to rebuild from the rubble this unique and incredible Republic of Hungary.

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When the London-based Gresham Life Assurance Company came to Budapest in 1904, however, their intention wasn't altogether inconsistent from these interlopers of yesteryear. In fact, they wanted to corner the annuities market, control a portion of the economy, and do so from a unique and unquestioned position of power. So when they called upon a local architect to create their presence in town, Zsigmond Quittner decided that location was everything. Perched right upon the bank of the River Danube, Gresham Palace was completed in 1906 to face off against Buda Castle on the opposite side, as though the two palaces were squarely if metaphorically sparring for the eye's attention.

From the grand entrance at the now Four Seasons Hotel at Gresham Palace, I could see for myself the significance of its appeal.





The Danube, Europe's second longest river, is classified as an international waterway: originating in the Black Forest in Germany and passing some 1771 miles through four central and eastern European capitals before emptying into Russia's Black Sea. Known to history as one of the long-standing frontiers of the Roman Empire, the river flows through and defines the borders of 10 European countries. It was not merely the principle source for drinking water and fishing, but the only practical means by which to trade products and services throughout Ancient Times. In fact, Budapest is home to the largest thermal water cave system in the world and attracts an estimated 8.6 million tourists per year to her 80 geothermal springs, exquisite lakes and grasslands, and to the promise of her natural healing spas. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that various leaders from the Medieval World wished to stake their claim on Hungary's natural resources, and to seize for themselves what King Stephen I described as Hungary's National Treasures.

The cool Baroque architecture of Buda Castle begins to glow outside my window; almost daring me to forget that the Kingdom of Hungary endured for nearly a century before the Allies of World War I redefined her borders in the Treaty of Trianon. Her geography was reduced from the size of the state of California to that of South Carolina. And for those who remained, World War II brought with it not only the atrocities of Nazi Germany but Soviet occupation as well; thus cornering the once Great Power and Cultural Center into a tiny, land-locked vassal state behind the Iron Curtain. Without open markets, free trade, a sovereign government, the freedom of religion, or the liberty to buy and sell land to connect them, these people and this story clung to life through the traditions passed from one generation to the next. In fact, when I met the hotel's Director of Marketing, Sherryn Bates, for a drink in the hotel's Bar for a Palinka, I questioned why the once medicinal cocktail would be served in an upscale luxury bar. "Dahling," she said, couching her response with Aussie flair, "open your mind."



But after WWI this once Great Power and Cultural Center was cornered into a land-locked vassal state behind the Iron Curtain.



Indeed, this Hungarian tradition of sharing tulip shaped glasses of fruit brandy has served not merely to ward off disease and prevent illness, but to connect the classes and unite the people in a profusion of celebrations for nearly a century. Normally drunk as a shot, we



pushed further into the night where the demarcation lines between tourist spots and the local's scene is really quite hard to define. Veal Paprika (a Hungarian innovation of finely ground red pepper) may seem like a delicacy to some, but is nevertheless an innovative, cost effective infusion among the sidewalk cafes, posh



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restaurants, and especially traditional family homes of Budapest. Each course is impeccably paired with a glass from one of the nation's 22 indigenous

wine regions: where modern grapes together with classic varieties crescendo in the extraordinary and time-honored tradition of Hungarian Wines. Archeological evidence suggests that Hungary's neighbor Georgia is responsible for the first production of wine some 8000 years ago; both of whom shared a coastline along the Black Sea. But while Rome takes credit for introducing vines to the region, it was the blessed climate, variation of soils and of course their beloved River Danube that enabled Hungary to produce, export, and ultimately to perfect wines along the Medieval timeline. Even Attila the Hun, the most powerful leader of the Hunnic Empire, preferred (if insisted) upon Hungarian wine. So it comes, therefore, as no surprise that the 4.5 billion dollar industry is today poised to become a contender among producers, societies, and most importantly the consumers with the world's most discerning palates.



