

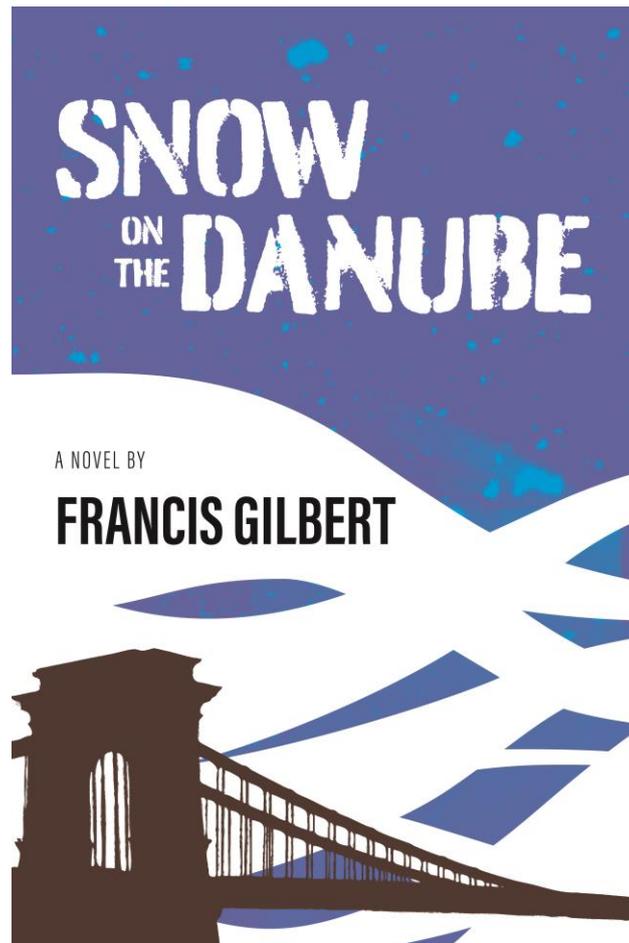


Snow on the Danube

By

Francis Gilbert

Snow on the Danube (Blue Door Press 2019) evokes the lost world of Budapest during and between two great wars and is recounted in the inimitable voice of Count Zoltán Pongrácz: a fussy hypochondriac who becomes an unlikely and compromised hero when the Fascists take over his beloved country and he is forced to rescue his adored, wayward sister Anna. An unlikely comedy, a document of filial love and a compelling portrait of the horrors of war, Snow on the Danube is the story of one man's quest to save everything he loves most: his family, his friends -- and, perhaps, his soul.



The Beginning 1920

Hungary wore black on the day of my birth. Street vendors tied black ribbons around bouquets of flowers; archdukes donned their darkest garb and thrummed their fingers on gold-tasselled armrests. Tram-drivers left their trolley buses in the depot and sat with their children in their tiny flats. Priests and civil servants hoisted black flags and watched them flutter in the air. The streets were empty. Church bells rang. Gamekeepers cancelled their early morning walks; they slumped in their chairs, hounds at their feet. Maids failed to make their daily trips to the grocers and lay on camp beds in their cubby-holes;

bakers neglected to light their ovens and open their shutters. The keeper at the City Zoo threw a few thin slabs of meat to the lions and slouched home.

It was a day of national mourning. In Paris, a treaty was signed that butchered Hungary. Two-thirds of the kingdom was turned over to Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. Hungary had supported the losing side in the First World War.

My father had two reasons to wear black on June 4, 1920. Not only had he lost the family's monumental Transylvanian castle in the unceremonious carve-up of the Treaty of Trianon but he had also, on the very same day, to endure the birth of his son.

My memories from those very early years are vague. I don't remember much about the family's life at our chateau in Villány. I can recall my father's imperious voice barking orders at the workmen who toiled all day at the bottom of our ornamental garden. 'Down there! Careful now. Easy with those girders!'

His shirt sleeves were rolled up and his bald head seemed to glow as he twirled his silver-topped cane. In his polished hunting boots he was a mass of perspiring muscle, mushrooming dust as he heaved bricks. I had no idea what was going on but I guessed it was of the utmost importance.

My first memory of my sister is of her informing me about those mysterious, grunting proceedings. Her black hair brushed my cheek as she leaned towards me and whispered: 'They're building a bridge. Papa says it's very important that the lions have tongues.'

