“Lost and Found: the Danube, Hungary, and Europe”

Abstract: Today Hungary contains just under 15% of the Danube’s length and catchment area. Yet the river has always been at the center of Hungarian history. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have used the river to address important national and international issues. This scholarship, however, typically analyzes state and international actors and focuses on Budapest and other large urban centers. My paper instead turns to the work of ethnographers, local historians, and writers. Using one small town on the Danube as its case study, it seeks to understand how ordinary men and women have interacted with the river—and by extension with Europe—over the past two hundred years. In particular, it examines how the river shaped the lives of people who lived along it; how locals responded to the repeated use of state power to remake the river through dams, embankments, and dredging; and how the river created sometimes surprising connections between this town on the Danube and the wider world. Even for the residents of this small town, “Europe” always had many meanings, just as it does today.
Lost and Found: the Danube, Hungary, and Europe

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Dunavecse is a small, unremarkable town in Hungary, 90 kilometers south of Budapest. As its name suggests – “Duna” means “Danube” in Hungarian – the town lies directly on the Danube River. According to its homepage, however, the best fishing in the area can be found away from the river, on the inland “Willow Valley Main Canal.”¹ There, the web-site promises, anglers will encounter banks “covered by reeds or fallen trees, branches, and roots.” With luck they will catch trout, pike, carp, and catfish. In recent years, fishermen’s bungalows have sprouted up along the canal, their high prices clear proof to a Hungarian fishing magazine that people would rather invest money locally “than on the Adriatic or Spanish coasts.”² Young people from nearby villages come here in the summer to swim and sunbathe.

Like many good fishing spots, Willow Valley is largely man-made and relatively new. This waterway had once been a branch of the Danube, encircled by wetlands, and prone to floods. But farmers and herdsman had come, and they wanted dry fields and pastures. So regional and state officials oversaw the “regulation” of this stretch of the river in the first half of the twentieth century. At Willow Valley, dams shut out the Danube and turned the stream into a straight canal with a carefully controlled flow of water. The wetlands dried up, and plant and animal species disappeared. Nowadays a local hatchery stocks the stream near Dunavecse with fish several times a year; farther downstream, the fishing is poor.

A small town’s fishing spot seems to have little bearing on the mighty Danube – or on the meaning of Europe in Hungary. Yet this remnant of the river hints at the larger processes that have remade waterways across Europe in the modern era: the settling of the river into a single channel, the erection of dams and embankments, the erasure of the wetlands, the loss of biodiversity. It shows too how this town, which grew up alongside the Danube, has slowly turned away from it, with the result that fishermen now drive to an artificial canal regularly supplied with fish rather than walk over to the river. Today, the Danube plays only a minor role in the town’s economic life and transportation network. Some locals nonetheless dream of reversing this process, of reclaiming the river, and using it to reinvigorate their small town. They hope that the Danube, which the town has lost, can again be found.

The Danube has long been both a Hungarian and a European river. It has been studied as such, and scholars have used the river to address important national and international issues. Historians have examined the river’s place in nineteenth-century diplomacy and Cold War tensions; scientists have documented its persistent pollution and biological impoverishment; and geographers have demonstrated the embeddedness of river regulation in larger cultural and political systems. This scholarship reveals how the river both unites and divides the region it flows through. On the one hand, it shows the power of Hungarian nationalism in framing questions about the river: “For many Hungarians,” anthropologist Krista Harper has written, “the fate of the Danube and [its main tributary, the Tisza] is entwined with that of Hungary as a nation-state, and Hungarian discourses about the rivers reflect a preoccupation with borders and territorial integrity.”3 On the other hand, this work has underscored how the Danube can also serve as “the unifying artery of the culturally diverse geographic region of Central and Southeastern Europe, frustrating attempts to divide Europe from non-Europe, and facilitating the flow of economic, cultural, and other forms of international exchange.”4

Places like Dunavecse rarely figure in studies of the Danube. A hundred years ago, an English guidebook writer advised travelers looking for beautiful and varied scenery to skip this portion of the Danube and take the train instead. More recent scholars have largely agreed that there is little to see here; they typically analyze state and international actors and focus on Budapest and other large urban centers. To learn about the residents of small towns along the river, then, we need to turn instead to the work of ethnographers, local historians, and writers. To this can be added fragmentary primary sources: little-read newspapers, old engineering reports, faded maps, and rare interviews. By piecing together these sources, we can begin to grasp how ordinary men and women have interacted with the river – and by extension with Europe. In this essay, I use the small town of Dunavecse as a case study and approach the river from a local perspective. Given my training, I have also adopted a historical approach and have tried to show how dramatically the relationship between the residents of this small town and the river has changed over the past two centuries.

