

The Self fulfilled

My promise to Self is to visit Paris and Lake Balaton in Hungary annually in my remaining years. I made this promise to myself a few years ago without thinking much what a promise to the Self really meant. Going to Paris has always given me a thrill and the sight of Lake Balaton and its water have always given me an unmatched lift, why let any year pass without these eternal life enhancements and of course they are both within reach.

But then a self-promise has to be fulfilled. Now I have an obligation. Indeed if I do not visit either it is a sign of weakness, the Self would complain about being let down. From childhood on and certainly in my professional life promises always have had to be kept to maintain and prove to myself, and others, what a reliable person I am. My self-esteem would never recover having decided to do something regularly and then flinching from fulfilling it, the Self might even say what a sod I have become. Two years ago I could only get to the Balaton in December having visited a close friend in the southern part of Hungary. Several of us drove to a town called *Keszthely*, which is at the North-West end of the lake where after some rummaging around we found a spot where the Balaton literally ends and there I put my hand in the holy water for a moment. There, the Self grudgingly nodded his head, a promise fulfilled even if not in the spirit of it so this was an empty gesture, a mere bureaucratic tick towards a promise. Whereas going to Paris is always fulfilling, no just touching of toes into Paris life, but then how can one compare the water of a lake with the brilliance of the imperial capital? (my self-promise had no logic, it was just indulgence).

This year, 2017, the fulfilment of both promises was of a high order. We travelled to Paris on a super fast French train from Bordeaux specifically to visit the *Père Lachaise* cemetery and walk on the elevated garden called *Le Promenade Plantée*. The latter was built well before the better-known *High Line* in New York on top of a disused railway viaduct. Once up there the vistas of the city change, for everything is viewed high above pavement level as the visitor walks along its the length, several kilometres, looking into nearby buildings at third floor level, down to streets and sample long vistas of Paris. The vegetation is pleasing without being spectacular but it is an inspired

regeneration of something that has become redundant. It is a pity that London, which has so many railway viaducts, has nothing like this but then London is not exactly short of greenery.

The next day we made our way to the cemetery that to my surprise was built on a rather steep slope. Whilst the *Brompton* and *Kensal Green* in London, of a little later vintage, were laid out on a strict grid, the *Père* starts straight then wanders you around. The monuments to the dead were the highs of funereal art but no better than in London or indeed at the *Fiume Road* cemetery in Budapest. No money was spared on the artistic eternity of the dead except, hugely disappointing, the effort for Chopin whose grave has not the scale or panache that his music deserves, just a grieving semi-clad girl on top in need of a good scrub. The most popular, at least judging by the throng of people nearby, was Jim Morrison's which so many wanted to touch or leave something personal that it had to be barricaded so I never got to it. A tree nearby had to be wrapped in a mat to let the faithful attach their mementos. Finally, we made our way to Oscar Wilde's



monumental grave that impressed in its scale and design. Jacob Epstein's winged angel has the awkwardness that parallels Wild's life or perhaps the humiliation of his end. As a sculpture it outranked most of the others.

After the funerary impressions it was time for what in France is *non pareil*, lunch on a terrace outside a restaurant that was conveniently placed for those who exited the dead but were themselves very much alive for *cuisine* and *du vin*. As is my custom, sometimes embarrassing but hardly ever spurned, I strike up conversations or at least nods with complete strangers; the brief exchanges elevate moments above the mundane. The Frenchman at the next table was friendly but his wife stuck to the stiff nosed reputation of Parisians. There was also an English couple, a handsome woman with a crass husband.

Now I come to the day that really inspired me to write this, the visit a few weeks later to the Balaton, which I had planned even more eagerly than the journey to Paris. The very next day after our arrival in Budapest, Sunday 1st October, I made my way alone to the Balaton where I looked up a place the least distance away, so it seemed, called *Balatonakaratty* a long name even by Hungarian standards. I travelled on the trams to the South Railway station, a design from communist times, its many levels not for those with ambulant deficiencies. At the ticket office a long consultation ensued with a most helpful middle-aged lady clerk going over my options, '*Balatonakaratty, no there are no direct trains to get you there, you have to go to Székesfehérvár then change to another train that will take you to the Balaton*'. I said fine then expected to pay for a return fare but the whole amount thanks to my age came to about sixty pence. Yes, that little! I was embarrassed by this generosity in a country where I pay no taxes.

The train, clean and modern, sped along on smooth tracks. The countryside, nothing much to start with, rushed by. There were acoustic screens to shield the local inhabitants from the noise of the train, something one rarely sees in England. The stations along the way were also newly built, the whole experience was telling the traveller that the EU's western standards have reached Hungary. I sat facing forward, although there were plenty of empty seats somehow a young couple decided to sit opposite me. Watching them was one of the highlights of my day. Neither was particularly good looking, the girl had missing teeth and pimples everywhere, but what made the experience so special was the way they were totally, utterly in love with each other, nothing else mattered. They never for a moment glanced in my direction just a few feet away, that was fine by me, there was total adoration in the girl's eyes, in the young man's the same, every minute, not even that long, they leant forward touching lips. He described in dead seriousness some football game where there were three goalkeepers in one of the teams, this, however unusual, was not something that would make the average girl's pulse beat faster. But for her it was all so fascinating, she was just lost in him the smile never leaving her face, her eyes sparkled, her glance never wondered, the universe was Him. I could not help wondering how long this burning intensity could last in their young lives but of course I will never know. At

some non-descript station they departed carrying themselves away in their adoring bubble. Excellent, here was proof again that Hungary was a country of uninhibited romance.