Trying to connect the idea of the bridge with lions was very difficult for me. I imagined that Papa would place real ones on the bridge and this was the whole purpose of the exercise: to give the lions a decent home.

This supposition was no more ridiculous than what he was attempting to do. My father, being fanatical about bridges, thought that he could somehow rectify the dire financial problems afflicting his vineyards by building a replica of Budapest's Chain Bridge at the bottom of his garden. He persisted in believing in this illusion for a long time, even after the construction of the imitation bridge

had bankrupted him, forced him to sell the chateau and move permanently back to Budapest.

Many years later, when I would stroll with my father on the actual bridge in the Budapest twilight, he would sigh and point to the monumental but tongueless lions, commenting regretfully: 'People were coming from miles around to see my Chain Bridge at Villány. The archduke Frederick himself greatly admired it. That bridge was the only thing that wretched estate had going for it: it was a rotten, dry, wizened sort of place. We never grew a single decent grape there.'

After the Count's death, I discovered that this was an outright lie. Although my father sold the chateau, he continued to own vast tracts of the vineyards. He had the good sense to appoint an honest and practical Magyar supervisor to run them all. This doughty chap wasn't even discouraged by the lack of any venue to make the wine in and converted some abandoned cellars on the estate for that purpose. The fantastic Hungarian wines that this chateau-less estate produced was the only real source of income that my family had.

But, of course, I knew none of this as a tiny child gazing on all those workmen toiling away at the banks of the small river that babbled at the bottom of our garden. At the grand opening of the bridge, which most of the neighbouring villages attended, my father held me up proudly before the stone lions.

'My lions have tongues that definitively exist -- unlike the lions on the Chain Bridge in Budapest. They'll be seeing my lions' tongues for miles around! Just look at them!' the Count roared as he held me aloft before the curled manes of those sandstone felines. To be honest, I don't remember this but the anecdote was recounted with such regularity in the following years that it has almost become a genuine memory.

Certain smells awaken glimmerings of the chateau at Villány in my mind. The sharp, rich tang of fermenting wine transports me to the time when Anna gave me an illicit sip: I can still see her dimpled fingers wrapped around the glass. The cool dampness of mould compels me to recall the wooden barrels in the wine cellars. The baked warmth of the hard earth makes me see those dry vineyards

tapering off into the horizon. And the delicious whisk of a breeze sends me back to the moments when I would stand in the middle of the bridge, watch the water ripple underneath and feel the airy draught against my cheeks. Ah yes, I'm never far from those sensations.

My sister told me that we used to play a lot of games around the bridge's building site. Her favourite pastime was a game that she had invented after reading Molnár's *The Paul Street Boys*. This was a classic Hungarian children's story about a group of boys who engage in a fierce battle with a nasty gang to claim ownership of some derelict but treasured land in the slums of Budapest. I'm not sure that our massive garden in Villány, with its circular ponds and cherub-infested fountain, topiary hedges and lichened griffins, replicated those conditions but apparently Anna managed to persuade the servants' children and myself that it did.

According to my sister, we all had a marvellous time throwing sand and bricks at each other and hiding behind wheelbarrows until I received a vicious crack on the head. Anna had to scoop me up in her arms and run with me into the drawing room where my mother was reading. Mama said there was so much blood spurting out of my head that Anna's white frock turned red. Because there was no hospital nearby, they had to take me to a gypsy healer who waved some leaves over my battered skull and curtailed the bleeding.

My only memory of the event is of a warm stickiness sprouting out of my scalp and wondering whether cocoa and other hot beverages were extracted from people's heads. Push back my hair and you can still see the long, white scar.

* * *

Yes, yes, yes: there are black and white photos from this time. There's my father, the Count, standing in his hunting gear and deerstalker hat with his Purdey shotgun in front of the fat-tongued lions. There's my mother, sitting under a parasol in her white, floral dress, reading *Pride and Prejudice* and looking like the fair English maiden that she was before we moved to Budapest. There's me, as a baby, wearing a long, cotton dress with frilly edges and long sleeves being carried by my mother in the road leading to the Archduke Frederick's farm – his wine cellars and hunting grounds were close to us and we used to visit them regularly. What big round eyes I have! But you can certainly see in my pale, agitated face the first inklings of the illnesses that would plague me for the rest of my life.