A stroll along the Andrassy Avenue in May is not unlike walking along New York's Park Avenue in Spring. Except, of course, that this Grand Boulevard is recognized as a World Heritage Site. The Grand Victorian apartments of pale, pink colored stone are piped together with the creamy mastery of the city's grand Gerbeaud Confectionery; with each detail and every turret a little more dazzling than the next. And although the Budapest Metro, the second-oldest underground metro system in the world, will take you round and round, you'll prefer instead to stay upon the most magnificent thoroughfare in town. Indeed, I factored a couple of hours to peruse the main shopping street, fine cafes, and upscale luxury boutiques on my way to the Hungarian State Opera House. Built in the neo-Renaissance style, the Royal (as it was known then) Opera House opened its doors in 1884 with the debut of *The Queen of Sheba*: the German opera which chronicles a love triangle that unfolds in the Queen's visit to the Court of King Solomon.



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Nearly 130 years later, however, the truth and nature of love continues to unfold in *Giselle*: a ballet in 2 acts which tells the story of a peasant girl whose ghost, after her pre-mature death, returns to protect her lover from the vengeance of a group of evil female spirits known as the Wilis. Set in the Rhineland during the Middle Ages at the Grape Harvest, it was the Russian Imperial Ballet who revived the ballet from dormancy at the turn of the 20th century, and set *Giselle* into a cathedral setting of the single most difficult role for a prima donna to play.

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From Row 10 and Seat 8, I watched the Duke Albrecht, cleverly disguised as a peasant to sow his wild oats, become fascinated with an unassuming peasant girl named Giselle. Together they find in Victor Hugo's poetry, from which the librettist took inspiration, the magic and meaning of the poem *Les Orientales*. This masquerade of his identity with her naiveté crescendos into a playground where Pointe work and pirouettes reveal the look and feel of young love. But when Giselle discovers her paramour's disguise at the end of the first act, the peasant girl, with an already weakened heart, dies: only to re-emerge in perhaps the most ethereal capacity of a ballerina - a spirit. Set in a moonlit glade near Giselle's grave, Albrecht is found searching for her memory when confronted by the Wilis: a group of female spirits who, upon being jilted on their own wedding days, rise from their graves to seek vengeance upon men by dancing them to death. But Giselle, her love undiminished, is also summonsed from her grave to watch over and protect Albrecht against them. No longer a mere mortal ballerina, however, Giselle is transformed into perhaps the single greatest spectacle of human animation I have ever seen. In *Pas de deux*, Albrecht raises Giselle into the air and then rotates and suspends her on a 90-degree geometric angle; the two almost creating the illusion of a human cross. And while her tutu immediately falls to the ground from gravity her legs, successively, merely float one

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after the other to the stage. At another moment, when the Wilis begin attacking Giselle, Albrecht literally sets her off to the side to defend her honor – but on merely one ballet toe. Whilst the other leg is fully extended upward, Giselle comports herself like a pair of open scissors balancing themselves upon one resplendent point for 6 full minutes of stupefying, if gravity defying stillness. These moments and this story climax not only into a 16 minute standing ovation but into the stark oblivion that I'd been carried away from the splendor of the Hungarian

Opera House to a simple cottage in the Rhineland. And when I turned my back on the darkened stage now strewn with fresh flower bouquets, I couldn't help but feel that I understood more about the truth and nature of love. Indeed, by not succumbing to the feelings of vengeance and hatred that defined the Wilis, I (I mean Giselle) somehow felt free to live and love more perfectly.

My walk back through the Jewish Quarter, past the Great Synagogue, through Hero's Square, and home to the Four Season's Gresham Palace takes me full circle in a week that's

allowed me not only to peek behind the Iron Curtain, but to see for myself how traditions create, serve and ultimately protect the people. Originally comprised of office space, upscale apartments, and finally army barracks for Soviet soldiers, Isadore Sharp, the son of immigrants and Founder of the Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, ultimately saved the palace by overseeing that its illustrious past be endowed not by the eradication of its darkest hour, but by the illumination of its peacock's eye upon and through the gates of tomorrow.



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