This case study has three aims. First, it will trace the many ties that bound locals to the river and the myriad ways it shaped their lives. The environmental historian Peter Coates has warned against scholarship that treats rivers as “a more or less inert backdrop to the main human action and spectacle” and insisted that humans and rivers “co-produce” history. Second, it will reveal the political ecology of the Danube. In particular, it will document the repeated use of state power to remake the river and the patterns of adaptation and resistance that it engendered on the local level. Last, the case study will examine the sometimes surprising connections that that the river created between this town and the wider world. As we shall see, even for the residents of even of this small, often overlooked town, “Europe” always had many meanings, just as it does today. To pursue these themes, the paper opens with an overview of the Hungarian Danube, presents the case study, and closes by looking at the continued resonances of Europe up and down the river.

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The Hungarian Danube

“Without the Danube, Hungary could not have existed.” So wrote the journalist Emil Lengyel in 1939, with only some exaggeration.7 The river has long been at the center of Hungarian history. It has been the site of coronations and revolutions, the lifeblood of Hungarian trade and transportation, the inspiration of poets and engineers. The Danube has witnessed some of Hungary’s greatest triumphs – construction of the Chain Bridge linking Buda and Pest in the 1840s – as well as its tragedies: Hungarian fascists shooting of thousands of Jews on its shores at the close World War II.

Today the Danube is more placid. Many bridges span it, and both highways and railways run alongside it. Only a few barges and tugs share the water with the occasional cruise ship, speedboat, and hydrofoil. The river is mostly straight and uniformly wide. It’s less polluted than it once was, but fishermen and swimmers are scarce, especially on the main channel. Many people spend their entire lives by the river and never get wet. To begin to understand how the Danube came to be disciplined and distant, we need to examine how radically it has been remade in modern times. River regulation altered its ecosystem, transformed the lives of people living on its banks, and created both tensions and connections between Hungary and its neighbors. Although the “taming” of the Danube is often told as an exclusively Hungarian story, we need to be attentive to its European dimensions as well.

Two hundred years ago, the Hungarian Danube was a different river. Because the Hungarian state was then much larger, the river was also much more “Hungarian.” Until its demise in 1918, the Hungarian half of the Habsburg Empire contained one-third of the Danube’s total length and catchment area (today just under 15% of the Danube lies within Hungary, or 12% if one adds the Rhine-Main-Danube canal). Hundreds of thousands of people lived along the river, and many of

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them made their livelihoods directly from it. Fishermen and farmers alike knew its moods and dangers. Water levels varied considerably throughout the year, and floods caused by rain, snowmelt, and ice were a common occurrence. Full of shifting islands, hidden sandbanks, and other obstacles, the Danube posed challenges even for experienced pilots. Traces of the river’s movements could be seen in oxbows spread across the lowlands, as well as in cities: “Where the Danube flowed in days gone by, and where its dams and bridges once stood, we now gaze upon busy streets and palaces,” marveled a newspaper in 1781.⁸

The heyday of river regulation in Hungary came in the 1800s. For centuries, landlords and villagers had undertaken local efforts to keep back the water. They built small dams, embankments, and drainage channels. Calls for more extensive flood protection grew louder in the 1700s, as the population grew and shipping on the Danube increased. In the peace following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, state authorities (in Vienna and after 1867 in Budapest) committed themselves to large-scale work on the Danube. This led to systematic mapping of the river in the 1820s and 30s, extensive flood protection work starting at mid-century, and efforts to make the entire river navigable in the 1880s and 90s. These projects involved hundreds of surveyors and engineers, thousands of shovel-wielding workers, massive capital outlays, and steam-belching drilling and dredging machines. By the end of the century, river regulation had taken on a momentum of its own. Soon the Danube’s tributaries (and the tributaries’ tributaries) were also dredged, dammed, and diked, their wetlands drained and floodplains dried. The demographic and environmental consequences were enormous, as vast tracts of farmland opened to cultivation (never mind that the quality of soil was often poor). This subjugation of once “wild” rivers was a source of great national pride. A 1901 statistical report published by the Ministry of Agriculture thus opened with this boast: “Hungary’s flood protection works – in terms of their extent and importance – have no equal.”⁹ Hungary’s water projects, it explained, far outshone comparable works in Holland, France, and Italy, and it had accomplished them “practically unaided.”