Figure 1 The Chain Bridge, Budapest

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And there's Anna. Doesn't she look naughty with her dark, inquiring eyes, her cheeky grin, her thick black hair, and her high, Pongrácz cheekbones, all dolled up in that ridiculous harlequin's costume and hat? She always loved dressing up, even in the days when she became a hardened communist.

And here we all are together in our stately horse-drawn carriage, setting off for Mass in our Sunday best: my father is dressed in sober black with a top hat and my mother entirely obscured by the huge, netted hat she's decided to model. And there we are behind them: me, in an absolutely tiny shirt and tie, and Anna looking distinctly grumpy in a Transylvanian frock. She never liked acting the role of a Magyar. But my goodness, she looks so slim and young!

* * *

It's a shame that I remember so little from that time, but I was only five years old when my sister and I left Villány. My memory only revives when we moved to Budapest. And those first days and weeks I can recollect so vividly that I can shut my eyes and replay them with the same ease that a projectionist can pop a film into his whirring machine and shine it in Technicolor onto the darkened cinema screen.

Budapest 1945

Anna ran out of the apartment. If she had been speaking sense, I probably would not have followed her and tended to the unconscious Miss Virág. But my sister wasn't herself at all: there was a desperate light of optimism in her eyes, the kind of optimism that quickly dwindles into suicidal depression once it has been disappointed. I felt that she was in more danger than my tutor.

I pursued her onto Andrásy where she slackened her pace, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to keep up. I called out to her to come back but she ignored me and, thus, I trailed after her through the nightmarish wreckage of Budapest all the way down Attila József utca right down to the river.

The relatively intact state of my apartment had been an exceptionally misleading indication about the general condition of our capital city. How can I begin to describe its ruinous condition? The streets were strewn with overturned tanks, burnt-out trams and cars; flames still lapped at the ruins of great apartment blocks and grey smoke drifted around the tree-tops. Great swathes of the apartments on the ring road around Deak Ter had been obliterated, leaving only charred timbers, pulverized bricks, broken tiles and smashed glass, and the dead bodies of dogs and cats. The corpses of Germans, Hungarians and Russians littered the gutters. Although most of the bodies were of uniformed soldiers, I did come across one unfortunate Swabian flower vendor who was still holding out a sprig of heather and lavender in her hand as if she was just about to sell the pitiful herbs. Her throat had been slashed and the blood had dried around the deep wound like old egg yolk.

After that I determined that I wouldn't look closely at anything lying on the frozen ground unless I absolutely had to. However, despite this pledge to myself, I couldn't help discerning that much of the snow was streaked with bright, red blood and many of the icy puddles were the colour of English strawberries. Her determination to reach her destination seemed to make her oblivious of the

carnage around her; she hopped over bodies, skipped across gutters full of bloody pulp and twisted metal, and ducked around the abandoned trams and tanks.

As we approached the Danube, we heard feet tramping through the snow and the howling screech of a Russian officer. I swivelled round and saw that a large infantry division was marching in our wake: the sound of a drum reverberated through the eerily quiet, snow-thrilled air.

I managed to catch up with Anna on the fragmented remains of the Corso. She had come to a dead stop in front of what used to be the Carlton hotel and was staring at the Danube. The snow mocked us as it fell so peacefully onto the icy water.

“Ahhh!” Anna screamed.

I rushed up to her and took her arm by the railings of the promenade, which were now as looped and bowed as shoe laces. Then I embraced her, and she buried her face in the crook of my shoulder. As I held her, I could see what had happened to this once beautiful part of Budapest: every bridge had been blown up and all the great hotels on the Corso were simply piles of rubble with the occasional glint of a chandelier or hint of red carpet poking through the devastation.

I remember thinking it was a good thing that my father was dead: he couldn't have borne the vision of the Chain Bridge's lions with their manes blasted away and the middle of the bridge sliding into the unforgiving currents of the Danube. Nor could he have endured to see the great Buda castle's dome stripped of its green copper finery and its inner scaffolding exposed to the elements. Most of all, the smell of burnt flesh and rubber and wood, and the crackle of simmering fires eating up the great hotels of the Corso would have told the Count that everything civilised about Hungary had been lost, irretrievably cast to oblivion. And yet, I couldn't help feeling that my country deserved it. Quite frankly, I didn't care that the Chain Bridge was totally destroyed.

