Brick-red and fjord-blue – The Port of Komárom

Tamáska Máté

The sketch's straight line stretches boldly over the Danube. A terrace, a lookout, perhaps a volleyball court. It doesn't matter. A dream—if we're being truly strict—not even one of the most beautiful. As I flip through the university students' designs, which are meant to create the new Danube waterfront of North Komárom, I see not the slightest hint of reality. It's as if we were in Bilbao or Paris. But maybe the students are right.

Then I sit inside the port authority's office with its weeping palm trees. This could be anywhere. Plastic doors, plastic doorknobs, dust-trapping carpet, and the inevitable desk, where a massive monitor acts as a sail, shielding the worker from the gaze of anyone entering.

"Go for a walk? Here, at the port?" A hearty laugh, then he continues: "Who would go for a walk along the Danube? Between the rails and the cranes? It's dangerous!"

And what if there were no cranes? What if Komárom hugged the riverbank like the revitalized Western cities, with the vision the students had dreamed up—perhaps on a more modest scale, with quiet resting spots and cheerful beer gardens?

This question seems so surreal here, in the office split in two by a narrow monitor, that I'd rather not even ask it. When I return to the students, they've long since moved on to something else. "If there were promenades and terraces here, where would the boats dock?"—I bring the question from the office. They hadn't thought of that. In their view, the harbor can be anywhere; it's not a spectacle, and it doesn't belong in a city. It should be placed as far away as possible. Then they pause to think and add: a crane could stay, though, as a lookout.

An Imagined View

Two worlds fail to understand each other here: the old working-class mindset and the new, triumphant, leisure-oriented society. Admittedly, I too would prefer to have coffee up high, in a pretty crane-viewing platform, gazing far out toward Gerecse, watching as the waters of the Vág and Danube mix with the main branch. Occasionally a boat would appear, making just a faint murmur; in winter I wouldn't even hear that behind the well-heated glass. I'd imagine that this ship travels the length of the great river, picks up its cargo somewhere in Germany, and, sailing day and night, arrives at a Romanian port. Perhaps it even turns out to sea. A colorful flag flutters on its stern, a national symbol in international waters. On deck, the captain's car

rests, as docile as a guard dog with no duties. But I'll stop here. Man was made for work, moving tons of cargo; the dispatcher crackles over the faulty speaker; the lighthouse cools the towering pyramids of coal with its bluish light. Why should we banish the port from the cityscape? Why is it taken for granted that a café belongs on the banks of the Danube more than a loading dock?

Komárom's port, barely touched by traffic, is now more of a historical monument than a matter of economic rationality. A relic of the 20th century, a remnant of the era of great industrial development that has outlived its own end.

On the riverside tracks, the rusty freight cars almost wheeze, as in a poem by Attila József. According to Jan Assmann, one of the most influential researchers of cultural memory, the sites of classical modernity—railway stations and factories—and, we might add, ports, now resemble a museum more than a working facility.

Energy Crisis

For weeks now, I've been crossing the bridge between the "southern and northern," the "old and new," and the "Hungarian and Slovak" (or, as older people still say, "Czech") parts of Komárom. During this time, not only has the view of the port—which spreads out beneath the bridgehead like a life-size diorama—become etched in my mind, but so has the location of the trains. Because in this past month, not a single car has moved, not a single crane has turned. The silence, as they say, is palpable—or perhaps even ominous. Port traffic is less than 10% of what it was before the fall of communism, even though the 1980s were already marked by a deep crisis. A handful of people keep the entire waterfront running. Instead of being shut down, however, grand development plans emerge from time to time. And despite the city's repeated requests, it has failed to secure a promenade along the waterfront even after three decades.

A few years ago, there were rumors that the filling station at the confluence of the Váh and Danube rivers, in the so-called Spitz, would be dismantled. Then came the "great energy crisis," and the port was suddenly filled with piles of coal, just like in the "good old days," while ships lined up in front of the filling station.

Of course, it would be naive to think that, given today's energy demands, a port left over from the middle of the last century could serve even a larger region. The port staff, however, are optimistic. They say shipping is the only alternative to long lines of trucks. That is certainly true, and I, too, get excited, imagining that the "barges and convoys" familiar from the prayer-like monologues of water level reports will be the slow-moving winners of the 21st-century

green transition. Today, however, they seem more like water dinosaurs on the verge of extinction, floating darkly between the two banks, so motionless that they are the very antithesis—rather than the servant—of the global economy racing down the digital highway.

Old Dreams

I have time to ponder these things while my colleagues from the archives bring the boxes up from the storage room. I find nothing about the port in these either.