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⁸ “Elegyes túdósítások,” Magyar Hirmondó, December 8, 1781, 753-54.
This last point was untrue: river projects in Hungary always had a strong European flavor. Hungarian experts looked abroad for models and advice, for equipment and plans, and for skilled workers and engineers. When the Chain Bridge – the first permanent bridge over the Danube in Hungary – was built in the 1840s, its designer was English and its lead engineer Scottish. Hungarians read foreign technical publications and visited Western Europe to see canals, pumps, and dikes first-hand. They also deployed the same arguments as other Europeans: namely, that river regulation would speed the movement of troops (as Napoleon had demonstrated with devastating results), invigorate commerce, open up more lands to agriculture, speed the development of cities, and improve public health. Less tangibly, but no less importantly, these large hydrological projects were understood to be a prerequisite for a distinctly European path to modernity. Free passage on the Danube, in other words, would hasten Hungary’s own passage to modernity.

European politics deeply influenced the regulation of the Danube, which flowed through multiple states and empires. What historian David Blackbourn has written about the Rhine is equally true for the Danube: “Hydrology and diplomacy were inseparable elements of Rhine rectification.” International treaties and congresses – at Adrianople (1829), Paris (1856), London (1871), and Berlin (1878) – all pushed forward efforts to open the Danube to shipping along its entire length. Article LVII of the Congress of Berlin, for example, stated that “the removal of the obstacles which the Iron Gates and the Cataracts place in the way of navigation is entrusted to Austria-Hungary.” The Hungarian government took the lead in this important project. An engineer bragged about its accomplishments: “With this [project], Hungary has fulfilled the extremely important commission gained from the European Great Powers in the 1878 Berlin Treaty, and, by ensuring unobstructed navigation through the torrents of the Lower Danube, it has opened the gates of the East and the most natural route not only to Hungary but to all of Western Europe.”

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From the start, then, the remaking of the Danube was inseparable from Hungary’s national and continental ambitions.

These non-economic meanings – European modernity and national prestige – help explain the continued appeal of hydrological projects in the twentieth century, under very different political regimes. Hungary was defeated in World War I, and with the Trianon Treaty (1920) it lost two-thirds of its territory and two-fifths of its population. It also lost control of much of the Danube, which it ceded to Romania and Yugoslavia in the south and shared with Czechoslovakia in the north. Interwar Hungary had little desire to cooperate with its new neighbors on major projects on the Danube. But within Hungary itself the state undertook significant flood protection works, including the construction of 150 kilometers of drainage canals southeast of Budapest (the introduction’s “Willow Valley Main Canal” was part of this project). At the same time, conservative politicians, geographers, and historians used hydrological arguments to support claims that the peace treaty should be revised and Hungary regain its lost territory. The Danube and Tisza Rivers, these asserted, had always formed the basis of a unitary Hungarian state, and Hungary’s nineteenth-century conquest of these rivers served as ready evidence of its superior civilization. The hollowness of these claims was shown during the Second World War, when Hungary allied itself with Hitler’s Germany and, in 1942, massacred thousands of Jews and Serbs on the banks of the Danube, in Novi Sad in occupied Yugoslavia.

The communist regime that followed did not have territorial ambitions. But the mastery of nature inherent in river regulation had an obvious draw for communist leaders, as did the massive scale of many water projects. Somewhat surprisingly, the USSR maintained a hands-off policy on the Danube and let individual states in the Eastern bloc take the initiative. Romania thus completed the two biggest postwar projects: the Danube-Black Sea Canal, built under brutal

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conditions, and the hydroelectric dam at the Iron Gates, which it shared with Yugoslavia. Such projects served multiple purposes, as a recent study of hydropower explains: “This new ‘hydraulic landscape’ was a typical product of the communist official ideology, but at the same time embodied a more general development model based on the modernisation strategy of industrialization and urbanisation.” For its part, Hungary at first focused on smaller projects on the Danube. But in the 1970s it signed an agreement with Czechoslovakia to build a system of dams, canals, locks, and hydroelectric plants on the Danube, between the towns of Gabčíkovo and Nagymaros. Concerns about costs, the construction of nuclear power plants, and environmental protests eventually led Hungary to suspend, and then withdraw from, participation in this huge undertaking; eventually, dams were built only on what is today the Slovakian side of the river.

The resistance to this project merits close attention. In Hungary, it began with a small number of dissidents, who held clandestine meetings, published samizdat pamphlets, and forged connections with Austrian environmentalists. Their protests resonated with the broader public: “The multivalence of the Danube cause,” anthropologist Krista Harper has written, “with its patriotic evocation of the cultural heritage and natural splendor of the Danube landscape and its claims toward citizen participation in planning and decision making, appealed to both nationalist and progressive strands of Hungarian political culture.” In this context, protection of the Danube meant opposition to the communist system and to Soviet imperialism. Ironically, in recent years Hungarian environmentalists have turned their attention westward, criticizing the “ecocolonialism” of multinational corporations and rich countries that have taken advantage of laxer regulation and less oversight on the lower stretches of the river.

