

Donau

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What is Donau (the Danube)? A river. But how to define a river? Where does it start, where does it end? A river may have a definite end, unless it, like Donau, ends in a delta, but it is harder to define its beginnings. It has many beginnings, many small tributaries that make up something bigger, you can pick one and define it to be the beginning reducing all the others to secondary contributory ones, but this is of course only a convention. But in some cases, conventions are inescapable. What side of the road you drive on is a convention, but it is not a convention to make the convention. That is necessary. So could the source of the river be a tap up in a house in the Black Forest. When that tap is turned off, the river will empty itself once and for all in the Black Sea and then nothing will be left but a dried out river bed. Of course not, all the water in the river does not come from that single tap, even if we would make it the convention, a river has tributaries, which in their turn have tributaries and so on. The river is a fractal system and what makes mathematical sense is its basin, a region of the earth with the property that any drop of water that falls onto it, sooner or later will join other drops into a massive conglomeration of the same, eventually to flow out into a vastness of an ocean. However the boundaries of such regions are not necessarily fixed, although their movements may be so slow and gradual that they would not show up on a map. But such considerations do not concern the author. He is not a hydrologist, nor a geographer, but a historian, one of politics, culture and literature.

The travel report has many advantages. It provides a theme, a removal from a point A to a point B. But this removal is not mere transportation, neither A nor B may have any interest or significance, it is the road that matters, the goal is just incidental. Given the route one is free to digress. A journey is an extended sequence of digressions, as well as digressions on digressions, and so on, not unlike the intricate system of a river, with its tributaries and tributaries to its tributaries. One may bring up anything, be it of some relevance to the route. Thus what would be intolerable in a book becomes meaningful, not to say charming, in a travel report. The author does not dwell much on the physical part of travel, there are few descriptions of weather and nature, apart from the occasional glimpse of a city square, a church tower, a facade of a building. Did the author really undertake the journey? And if so, in one sweep, alone or with companions? We are never to learn. Some hints point at fellow travelers, names that are repeated, but it is hard to tell whether those are of flesh and blood, or mere figments of an idle imagination. In fact most of the book comes across as if it has been written in an armchair, for many people the ideal way of traveling, the imagination is aroused without concomitant physical discomfort, thus saved from danger and maybe even death. To travel in the armchair, is to travel safely and securely, just as we through history travel through the past, immune to its disasters and onslaughts. It is possible though that it was not actually traveled in the armchair but written in it. To write down your travels is to relive them again, maybe even more

accurately and intensively. Experience actually formulated and preserved makes a deeper impression than those merely suffered. As Aristotle remarked: The unexamined life is not worth living. Thus travel not recapitulated and reconstructed is not worth undertaking. But what the author does, is not so much recapturing his experiences, as creating them. Maybe all he needs is an encyclopedia and a few books to ransack. He may never have laid his eyes on the river. It might only have been a mythological entity, a thing entirely of the imagination, as mathematics is sometimes dismissed as being, or history, for that matter, although few commentators would have the audacity to claim that it does not really exist, that it is just a convention a reconstruction socially sanctioned by instruction and memorials.

The book is not a geographical account but a historical. It is a reconstruction of a past that no longer exists, although there still are fossilized bits and pieces thereof for those prepared to go out in the field and look. It is the past of Central Europe that existed until the First World War, experienced a turmoil between the wars and was excluded and cut off after the war. It is important to remember reading the book that it was published in 1986, a few years before the fall of the wall, which means that it was written in the early eighties, a time when the Cold War was experiencing its last throes of heat, then only to subside. It was written after Solidarnos appeared on the scene, and when a new economic policy was instigated by the Hungarians. There was a feeling that the wall may crumble, as well as a resignation that it would never. It was written before Gorbachov and Glasnost and Perestroika, and after the death of Tito, which was thought at the time to herald the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the time for which would come eventually. But it was a time when the assessment of the Habsburg empire was being reconsidered, almost rehabilitated. It might have been bad and despotic, but it was a benevolent despotism, tolerant, multicultural, replete with many virtues which were becoming recognized. And in particular compared to what would come afterwards, it was idyllic not to say paradisiacal.

We start slowly through southern German lands. Cities like Ulm, of which most people give little thought, are being brought up. Einstein was born in Ulm, although that fact has almost no explanatory value. Then we are treated to the brief acquaintance with King Ludwig of Bavaria, the king thought to be mad, drunk on Wagner and fairy-tales, and indeed the creator of two fairy castles, one a renovation, the other the 'real' thing of which dreams are made. But soon we are in old Austrian lands. Kafka is mentioned, but of course Prague is not along the river, not even within its basin, rain that falls on the roofs of Prague end up in the North Sea, not the Black one. But Linz is there, and we cannot ignore Hitler, and then Vienna of course, and here we can dwell. Wittgenstein makes a brief appearance, but actually more on the dust jacket than in its pages. To refer to Wittgenstein is thought of a sign of sophistication, one which Wittgenstein himself would have frown upon. Bad as he is, his admirers are worse, so bad indeed that their object of adulation could not have anything but scorn for them. After Vienna there is Bratislava, another city not much more than a name to most of us, and remains so after we have sailed through it with the author as our intermittent guide. And then there is Budapest. Three cities so very close to each other. After having been fed Habsburgeriana the Hungarians, as the junior partners, step on the scene. Most of us do not know much about Hungarian history, and it is not the duty of a traveler to supply a systematic account, only to supply

