

Between the Pages

I FIRST WENT TO BUDAPEST IN MAY 1997 as part of my research for my novel *The Sensualist*. I needed to visit the Semmelweis Medical Museum and to swim in the baths at the stately Gellért Hotel.

The tourist information agent at the train station had a

warm, welcoming smile. She graciously gave me bus tickets and found me a room at an agreeable hotel run by former acrobats. The efficient and underutilized buses ran along broad, manicured boulevards. The architecture in the center—an eclectic mix of neoclassical and Art Nouveau, sprouting turrets and domes, ennobled with entablatures supported by massive Atlas or caryatid figures—gave a fitting grandeur to this once strategically important city. My stay was blessed with flawless blue skies and a temperature moderated by a lovely breeze.

A second visit a year later was to an almost completely different place. This time rain poured ceaselessly. Low, heavy cloud kept the pollution at nose level. The helpful tourist office agent had been replaced by a holdover from the Communist era who refused to book a room, give directions for how to make a phone call or find a phone number, sell bus tickets, provide a map, or admit that she worked in a tourist information office.

I figured out the phone system and got a room at the same hotel as the previous year, but the heat had been turned off for the season, so there was no way to dry clothing or get warm. If this had been my first visit to Budapest, I would have noticed little about the streets or architecture, as I was perpetually hunkered under an umbrella or packed into a crowded, steamed-up bus.

ABOVE: Identification document for Györgyné Kiss, 1942–48.

-facing page: The doorbell system at a Budapest apartment.



Unchanging through rain or shine, however, were the well-stocked and plentiful *antikvárium*, the antiquarian and secondhand bookstores. The first thing that struck me about them was the stack of plastic baskets—the sort you find at supermarkets—inside the entrance to each one. The second thing was that customers were carrying these baskets and filling them up. Either the citizens of Budapest are voracious readers or they love being surrounded by books.

Although most of the books in Budapest bookstores are in Hungarian, German, or Latin, none of which I understand, I was instantly beguiled. I too grabbed a basket and launched into a book-buying spree that ended with the purchase of a duffel bag to hold them all. When my loot and I arrived home, I had to face up to the fact that I could not read a single book.

I had started out small, having discovered that most of the bookstores had drawers and bins filled with old documents, including personal identification cards, receipts, letters, telegrams, report cards, and coupons, adorned with photographs, signatures, seals—everything that the ephemera lover dreams of. My purchases graduated to smallish books—university theses on *materia medica*, psalters, ledgers, and unidentifiable works. Soon I was considering such weighty tomes as *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1751, and a stunning, completely handwritten work entitled *Planum seu Opus Deputaonis Rece sub Presidio Ctis Christophori Niczky*, 1797, in which 234 pages were filled with descriptions of legal cases. Over the last two hundred years, this

Identification booklet for
Grauka Öry Erzsébet,
1917–18.



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latter item has been in a fire, doused in water, and stored away, but its pages still respond to the fingers with a crisp snap, and the texture of the paper is seductively coarse. The spine, pictured on the right, no longer disguises and protects the book; through the damage it shows the signatures, the binding twine, and the layers of leather and gilt.

I rationalized these purchases by calling them “inspiration” and by planning to incorporate them into my own work, and I bought them from the marked-down shelves, where stood the broken, the emblazed, the irretrievably obscure.

Because I was paying no more than four or five thousand forints for a book (twenty to thirty dollars at the time), and often much less, I ignored the subject matter—not being able to read it anyway—and made my selections solely on the basis of tactile and visual appeal. Imagine my delight, then, when later opening *Imperatores Ottomanici (Ottoman Rulers)*, volume one, 1760, to be reminded that it had a spectacular two-color title page. And I had completely missed the decorative engravings scattered throughout: mythological creatures, crosses between Greek gods and Christian angels, heralding the arrival of Crusader sailing ships; a Turk fending off a powerful eagle; the Sultan receiving pots of gold from his subjects; Turks firing cannons at the Crusaders’ ships. I felt so lucky I could barely stand it. Then the real treasure, not something that had been created with the book, but something added later: a playing card stuck between the pages. Suddenly, this was no longer just a book off the shelf in a bookstore; someone had owned it, read it before.

The find set off an investigation into playing cards. I took the card to the playing-card expert in London’s Camden Passage, referred to in an earlier chapter. He told me that it was part of a tarock—also known as tarocchi—pack from about 1850; whoever had left it in there had probably consulted the book some hundred years after it had been published. A complete set consists of seventy-eight cards



and would now cost about a thousand pounds, so adding the rest of the pack to my single card, shown on the facing page, even if I could find a similar set, was out of the question.

I have saved the items that I've salvaged over the years: pressed plants, menus, newspaper clippings, snapshots, business cards, sketches, prescriptions, and pages torn out of other books. They make me think of the things that I've inadvertently used as bookmarks: receipts, library patron record slips, greeting cards, notes. When I reread a book that has not been off my shelf in a decade or two and find, for instance, an old-style bus transfer, I am reminded of how fast things change and how impersonal many of them have become. There is nothing unique about today's receipts, and the printing on them fades in a very short time; notes are more often computer-generated laser pages than handwritten missives; and when was the last time anyone had the leisure to pick a flower and press it between the pages of a book?



ABOVE: A sketch and a photograph found in the pages of a Hungarian book.

FACING PAGE: The tarock card and the book it was found in.