Today the Hungarian Danube bears little resemblance to the river it was 200 years ago. The remaking of the Danube, I have argued, cut across ideological lines:

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16 Harper, “‘Wild Capitalism’ and ‘Ecocolonialism’,” 224.

it served the interests of nineteenth-century liberals, interwar conservatives, and postwar communists. These interests were at once domestic and European. For Hungary’s leaders, river regulation promised to solve problems at home. But it also pulled Hungary into the mainstream of Europe. For advocates of river regulation, “Europe” had many meanings: It was a source of know-how, a yardstick by which to measure Hungarian achievements, and a model of modernity. Yet, “Europe” could also inspire protests against the same hydrological projects, as was shown in the links between Austrian and Hungarian environmentalists in the 1980s. The Austrian writer Karl-Markus Gauß once observed that what makes the Danube so attractive is “its contradictions unfolding within a narrow space.”\(^{18}\) The river can inspire a wariness toward other Europeans as well as connections to them; it is a resource to be exploited and a treasure to be protected; it is a promise of a transformed future and a mirror to a haunted past. The next section explores these contractions, and how they played out on the local level, by looking at one small settlement on the Danube.

A Hungarian Town

This section takes us back to Dunavecse, the town with the good fishing described in the introduction. Dunavecse shares many features with other towns and villages scattered across Hungary.\(^{19}\) Like them, it has a long history: its name crops up in thirteenth-century documents, and a handsome Calvinist church built in 1745 dominates its main square. In the 1840s, one of Hungary’s most celebrated poets, Sándor Petőfi, spent several years here; to honor him the town later erected two statues, named its school after him, and set one of his poems to music, creating its unofficial anthem. This rich, romantic past stands in contrast to a more prosaic present. Like many other provincial towns, Dunavecse has struggled in recent years. Good jobs are hard to come by, and the population is aging and shrinking. It recently


dropped below 4,000, down 20% from its peak. Yet locals display a remarkable resilience and sustain a busy civic life centered on their churches, schools, volunteer fire company, and public festivities. In short, little sets Dunavecse apart from many other Hungarian villages and towns.

There remains the Danube. For centuries, the river shaped all aspects of life in the town. A local historian put it grandly: “One thousand threads tied [the residents] to the river, with its blessings and curses; it gave them food and drink, brought in and carried away their crops and goods, turned their mills, and watered their fields…. But what it gave, its devastating floods could take back with interest.”

Today, however, much has changed. Never before has the river been more controlled, and never before have residents had so little to do with it. To explain this seeming paradox, this section traces the changing relationship between the residents of Dunavecse and the Danube. Along the way, it highlights the many steps taken to control the river and protect the town from floods, the many ways locals used the river, and the many connections – both material and mental – that the river created between this small town and other parts of Europe. Focusing on the modern era, this section begins in the early 1800s and ends in the late twentieth century.

Two hundred years ago, Dunavecse was a minor market town with a largely peasant population. It enjoyed some advantages over the surrounding villages: it had the right to hold weekly markets and could elect its own leaders; it had a busy port and plentiful fish. It had problems too. The nobility owned much of the land, including some of the best farmland and pastures to the east of the village. The peasants paid rent to these landlords, owed taxes to the state and county, and had to perform unpaid labor (corvée, közmunka) throughout the district. They also had to contend with recurring natural disasters: epidemics, fires (one destroyed half the town in 1848), and of course floods. Every decade seemed to bring a major flood, and every year brought water into the town and surrounding fields, making roads impassible and creating wetlands of reeds, sedges, and bulrushes. Locals adapted as best they could. They built embankments on the river and placed their houses on

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20 Balogh, “A kis lak…faluban,” in Dunavecse.
high ground and thatched them with reeds. Many dwellings had wattled walls – a lattice of small branches woven through larger posts – covered with mud, which, as one nineteenth-century economist observed, “offered greater security against collapse in the event of a flood.” But it was also true that the best farmland stood close to the river; farther out the land became sandy and even salty. So, the residents of Dunavecse needed the Danube, but had good reasons to fear it as well.