tantalizing tidbits. There is a connection of the Hungarians with the Huns, but did they have anything to do with each other really. And then there is the tantalizing facts that the languages of Hungary and Finland are related, but the author not being a philologist does not even mention it. Clearly there was a Hungarian Kingdom in Medieval times, with its lists of regents and glorious battles, which is but dust to mankind at large, and now almost on par with fairy-tales kept alive only by constant recapitulation. But how did Hungary become attached to Austria and under the dominations of the Habsburg Enterprises? In 1688 the Turks were standing outside the gates of Vienna. The East was getting into the West, although of course Vienna from the perspectives of the French and the English, and even many Germans, was an outpost in the East. 1688 this is half a century after the Thirty Years War and at the verge of European Modernity. It also represents the apex of Ottoman power and extension. The onslaught was fought off, with consequences maybe as momentous as Martell at Tours. The Turkish army was larger than that of the Austrian, yet the latter may have had the benefit of slightly superior technology, but when it comes to battles (if not wars) chance and circumstance play more than supportive roles. After that the Turkish empire went into a slow decline. Still during the 18th century it provided the role of the 'other', powerful enough to be an alternative almost on the same level, but during the 19th century its Balkan possessions disintegrated, and the First World War gave that sick man of Europe (note Europe) the coup de grace, creating the modern troubled mosaic of the Middle East. But of course we are digressing, be it in the style and mood of the book, so let us return to Hungary, which must have been swallowed by the Turks, sometime during the 16th or early 17th century. The book is not a systematic textbook on history, it only makes us curious for precision, which is a prerequisite for learning and digesting. One surmises that the Hungarians became under the dominion of Habsburg until 1848, the year of revolution throughout Europe and the birth of Communism, as we came to know it during the 20th century. Then there was this historic compromise that created the notion of 'K.u.K', the dual monarchy of the imperial and the royal. The Hungarians did enjoy a high degree of independence, which they exploited to suppress the independence of those subjugated to them.

As we follow the river along its relentless flow to the Black Sea we come upon a quilt of minor nationalities, and fragments of major ones. To list them all takes many a line of text, tedious to those who are ignorant to read, fascinating like a family album, for those who are part. Here among the various Slavic and Hungarian crowds, there are also Germans, most of them expelled after the war. A vanished culture. The author is a professor of German at Trieste, that former Austrian port, and the German presence intrigues him a lot. A vanished culture of which there are traces kept alive by exiled populations, but for how long? The German presence in present Rumania, a country which reaped the largest territorial compensations of any country at Versailles, has survived into our days, although greatly diminished. The author makes a digression far from the banks of the river, not only to nearby Timisoara but also into the Carpathian mountains, touching Brasov, Cluj, Sibiu and above all Sigisheara, a fairy-tale German city. The latter I recall from my own visit back in 1969, actually before the great exodus of Germans to be followed abetted by the cleansing politics of Ceausescu (who sold them to West-Germany, which paid good money for them). Celan is brought up, maybe the most well-known German writer of

Rumanian extraction, but he also mentions Hertha Müller, some twenty years before she was distinguished by the Swedish Academy of letters,

There is a grandmother Anka from Bela Crvka (White Church) who supplies the author with many needed stories, and whom he hence, one surmises, must have met in the flesh, one of the few contemporary and uncelebrated people he describes at such length. Although the small town is closer to the outlet than Belgrad (White City), it is mentioned before as well as after, and gets more printage than the Serbian capital. One gets the impression that it is around here, that one is to find the essence of central european culture, when the author continues on his more or less imaginary quest, Bulgaria gets short shrift, except some mention of the border town Ruse. He extolls the friendliness of the people, as if they were a tribe from the darkest recesses of Africa, noting in passing that it is the most obscure country in Europe, with an inescapable hint of backwardness¹. In Rumania, there is an obligatory side trip to Bucharest, although that city does not lie on the river. The antics of a Ceausescu razing down large parts of the city to create something to his glory, are noted in passing, with the qualification that Ceausescu did not raze down as much as moving around, chopping off a piece here and there if needed.

Finally we arrive at the Delta, the river expands in many directions into a labyrinth of shallow water, and a rich fauna. People live here feeding off the waters supposedly teeming with fish. We are far from Habsburg and Central Europe when we are expelled into the Black Sea, which would deserve a book of its own.

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¹ In the fall of 1984 I hiked with a Bulgarian friend and colleague in the mountains at Plovdiv. He took me to a village, which history and the outside world had bypassed, telling me that the fact that we were from Sofia was exotic enough