

*Pál Békés*

## THE AGE OF DISCOVERY

### The Oceans

We found the wash-tub along the Rákos stream. It was during a botany field trip organized by Mrs. Bátki, our teacher. We visited her apple orchard on the outskirts of Budapest. She said first we should pick the apples from her trees then for an hour we could do whatever we wanted to and after that, we'd rush back to school so our parents wouldn't worry. Her apple orchard wasn't far from the tram terminal and we finished picking apples very quickly as it was a poor harvest. During our free time we went roaming along the stream and suddenly—wow!—a wash-tub. It was made of wood, its inside covered with sheet-iron.

"Just like a ship." Szász said.

"There's a hole in the bottom." I said, after inspecting it.

"It could be stopped up," he answered with an expert expression on his face.

We stuffed some cloth into the hole and now the tub really looked like a ship.

"What about going?" he said.

"Where?"

"The Oceans."

(It was as if he said "to the tram terminal.")

"Why not?"

"But I'm Captain."

Well that's what I always hated about him. I protested but he was firm. In the end he agreed I could be the helmsman as a ship needs one of those, too. I accepted but then I realized there was nothing to steer.

"And now? Where?" I asked at last because even if we didn't have a helm, the helmsman is supposed to know the direction to go.

"First we go down the Rákos stream, that takes us to the Danube that runs in the sea and then to the Oceans."

It sounded fairly logical, but still I had some doubts.

“Is it going to be good?” I hesitated. “I mean the Oceans.”

“Sure,” he encouraged me.

He was talking about banana trees, waves as high as mountains with spray on the top, graceful, snow-white schooners in the harbors (I asked what a schooner was, he said a kind of a ship, I asked if it was like ours, he said yes) and he was talking about friendly natives with flower garlands around their necks (I asked how he knows, he said from the TV and I believed him as we didn't have a TV).

I liked the banana trees the most. I hadn't eaten bananas yet but my father had talked about it.

“Let's go,” I urged him. “Right now.”

We launched our vessel; we sat in front of each other and began the voyage. The hole with the cloth stuffed in it was right under my bottom. As soon as we left, the ship turned around. I put my hands in the water and tried to navigate it with rowing gestures. Szász was commanding: one-two, one-two. I protested: I am the helmsman and not a rower. He told me to shut up; it was his duty to suppress rebellion as the captain has power over death and life on a ship, in case I didn't know. But he helped me.

We moved along quite well; we were carried by the dirty water along the concrete embankments.

Suddenly I felt the cloth leak and water seeping into the ship. I reported it to Szász immediately and suggested we look for a harbor. He said: “No way. We can't afford to lose time on our way to the Oceans.” He told me to scoop out the water with the palms of my hands and he'd take over the steering.

First I scooped with one hand then with both but in vain. More and more water leaked into the ship. Szász commanded me to sit on the hole to stop the leaking, but whatever I did the water got higher and higher until we were sitting in water. Soon our ship got out of control. It drifted into the middle of the stream and sank slowly. We gave up scooping. We realized our voyage had come to an end. Only an inch or two of the wash-tub was still above the waterline when our captain ordered us to abandon ship. I began preparing but he didn't move. He said the captain must be the last to leave a sinking ship. I sat back and told him I would stand by him till the bitter end. He thanked me and we sank together, face to face.

The water was up to our necks when the wash-tub hit bottom, but we didn't move. I could only see Szász's head sticking out of the stagnant water and he saw only mine as we sat in the concrete bed of the stream with the

wash-tub under us. I don't know how long we could have stayed like that but then some disgusting carcass drifted by and we began flapping our hands and climbed ashore. Where once stood our proud ship, now only the nauseating and loathsome carcass was floating and slowly decaying.

We were covered with mud, stinking water dripping from our hair when we turned back and walked along the Rákos stream through a cabbage field.

"What's the matter?" he asked with tears in his eyes.

"The banana trees . . ." I cried.

"That's on TV only." He wiped dirt, tears and snot from his face.

"The Oceans," I sobbed shivering, "the banana trees!"

We were clomping through the cabbage field.

We got back in time for lineup.

## America

We didn't have a garden but the Gerhardts' apartment was in a building on Ilka Street so they did. There were three chestnut trees, two stone boxes for flowers, a thick horizontal iron rod for carpet cleaning, and a shack for the garden tools. Whenever I visited them, Gerhardt's mother told me: "this is a nice, neat middle-class building." I felt she was belittling our home so I always shot back: "ours is exactly the same as yours, except it hasn't got a garden." She didn't say anything but sent us to play. Gerhardt's mother was quite good-looking but still I didn't like her.