The port area, once managed from Prague and later from Bratislava, appears on maps as the city's terra incognita, blank and unmarked from the 1920s all the way through to the most recent regime change. Behind the port, however, major changes were taking place.

Half the city was demolished to make way for "nearly ten-story buildings" reminiscent of Bratislava's housing estates. Their windows overlooking the Danube are veritable little dioramas, from which the landscape is once again filled with the river. But nothing came for free. In the prefab apartment buildings, not only the explosive clatter of flushed toilets running along a shared pipe, but also the window-rattling thud of cargo falling from the harbor cranes became part of home life. The difference between noise and sound, of course, is decided in the mind.

The workers living here mostly worked at the port or the shipyard. For them, this grating clatter was an integral part of their livelihood. All of this is easier to imagine than to glean from the documents. The archives remain stubbornly silent.

No one today could say for certain how the plans for the port eventually ended up in the Danube Museum. It is as if they wanted to prove Jan Assmann's thesis that modernity belongs in museums. The most recent plan shows the urban development concepts from after 1945. On the sketch, which spans several square meters, Komárom appears as a single grandiose port, encircled by an industrial railway, with ships resting in every available stretch of water. Whoever envisioned this was just as obsessed with fantasy and Western models as our university students today. A port of a scale acceptable even to a Hamburg eye would have encircled Jókai's quiet little town. A few stray tracks and the port's "newer" blocks of buildings—now 50 to 60 years old themselves—indicate that work on the plan had indeed begun. However, the benefits hoped for from shipping seem to consistently fall short of reality.

On the part of the port facing the city, where goods arriving by water should be received, office buildings, discount stores, and private clinics now line the streets. It is a typical suburban landscape.

People even drive here from neighboring streets to buy tiles, paint, and bathroom faucets. This part of the port gives off a sense of being left unfinished.

Further up, beyond the bridge, beneath the prefabricated apartment buildings, the landscape is equally quiet, but here a sense of abandonment dominates. The red warehouses with their exposed brick walls glow along the waterfront—which shifts from deep blue to deep green—like the red blanket in a painting by Pál Szinyei Merse. They catch the eye. Inside, they are veritable basilicas. The roof floats above the space without supports, allowing trucks and forklifts to maneuver comfortably. There isn't an event organizer who wouldn't dream of throwing a rave party here...

Here we go again with this exaggerated and clichéd daydreaming! Some of the warehouses are indeed empty, but most of the space is in use. Smaller businesses have set up shop in the corners of the halls, much like the homes of new settlers once leaned against the walls of abandoned Roman amphitheaters. Further away, even larger buildings stand in a row—that's the shipyard, also divided into sections; among other things, the Faculty of Education of the Hungarian University is housed here.

The First Boat

I set out for a walk around the harbor. The water is a dazzling blue. The wind, which has been blowing steadily for days, and the bright sunshine combine to create the atmosphere of a Norwegian fjord. A yacht comes into view, and the "captain" on board looks just like a worker from a socialist poster found in the archives: he gazes boldly into the distant void with an optimism that brooks no contradiction. A steering wheel held confidently before his bare chest—they are preparing to dock. The protruding belly, of course, would no longer fit on the poster; the artist would have to pixelate it, just as the curves of the female figure posing at the bow of the ship also need refining

Sociologists never tire of emphasizing that the world is becoming aestheticized; by this we mean that beauty and spectacle are increasingly valued. Another matter is that this beauty is largely an imagined, retouched reality. Just as a defunct harbor would be a retouched reality. As long as it's operational, it's nothing but trouble: it takes up space from pedestrians, it's noisy,

and it kicks up dust. If it were closed, it would suddenly become a legacy of the Golden Age, where even the cast-iron knob on the harbor bollard deserves attention.

Surprisingly, these harbor bollards are still in use today. Not so much here, in the former winter harbor, but out at the main channel. One day, a massive hotel ship maneuvers in. Forty to fifty British and American retirees share the living space of a small village. Only a few of them venture into town, but when they do, they become a real spectacle. Their legs unaccustomed to walking, their impeccable native English—which, for that very reason, few understand—and, of course, their eyes accustomed to better and more beautiful cities, all make them seem incredibly out of place. This is exactly how the first steamers' English passengers must have looked a good 200 years ago.

Where there are no hotel ships—and indeed, there are almost none anywhere—the harbor piers offer a wonderful place to rest, with fresh Danube air and magnificent sunsets. And on the opposite bank, the outlines of the port on the Hungarian side. But that is another story.

(translated with AI DeepL)