The nineteenth century brought fitful – and largely ineffective – efforts to protect Dunavecse from the river. The impetus came, as elsewhere in Hungary, from state and county authorities, often in response to devastating floods. One of the worst occurred in March 1838, when ice dammed the Danube, spilling water 15 to 20 kilometers inland. In Dunavecse it destroyed 133 houses and left one-third of the population homeless. In the following decades, water engineers raised the embankments and built protective dams. Both failed spectacularly in 1876, when another huge flood hit this section of the Danube, again causing widespread damage. This prompted even more regulation efforts, including the formation of a quasi-public society dedicated to regional flood control (the Dömsöd–Pataji Dunavédgát Társulat). In the 1880s the Hungarian government, working closely with this society, brought in more than 100,000 cubic meters of stone to strengthen the riverbank. It also used steam-powered dredges to cut a deep channel in the Danube, which aimed to increase the speed of the river and decrease the likelihood of dangerous ice blocks. In the early twentieth century the town also dug deep artesian wells – the first was 90 meters – to protect its water supply, which floodwaters regularly contaminated.

In spite of these threats, locals benefited from the river. Steamships plied the river from the 1830s onward, dramatically reducing the time and difficulty of travel. In 1840 the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen journeyed by steamship upstream from the mouth of the Danube all the way to Vienna. The region around Dunavecse made a favorable impression: “New fruitful districts, vine-hills and large

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villages with new and light churches met our view as we darted past.”

The first steamship reached Dunavecse in 1831, and by 1867 regular service had made it easy for passengers to reach Budapest and for farmers to bring their livestock and flour to the capital. The flour came from Dunavecse’s eight ship mills, which operated on the far bank of the river where the current was strongest. Anchored amid islands and sand bars, these floating mills ground wheat, rye, barley, corn, and other grains. Farmers were convinced they produced the best flour and long spurned a steam-powered mill built on dry land in the early 1900s. The ship mills shared the river with fishermen who used small boats to reach the opposite shore. Many more locals fished from the bank, using rods or nets.

Crucially, the peasants, millers, and fishermen of Dunavecse were not passive observers of the wider changes remaking the Danube. They possessed limited political power, so they used what means they had to try to turn river regulation to their advantage. In 1847, for example, floods again broke through the town’s defenses, ravaging houses, forcing residents into boats, and killing two people in the area. Town leaders quickly sent a memorandum to the higher authorities (in this case Pest County), asking for relief and drawing attention to the “terrible damage” the region had suffered. Pointedly, the memorandum requested that peasants be allowed to perform their required unpaid labor building up and strengthening their own embankments, rather than working on distant projects that took them far from home. The county made only limited concessions, yet the episode illuminates how residents of Dunavecse accepted river regulation and sought to gain something from it.

The same pattern can be seen in the town’s multiple lawsuits against the largest landowners in the area, the Földváry family. At stake was ownership of valuable property produced by river regulation. This included fields on the outskirts of town (which had been wetlands before embankments dried them out) and an island in the Danube (which changes in the course of the river had created out of a low sandbank). The town had little chance of success in court; the Földvárys were an

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24 “Törvényhatóságok,” Jelenkor, March 25, 1847, 141.
old, powerful, noble family. To no one’s surprise, in 1859 the judges awarded the lion’s share of the reclaimed land to the Földvárys and forced the town to pay back taxes and legal expenses. Yet local resistance did not end there: angry peasants harassed surveyors who came to demarcate the nobles’ lands, and within a decade the Földvárys had sold most of their property in Dunavecse. Most peasants gained little – few could afford large parcels of land – but their actions again showed how, in places like Dunavecse, river regulation contained elements of coercion, consent, and contestation.

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The twentieth century shattered this small world. The world wars were a travesty for Dunavecse: 900 of its men served in World War I, which ended with 190 of them dead and another 150 prisoners of war. The Second World War brought the Holocaust (in which nearly all of the town’s 25 Jewish families were killed), the Red Army, and German air attacks. The period between the wars witnessed growing social inequality: the majority of peasant households had tiny plots or no land at all, and many young people left for Budapest. Yet the interwar period was also, in its own way, a golden age for the town and the river.

Nowhere was this more true than on the Danube, where cheap and regular river transportation allowed Dunavecse to become part of Budapest’s “green belt.” In place of the usual grains, farmers now grew fruits, vegetables, and herbs for the capital. Asparagus came first and was followed by paprika, new potatoes, grapes, apricots, spinach, sorrel, rosemary, basil, and rhubarb – all new and exotic plants to this region. Intensely cultivated in small gardens, these crops proved highly profitable, especially for growers who could maintain high quality, meet the needs of the Budapest market, and ship their products quickly. Further opportunities came with flowers, and in the 1920s and 30s Dunavecse produced so many chrysanthemums, violets, petunias, geraniums, and lilies of the valley that

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travelers on the Danube called it the “flower town.” Horticulture benefitted some social groups more than other. The town’s 200 or so Nazarenes played a key role in production; women were largely responsible for selling goods in Budapest. This “army of many-skirted, kerchiefed, shawled market women,” Domokos Varga has written, “were the enduring links between Pest and the villages. They carried what they had to sell in large baskets and sacks, and they took home money and what they bought in town, along with rumors and the occasional newspaper.” The profits from this trade went into traditional peasant investments, including furniture, wagons, horses, and daughters’ trousseaus. Yet, improved transportation also allowed “traditional” crafts to reach new markets. For example, lace produced by girls and women in a Dunavecse workshop was distributed across Europe.