The shack was in a corner of the small walled-in garden. Between it and the high brown brick wall there was a narrow corridor that remained invisible from the windows. Gerhardt said we would dig right there. I asked why and he said so we could dig for treasure. I wanted to know why just there, and he said I'm an idiot the rest of the garden is paved over in concrete. Treasure can be hidden here just like anywhere else, so why not here? He sounded really convincing. We began working immediately. He had two toy shovels, he handed me one and I broke it immediately. So he stole the sewing box from his grandmother's old Singer sewing machine. It was made of shining chrome steel and seemed ideally designed for digging.

The soil was full of stones, so we proceeded slowly. We found some broken bricks and rusty barbed wire. The second day the sewing box hit some metal and we got excited but when we cleaned the dirt from our finding, it turned out to be a can. Sardines in oil.

The third day Gerhardt announced that the work was over, that we weren't going to find any treasure here, so we had to move on to a new field. Well, that's the risk you take with treasure hunting—sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.

We were terribly sorry for all that work down the drain. We were staring at the deep hole sadly, it reached up to our hips when we stood in it. We were speculating that perhaps we could use it for something else. And suddenly he grinned and shouted: "I got it! Sure! We'll dig a tunnel to America!" At first I didn't understand, but then he explained. The earth is round, America's on the other side, so if we dig the tunnel straight through the center of the earth we'll end up right there. Our hole is perfect for a beginning. I was extremely doubtful, and told him the earth is not round. But he was very persuasive. So, I told him okay, but first I was going to make sure, because I don't like tricks and I'm not willing to dig in vain.

I went home and asked my father. He confirmed what Gerhardt said was true. I resented this as I thought he should have been on my side. He took me to see our neighbor, Mr. Varkocsy, who had a globe. I was turning and scrutinizing it all evening. I had to accept the truth that the earth is round but I measured very exactly and discovered that the other side of the world is not America but the Pacific Ocean and the closest body of land is a tiny dot in the water: Mimicry Islands.

Next day I told Gerhardt what I had learned about the shape of the earth and he nodded, "sure." But as for the Mimicry Islands business he was firmly against it; he wasn't willing to give up his conviction: the other side of the earth is America. We made a bet on a big bar of white chocolate, and said we'll see when we get through. We swore to keep our plan secret. I was pushing the tunneling as much as I could as next week I was to be sent to my aunt for holidays and I wanted to find out the truth by that time.

We were digging like mad. Gerhardt's mother was whining all the time why we are so filthy. But we kept our oath and didn't reveal anything. In the evenings I was revolving Mr. Varkocsy's globe and kept asking the old man about America and the Mimicry Islands. He said America is big, everybody is rich, drives a car and beats up black people. Women have nylons, men have

Colt 45s, they all chew gum and want war. As for Mimicry Islands he was a bit uncertain but he said, judging by the name it must be a disgusting place.

The hole was so deep, we both disappeared into it when we stood on each others' shoulders, but still we had the vague suspicion: most of our work is ahead of us. We permanently changed our positions: the one on the bottom of the hole filled the chrome steel sewing box and handed it up, while the other one took and emptied it—there was hardly any place left between the blackened planks of the shack and the high brown brick wall.

We hadn't finished the tunnel when I had to go to my aunt for holidays. Gerhardt told me he would continue on with the tunnel alone. I begged him to wait for me, but he wouldn't even listen. We parted in anger.

We met again at the opening ceremonies of school. White shirt, dark shorts, the director was giving his usual speech. We were standing near each other in the first line, unfortunately between two teachers. Still I couldn't endure it and whispered from the corner of my closed mouth:

“So?”

“I won,” Gerhardt whispered back. “It's America on the other side.”

“So you got through?!” I was so stunned I forgot about everything and was disciplined by both teachers immediately.

“Sure,” Gerhardt nodded silently, “sure,” and was staring at the director knowingly. He was talking about us second graders. I was hesitant to believe him and wanted to put him under cross examination, but the national anthem began and stopped me.

After the ceremony I cornered him.

“So?”

“So what?”

“What is it like?”

“Nothing special. Just like here.”

I asked if it was true that everybody is rich, drives a car and beats up black people. He said it was true. I asked if women have nylons, men Colt 45s, if they all chew gum and want war.

“Sure,” he nodded. “But otherwise it is just like here.”

I was a bit suspicious.

“So pay up,” he said. “I want the chocolate bar with the red label.”

“I wanna walk through the tunnel and have a look at America too.”

“You can't. It got buried. It caved in as soon as I got back.”

Suddenly I understood everything. What a pig! He made the tunnel collapse on purpose! Now it is sure he got to Mimicry Islands and he wanted to hide the truth! I told him my opinion really harshly. I hate when anyone wants to dupe me. I told him to forget about the chocolate.