

**Modern History Sourcebook:
Michael J. Quin:
A Voyage Down the Danube, 1836**

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At two o'clock I went to dine with the Count. A rude sort of a gate opened to a court-yard through which I passed to a staircase, or rather a wide step-ladder, and soon to a gallery leading to a suite of rooms genteely furnished. On the table in the Count's sitting apartment I recognised as old friends the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*, several of our "Annuals," and other English and French periodical publications. Besides the Count, a Hungarian magnate of considerable property, was present, who coincides in most of the prudent views which the Count entertains with reference to the civilization of Hungary. Mr. Popovicz was also of the party, as well as a sensible young barrister from Pest, named Tasner, who accompanied the Count as his secretary. We had an excellent dinner of vermicelli soup, bouilli, haricot mutton, beef ragout, roast fowl, and pudding, following by a desert of sweet cake and grapes. The wines were champagne and the ordinary white vintage of the country, the best I had yet tasted in Hungary. Our conversation at dinner turned chiefly on the enterprise in which the Count was engaged, and in which all his faculties seemed to have been absorbed.

I collected from what was said that it was intended to construct a road wide enough for carriages, along the whole of the left bank of the Danube, and that canals were to be formed parallel to the rapids and other rocky passages, where the river was liable to be reduced much below its ordinary level during the summer and autumn. These works necessarily required a large expenditure, which the returns of the Steam Navigation Company were not expected to repay. The Austrian government, therefore, actuated by an impulse of public spirit which it too rarely acknowledges on other subjects, has taken upon itself the entire outlay which these undertakings will require, and has, moreover, with peculiar propriety, intrusted to Count Szechenyi the superintendence of the whole, as well as an unlimited supply of funds, for which he accounts directly to the emperor. It is especially understood that a certain percentage is secured by the Austrian government to the Navigation Company upon its capital, provided the returns should fall below a stated amount: in point of fact the returns have for some time exceeded the amount agreed upon, so that the government is not likely to have any further responsibility in that respect.

The enterprise was originated by the Count, who, at an early period of his life (he is at present about forty-four years of age), plainly perceived the great advantages that would accrue to Hungary if the Danube were rendered navigable for steamboats to the Black Sea. Adopting the English system for procuring a large capital in small shares, he formed a list of subscribers at Pressburg, consisting of magnates, members of the lower chamber of the diet, bankers, and merchants, which he brought over to this country. Here, also, he obtained a few distinguished names, and made himself master of all the details of steam navigation. Having ordered the engines for three boats to be sent from Birmingham to Trieste, he had the vessels built in that port, and then a petition was presented to the diet, on behalf of the subscribers, praying its sanction to the undertaking. This was the first instance in which the diet was called upon to take into its consideration a measure peculiar to Hungary in its national character, and involving, therefore, consequences of a vast political as well as commercial tendency.

If the diet took this enterprise under its auspices, the popularity and the sense of independence which the assembly would thus acquire, might lead to other measures still more conducive to the re-establishment of the Hungarian nation. Prince Metternich immediately sent for Count Szechenyi, whose brother is married to a sister of the prince's wife, and sought explanations of this treasonable proceeding. The Count's answer was very simple and unequivocal. "If you have no wish that the diet should adopt the petition and act upon it, do the thing yourselves, for the Danube at all events cannot be long without steamboats." The hint was taken, the petition was cushioned, the plans of the Count were not only accepted but improved upon a most magnificent scale, and given back to himself for execution. The Count is the most distinguished leader of the opposition party in the diet, but he took care to have it thoroughly understood that though, for the benefit of Hungary, he charged himself with the commission offered to him by Prince Metternich, he was still free to follow up his political principles in every way that he thought advantageous to his country.

Source:

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