The river did not just take away goods; it also brought people to Dunavecse. In the interwar years Dunavecse became a holiday destination for the lower classes of Budapest, who were drawn by cheap fares (including “weekend” specials, a novelty for Hungarians), advertisements (“Let’s Spend the Summer in Dunavecse!”), and amenities such as tennis courts, boat rentals, and restaurants near the riverbank. Locals and visitors also mixed on the “corso,” which was built atop the flood embankments and attracted young people, especially on summer afternoons. Many people also crossed the river to the opposite shore, where river regulation had turned two smaller islands and sand banks into one large island. A large summer camp was built here in the interwar years. Hungarians scouts and a Calvinist youth organization shared the camp and gladly interacted with residents of the town. In return, reads a local history, “the people of Vecse thronged in great numbers to their campfires.” In 1938, the Calvinist youth held a “world congress” on the island. It attracted more than 100 participants from England, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and other countries. Campers spent their time in Bible study and debating contemporary issues, such as “Christianity and the aims of

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26 Domokos Varga, Vizek könyve (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1976), 134.
27 “My mother had a fabric shop and she also trade in hand crafts, baskets etc. She sent these to Budapest for sale.” “Éva B.,” in Hungarian Jewish Women Survivors Remember the Holocaust: An Anthology of Life Histories, ed. Ilana Rosen (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004).
28 Balogh, Dunavecse, “Egyletek és testületek, pódium és színpad.”
29 Balogh, Dunavecse, “Egyletek és testületek, pódium és színpad.”
national minorities in Europe.” But they also went swimming and boating, leading one newspaper to boast that campers from “cooler countries left the Dunavecse island well tanned.” All these innovations — weekend visitors, tennis courts, summer camps — showed how quickly “modern” and “western” forms of leisure had taken root in this small town.

But the river remained unpredictable and dangerous, especially in the late winter and early spring. In March 1931, three young people were killed when strong winds capsized their small boats (the fourth member of their party was pulled unconscious from the river). A decade later, disaster struck the entire town. The river had already flooded in 1940; in March 1941 the river rose more than eight meters and again broke through nearby dams and embankments. The government sent 10,000 sandbags from Budapest and even ordered the Hungarian air force to bomb the frozen river, hoping to break up the ice barrier, but to little effect. The water swept aside the emergency dams and soon covered the entire town and surrounding fields. Dozens of houses were ruined or badly damaged. Months later, thousands of hectares remained under water. Curtly dismissing nearly a century of river regulation work, experts now claimed that Dunavecse lacked proper flood defenses and flood zones.

The 1941 flood was a clear invitation to even more drastic river regulation efforts. Hungarian communists, in control from 1948 onward, welcomed massive public works projects. By now, the formula was well established: raise higher embankments, build stronger dams, dredge a deeper channel. When the river rose to record levels in March 1956, Dunavecse was again threatened, and officials called out the army, bombed the ice, and evacuated some residents. This time, however, the emergency dams held, and “perhaps for the first time ever,” noted the historian

31 “Három halál, három szerencsétlen” a Dunán,” Új Barázda, March 3, 1931, 4.
Mihály Balogh, “they held the torrent back from the village’s streets and houses.”

As before, the high waters brought even more measures to regulate the river and defend the village. But these new dams, embankments, and canals came at a high cost. The area soon lost much of its biodiversity. Wetlands around the town dried up and disappeared, taking with them the plants and animal they had long harbored: reeds, rushes, and sedge, as well as pheasants, deer, foxes, and white-tailed eagles. The beach also suffered. According to Balogh, “this attempt at [flood] protection turned out badly: the edge of the river soon began to silt up. Vecse’s famous beach went to ruin, the lively watersports of the summer died, and the guests who had come on holiday stayed away.” Balogh stated it simply: “This thoughtless ‘defense of the riverbank’ took the Danube away from Vecse.”

