

Gay Life in Hungary

Kevin Moss

After ten years of visiting Hungary, the gates of gay Budapest finally opened for me two summers ago. In a crowded cafe on busy Váci street, the fashionable pedestrian mall on the Pest side, I struck up a conversation with some men at another table. Soon three of the maybe fifteen tables in the place were discussing the merits of various gay meeting places in the city: baths, cruising areas, piano bars, discos... Budapest, it turned out, was not the kind of wasteland I had learned to survive in Moscow.

With the collapse of the Soviet empire, each country in Eastern Europe is finding its own path to independence, and each gay community its own path to liberation. Even in Kádár's communist Hungary, homosexuality was not a crime. In spite of the *Spartacus Guide's* claim that "the attitude of the Hungarian population towards gays is intolerant," Hungarian gays now have organizations, bars, and a newspaper. Some of the baths seem to be predominantly gay, and nobody seems to mind. The baths are the pride of Budapest, actually the reason for establishing a city here since Roman times. There are perhaps ten in operation now, ranging from the oldest, Király, built by the Turks when they occupied the city, through the pseudo-baroque Széchenyi in the city park and the art nouveau Gellért resort complex, to the modern Termál. Most have saunas,

steam rooms, and swimming pools as well as the pools of natural hot spring water with various medicinal properties (some of them radioactive!). And most, being segregated by sex and requiring no clothing or only a small napkin-like apron, are active cruising areas. The largest and most popular complex is the Gellért, which also has a mixed outdoor pool with a wave machine, a small restaurant, and a sunning terrace. Entry to the entire complex runs a few dollars, and a ten-minute massage can be had for \$1.25.

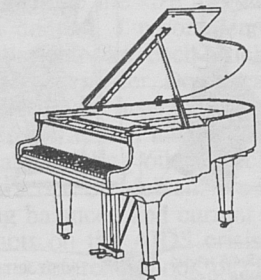
1989 marked the change from People's Republic to Republic of Hungary and also saw the opening of the first gay disco, the Lokál, complete with drag shows and an adjacent leather bar. The oldest gay bar in Hungary (perhaps in all Eastern Europe), the Egyetem, closed this year after more than 25 years. From the outside it looked like a typical cafe, but behind the tables on the street there was a bar, and further back a piano room where gay men gathered in the evenings. By this summer there were two more piano bars and a second disco, the Angel Bar, advertised as "not just for angels." All of these seemed friendly, clean, popular, and cheap by American standards: roughly \$1 cover and \$1 drinks.

In April of this year the first issue of *Mások (Others)*, the gay monthly, appeared. The first three issues are 16 pag-

es of news, fiction, photos, and personals. A sampling: an article about Zsuzsa Lantos, torch singer at the Egyetem who died recently; a plea to Hungarian lesbians to participate: "Women, we're waiting for you—it will be easier together!" and complaints about discrimination against minorities (read gypsies) in the gay bars. Some of the personals are also telling: because of the shortage of housing and meeting-places, people advertise their own apartments for use by gay couples and add that in exchange they expect to take part in any sex.

The provinces of Hungary remain... well, provincial, but Budapest is developing from a great attraction for straight tourists into an exciting and worthwhile destination for gays as well.

The author is an Associate Professor of Russian at Middlebury College. ▼



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