

WITTY

LEAKS

IN THIS SERIES, DIPLOMATS SHARE PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES ON "EXCURSIONS" into Hungarian culture, art, gastronomy & scenery.



REMINISCENCES OF A SPIRIT

STORIES OF IMPORTANT PERSONALITIES CONNECTING INDIA AND HUNGARY

BY THE AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA, KUMAR TUHIN

A few days before I was to take the flight to Budapest in November 2018, I met the then External Affairs Minister of India to seek her guidance for my work in Hungary. One important message she gave me was that many individuals spanning several generations had contributed to furthering India-Hungary friendship, including Sándor Körösi Csoma, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Ervin Baktay and Amrita Sher-Gil, and that I should visit the places associated with them as soon as possible after landing in this country. Hungary had thus acquired a mystical image in my mind even before my arrival here.

To tell you the truth, my journey actually started much earlier. Exactly when is not clear, but between 3rd and 9th century, the ancestors of the Roma people arrived in Europe from northern and western India through Persia, Armenia and the Byzantine Empire and gradually spread their way across the whole of Europe, including Hungary. Stories of this connection with India are preserved in Roma people's oral traditions and the linguistic origin of Romani dialects in the Indian languages.

Journeys through time

I was captured in 1532 by the Turkish army which was withdrawing after their unsuccessful siege of Kőszeg and taken to Constantinople. I managed to get freedom later after converting to Islam and then travelled to Egypt, from where I joined the campaign of the Turkish navy in the famous siege of Diu in India against the Portuguese. In one of the most famous naval operations of that time, the Turkish navy was pushed back thus upsetting their ambitions for greater influence in the Indian Ocean. After that loss, I returned to Hungary and spent my last years writing memories of that contact with India. My work is available in the Vatican Library as György Huszti's manuscript "Descriptio peregrinationis Georgii Huszti".

My interest in the search for ancient homeland of Hungarian people believed to be somewhere in Asia led me to my long journey to India, the mother of all civilizations. After reaching India in 1822, I lived a simple life of an ascetic studying Buddhism and the Tibetan language and carrying out extensive research over two decades in monasteries in Zangla and at the Asiatic Society in Kolkata. Driven by my old wish to reach the unknown reaches of Tibet and Central Asia, I took to road again in 1842 but could only reach the town of Darjeeling near the Tibet border where

I came down with fever. There is a memorial at my final resting place in old Darjeeling cemetery. You will find many institutions and schools in Hungary named after me such as Körösi Csoma Baptist High School at Szentendrei út 83.

My business in educational appliances and photography material generated much wealth to enable me to undertake five journeys around the world between 1882 and 1914. I was able to pick up rare art pieces from the East, including from India. My art collection adorned my villa at Andrassy út 103 in Budapest and the visitors were understandably overawed. In my will, I therefore left my art collection as well as my villa to the Hungarian State for establishing a museum which they later named after me as Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts.

While I was employed at an art shop in Mumbai in 1895 and subsequently in Shimla and Kolkata in 1897, it rekindled my interest in the art objects of India. I later established my own art galleries in Delhi and London. Several compatriots from Hungary wrote about the rich collections displayed therein and lovingly called these as Imre Schwaiger's 'museums'. After the Ferenc Hopp Museum started operating from 1923, I started donating to it some Indian art pieces regularly. In fact, when I liquidated my London shop, I donated four large cases of such material to the museum, and which substantially enlarged its collection. My daughter Ilona inherited my Delhi shop. I breathed my last in Delhi in 1940 and am resting since then at the Nicholson Cemetery there, together with my wife Nelly and son Leonard.

By the time I moved as an eight year old girl with my family to Shimla in India, the charm of India was already cast on me. My dad was an Indian Sikh and my mother was a Hungarian Jewish opera singer. I was named Amrita Sher-Gil. I must admit the influence on our family of my uncle Ervin Baktay, who was among the most famous Indologists of his time. In his childhood, he felt himself overwhelmed after reading the Hungarian translation of the Sanskrit book Śakuntalā and felt as if some strange experiences from a previous life had come back to him. A school in Dunaharaszti at Baktay Ervin tér 3 carries his name. I started taking lessons in painting and discovered for myself the Indian traditional art by

visiting sites such as the cave paintings of Ajanta. I got only 28 years for my life, but I lived it to the fullest till my life candle extinguished in 1941. The 'Amrita Sher-Gil Cultural Centre' in Budapest is named after me. There is also a plaque in front of the building in Budapest at Szilágyi Dezső tér 4 where I was born.

Thirteen years after I got the Nobel Prize for literature, the first for any Asian, I reached Keleti Railway Station in 1926 to be greeted by a large gathering of the Hungarian people shouting "Tagore, Tagore". In the days that followed, I however fell ill and had to be taken to a hospital in Balatonfüred where I recovered. In gratitude, I planted a tree on the shore of Lake Balaton. Several famous Hungarian scholars and artists, including painters Erzsébet Sas-Brunner and her daughter Erzsébet Brunner, visited my Shanti Niketan University during the next few years. The Brunner mother-daughter duo arrived in India in 1930 answering a mystical call when they claimed to have seen me in their dream.

Within a few weeks of my arrival in Hungary, in December 2018, I visited the hospital in Balatonfüred where Tagore had stayed. Looking at the pictures hung on the hospital's walls, I could imagine the sage from India walking along the lake shores. Many Indian leaders who visited Hungary have planted trees at the Tagore promenade and a bust of Tagore has been placed here since October 9, 1956. As I strolled around Balatonfüredi Tagore sétány, his song from Gitanjali rang aloud in my head:

"THE time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long. I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet ... The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end."

Don't bother about getting my name. I am the spirit in these explorers. 🇮🇳