The Danube itself was not the river it had once been. Its economic role had changed dramatically. Ships carried fewer goods and passengers; railroads were an old competitor, and in the late twentieth century cars, trucks, and buses also cut into river traffic. In Dunavecse, passenger boat service up and down the river ceased in 1972, ending century-old routes on the Danube and the trade in fresh vegetables and flowers. On land, the collectivization of agriculture and the establishment of several small factories greatly reduced social inequality and created an economic upswing in the 1950s and 60s. But not everyone could find a job close to home, and young people began to move to nearby cities. Almost overnight, Dunavecse had found itself close to the beating industrial heart of communist Hungary. This encompassed Budapest, long the country’s industrial center, as well as newer sites, such as the massive oil refinery at Szazhalombatta, just 60 kilometers upriver. But the most spectacular change came when Dunaújváros – or “Stalin City,” as it was called in the 1950s – was built from scratch just across the river from Dunavecse. Here rose Hungary’s largest steelworks and paper factory, which together employed

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33 Balogh, “Megfordult világban,” in Dunavecse; also see “Nehéz közdelem után a Duna déli szakaszán is megindult a jégzajlás,” Szabad Nép, March 9, 1956, 4.
34 Balogh, “A kis lak...faluban,” in Dunavecse.
35 On the demise of the vegetable and flower trade, see Gy. S., “A tanács nem a büntetésen, hanem a megoldáson törte a fejét...,” Szabad Föld, April 8, 1973, 3.
11,600 workers by 1960. Some residents of Dunavecse commuted by ferry to work in the mills and factories, while others moved there permanently, drawn by high wages, plentiful food, and good housing. Starting in the 1960s, the town’s population began to decline, a process that has continued down to the present.

Communism’s triumph over nature took a heavy toll on the Danube. Untreated sewage, agricultural runoff, animal waste, and industrial runoff all polluted the river and degraded the ecosystem. The residents of Dunavecse could see this unfold before their eyes. In 1950, the large island that had once held the summer camp was given to the industrial city across the river. Needing water for its furnaces and mills, it put new dams in the Danube, and in the process all but joined the island to the mainland. At first it used this land for fruit and vegetable production. But pollutants from the steelworks and factories soon entered the water and soil, so that food could no longer be raised on the former island. City managers next planted aspens, hoping to create a park, but all the trees died. Meanwhile, in the river itself, pollution caused mass kill-offs of fish. The writer Domokos Varga recalled strolling along the Danube with his family in the early 1970s. When a brother decided to roll up his pants and wade in the water, he emerged with feet caked in tar that could not be rubbed off. The Danube, he mused, was increasingly becoming a “sewer.”

Not all residents of Dunavecse took this sitting down. In 1988, in the waning years of communism, several openly protested the air and water pollution caused by the factories across the river. Led by a bank official and local journalist, they “declared war” on a new paper plant that had begun operations without safety tests. Writing in a leading Budapest newspaper, the journalist claimed that many residents suffered from fevers, vomiting, and diarrhea. They also complained about the drinking water, avoided the beach, and knew not to eat fish caught in the “strongly polluted” Danube. He conceded that progress had been made in recent

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38 Varga, *Vizek könyve*, 56.
years—smokestacks now had scrubbers—but alleged that “dangerous materials” continued to enter the air and water. Local officials had been dismissive and state officials inactive, leading the journalist to ask: “Who then will protect us?” He ended on a pessimistic note, noting that “those who live here largely powerless to stop the destruction of their environment,” although he took it as a hopeful sign that people’s patience was beginning run out.

This small act of defiance mirrored the larger campaign in the 1980s against pollution in the Danube and the hydropower dam on the Hungarian-Czechoslovakian border. These environmental protests have been rightly understood as a critique of the broader communist system; they heartened the political opposition and emboldened the wider public. But a follow-up article about Dunavecse in 1988 offered a more sober assessment.⁴⁰ It agreed that locals wanted something done about pollution, even if they lacked direction and too often encountered discouragement and resistance from above. Not all of Dunavecse’s woes, it added, could be placed on outsiders. Many locals also contributed to pollution in the Danube: they grazed their sheep on flood embankments, built a motorcycle course in the floodplain, washed their cars on the bank, and let garbage pile up. In short, they treated it with indifference and ignorance. Concluding with a folksy metaphor, the article urged resident to “sweep out their own homes.” This would require them to rethink their relationship with the Danube. How they might do this—and how new links to Europe might be found—is the subject of the final section.

The Danube and Europe

Today the town of Dunavecse is alienated from the Danube River. It faces inland and closely resembles other small towns in the area, including places whose history was not directly shaped by the river. This is perhaps unsurprising: the creation of modern Hungary has helped to homogenize the countryside. Regional differences persist, but it makes sense that cultural, economic, and social differences between Dunavecse and its landlocked neighbors have declined. In

⁴⁰ “‘..Saját házunk táján...’,” Népszabadság, February 27, 1988, 6.
turning its back on the Danube, however, the town has turned its back on history and, one might add, on Europe, because of the wider connections the river made possible. Or has it? In this concluding section, I briefly consider three ordinary things – a bridge, a port, and a boat – that reveal once more the competing possibilities and meanings of the river to the men and women who live alongside it.