An expanse of water came into view but not the Balaton, this was the *Venetian Lake* (Velencei Tó). This is a rather shallow but attractive lake not far from the Self-promise destination. For a moment I even thought of getting off as a compromise but no carried onto *Székesfehérvár* where the train terminated. This is a large busy industrial town where nearby the last tank battle of WWII was fought in March 1945, the Soviets annihilating what was left of the Wehrmacht's panzers. It turned out that the next train to *Balatonakarattya*, quite satisfying to spell it out again, would be in two hours but as I really did not fancy idling away so much time in a railway station I made my way to the first of a line of taxis. *How much would it cost to get to the Balaton and later back?* I pulled out my Hungarian forints that were entangled with a fifty Euro note, his eyes immediately lit up: that would do, he will even wait for me while I dipped myself in the lake. Off we drove. The journey turned out much better than if I had caught the train; first we raced past a modern football stadium being built, *how is the local team doing? Them?....* After half an hour we veered off into rural parts, villages, *Jenő* and *Füle*, roused my interest with their ancient-sounding names so much so that I decided to make a brief stop on the return journey at the latter (the exact Hungarian translation of which is *His Ear*). After a few more roundabouts the first glimpses of the silvery lake came into view. The weather that day was perfect, sunny, almost cloudless, no wind, the temperature about twenty.

The driver stopped by a pair of rather industrial looking metal gates but after walking through I found myself in a nicely laid out park fronting the lake. At last I was by the Balaton, which stretched out into the infinity of the horizon, a true inland sea. The *plage*, let's call it that, would be packed in the summer months but now only the aficionados lingered about in late season October. The edge of the lake was lined with a gently curving stone bank with metal steps every fifty metres to descend into the water and the path along had regularly spaced out benches at polite distances from each other. As I was mentally preparing myself to enter the water that every wheezy Budapest resident told me would be unbearably cold there was the encouraging sight of

a woman in the distance wading in, the only one to enter the water. The chilly water could not stop me, in my teens I regularly swam in outdoor swimming pools in mid winter with the snow falling on my head, at any rate the English climate toughens you up. But first I wanted to take in the sight of the lake. There were a few sailing boats tied up at one end of the curve, not a proper harbour just a loose collection of yachts nestling under a few willows. Gentle hills were fading in the distance. Ahead the lake disappeared into the horizon while the sunrays were reflected towards me on rippling waves like a burning bridge. It was just perfect - what a fortunate chap I was in keeping the promise to Self. I changed into my swimming trunks, packed my belongings and sat on a bench, everyone around seemed nice and polite, no fear of having my phone pinched. The sun was so warm it almost burnt my body. I closed my eyes not to let sense and imagination interfere with the moment, it was a total immersion just the way the girl let herself be absorbed into her young lover. Perhaps this fusion of distant water and sun is what spurred the ancient Greeks to think beyond their own physical world and contemplate the meaning of life. I sat there soaking it all in telling myself that every minute was precious but my dutifulness to meet an undertaking soon got the better of me; the challenge of icy water had to be conquered. With much consideration, *no need to hurry my man,*

I carefully lowered the left foot down into the water. It was like being gripped in a frozen vice, an agony to overcome but after a few minutes took the next step and eventually up to my knees and so I progressed until reassuringly I could feel the soft sand of the bottom under my feet. I walked in deeper then plunged up to my neck. It was totally invigorating; hey my mind overcame the challenge of my body! Within minutes I got used to it, but surely I have to take back a record of my triumph. The very nice man on the next bench said yes he would take pictures of me, back into the water and so the photos showed me not as a withering man but a grey haired rather bent Adonis, sort of! The sunlit landscape gave no idea of how cold the water was - but I did it! Other people walked past but apart from the lady who waded in and told me she did this every day, and me, no one else dared the Balaton on 1st October at 16C° water temperature.



After overcoming the challenge of self imposed adversity I rested on the bench, the sun caressing my body. I sat there doing nothing, no appointments, no calls to take, no deadlines, nothing to achieve, just taking in the combination of sun, clear air and the Balaton. But like Eden it could not last, not that I committed a sin, it was just time passing for time has no sentiment. I took out my sketchpad to put down what I saw; drawing something sharpens the details of observation. My allocated two hours were up I knew that the taxi driver was waiting for me but not before I chatted to a middle aged couple passing by. I told them about the film, *Brief Encounter*, that we will never see each other again but how nice it was to meet them. The woman plump and with a season-full of suntan was called Maria, *Maria have a kiss from a London stranger*. She presented her cheek, the husband just smiled. We shook hands, his grip could have crushed a slab of Carrara. *No, not never, come and see us next year, we are always at the far end.*

I left the passing paradise knowing that such moments never return. The driver who had waited patiently in his Mercedes nodded and we were off.

We stopped as I had planned in *Füle*. *Füle* proudly displayed a pair of straw bales dressed up as man and wife for the Harvest Festival, placed midway between adjacent Catholic and Protestant churches, the usual arrangement in villages for the two main religions in Hungary. They were closed, open only for services and both were in rather neglected condition the paint peeling off showing the grey rendering underneath. Did this symbolise

the fading attraction of religion? There was just one distinguished house with elegant woodcarving in the whole of the main street, I imagine it once belonged to a burger. After twenty minutes of looking around the taxi took me back to *Székesfehérvár* where I boarded the train back to Budapest. Nothing much of note happened on the way back, but it was a great day to cherish without drama but when sense and sensuality came together and Self could not stop having a satisfied grin.

I finde my selfe more by chance, than by the search of mine owne judgement

Michael de Montaigne Essays, The First Booke, Chapter X Of readie or slow speech, translated by John Florio, 1632 edition.

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