Biography

Francis Gilbert found the process of working with the other members of Blue Door Press on *Snow on the Danube* an enriching and enlightening process. He began the novel in the late 1990s, doing much research and rewriting the novel a great many times. It was not until he worked with Blue Door Press in 2016 that the narrative finally took a compelling and original shape. You can read about this process in his blog here: <https://bluedoorpress.co.uk/2019/03/12/the-importance-of-patience-why-it-took-21-years-to-publish-snow-on-the-danube/>

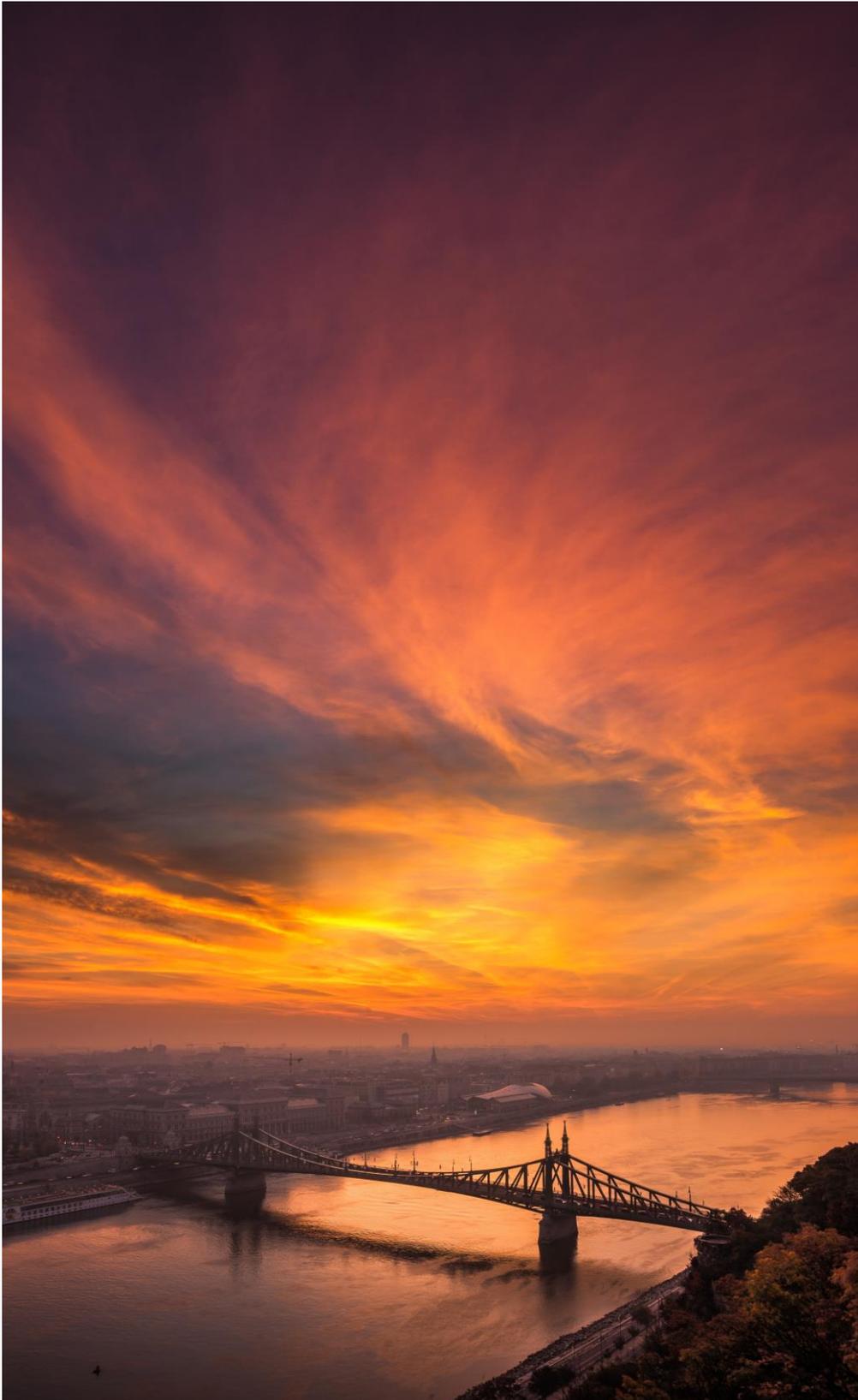


Figure 2 The Danube, the Chain Bridge, and Budapest