First, the bridge. On July 13, 2007, the Pentele Bridge over the Danube opened to traffic. Linking Dunavecse and Dunaújváros, it gracefully stretched 1,700 meters across the Danube. The most expensive bridge ever built in Hungary, it was the centerpiece of the planned M8 highway, which would run from Szolnok in central Hungary to the Austrian border (with easy access to Graz). Hopes for the bridge ran high on both sides of the river. A local geographer predicted that the bridge would help these two “internal peripheries” overcome their isolation.41 Residents on the Dunavecse side, he promised, would enjoy better job prospects, increased mobility, and stronger civic organizations. Over time, he wrote, small towns like Dunavecse could shed their provincial character and take on the qualities of more dynamic areas: “If the M8 motorway is extended, then the importance of local forces will not diminish, but national and international influences will occupy an even greater place.” To date, however, the M8 highway remains largely unbuilt: only 34.5 kilometers out of a planned 330.2 have been completed. So, the Pentele Bridge is in many respects a “bridge to nowhere” (in fairness, it does link up to north-south highways). But the ideas behind it represent something substantial and familiar: the dream of achieving Hungarian greatness and European modernity through massive infrastructure projects and a mastery of nature. In this case, the Danube is merely an obstacle to be overcome; the bridge does nothing to pull the town and river closer together.

Other residents of Dunavecse dream of Hungarian and European futures that look to the Danube, rather than away from it. This brings us to Dunavecse’s port, which is centuries old. Since 1996, a private company has run it. The company has eight employees and handles 60 to 120 thousand metric tons per year – far

below its capacity. This worries Béla Szalma, a native of Dunavecse and a third-generation riverboat captain. Szalma is the president of the Hungarian Federation of Danube Ports (Magyar Dunai Kikötők Szövetsége), which aims to improve infrastructure and increase shipping on the Danube. In 2012 ships carried just 2% of all goods in Hungary, and by 2030 the Federation would like to increase this figure to 10%. In interviews, Szalma spells out his dream of turning the Danube into a liquid highway. The main obstacle, he emphasizes, is the low water level on Danube, which prevents cargo ships from carrying full loads nearly 150 days of the year. To Szalma, the solution lies in further regulation of the river; only more diversion dams, locks, and canals will allow year-round shipping. He favors hydroelectric dams, but also praises the beauty of the waterway. And he cares very deeply about smaller ports like Dunavecse. With Szalma, then, we can see someone who wants to go “back to the future.” That is, he wants to recreate elements of the past (thriving small-town ports, busy shipping on the Danube, aggressive regulation of the river) to forge new connections between towns like Dunavecse and other parts of Europe.

This brings us, finally, to the ship. In 2010, a wooden ship docked at Dunavecse. On board were the Friends of the Danube Circle (Duna Baráti Kör), who had come from another small town 30 kilometers upstream from Dunavecse. The visitors received a warm welcome. Significantly, both the Friends of the Danube Circle and their ship were inspired by a similar organization in Ulm, Germany. In 2000 members of the Society of Danube Friends (Gesellschaft der Donaufreunde) had traveled down the Danube in a small wooden vessel. Called the Ulmer Schachtel or “box of Ulm,” it was modeled on old river ships built before the age of steam (it did have two diesel motors, however). These self-proclaimed friends of the Danube, in both Germany and Hungary, are odd organizations: they allow only men as members and their trips seem fueled by romantic nationalism and alcohol as much

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as by environmental concerns. There are much more serious environmental groups up and down the Danube, although not in Dunavecse. Indeed, one suspects that the *Friends of the Danube Circle’s* mixture of river conservation, local patriotism, Hungarian nationalism, and Danubian connections would strike a chord in a small town like Dunavecse, with its long history with the river. This ship thus represents the possibility of a nostalgic “return to the river” (and to Europe), one that largely idealizes a lost world and ignores the darker aspects of the past and present.

In his 1983 book of Dunavecse, historian Sándor Naszály reflected on the importance of the Danube for the town. “Dunavecse can not only thank the river for the first part of its name, but also for the many triumphs and sorrows of its long history, for its sustenance and perhaps its survival; indeed, for existing at all, for it exists only because here was and here is the Danube.”45 This town still sits on the river. It remains to be seen, however, whether the men and women of this town will again rediscover the river and whether they will come with dredges or with fishing poles. If they do return, the Danube could help them discover other people and places up and down its banks.

45 Naszály, *Dunavecse*, 5.