

Claudio Magris. *Danube*. Translated from Italian by Patrick Creagh. (Paperback Edition) London: The Harvill Press. 2001. 416 pp. \$13.50.

In this engaging journey along the Danube River, Claudio Magris guides the reader from the river's source in the Bavarian hills through Austro-Hungary and the Balkans to its mouth at the Black Sea. The book is unique in its successful intertwining of travel impressions, prose, historical insights and philosophical reflection. The brilliant writing style combined with a fascinating factual knowledge of the described regions casts a spell over the reader, who is unable to lay the book aside after beginning to read. The author paints a mental picture of Central Europe, which conveys the singular importance of this part of the old continent as the cultural heart and cradle of tolerance between East and West, and Christendom and Islam. Thus, *Danube* is a comprehensive introduction to Central European culture, varied history throughout the centuries, and people and traditions—both for the learned historian and the young student or traveler who is interested in getting to know a fascinating landscape. This landscape has always been unique in its variety of historic events that continue to shape the destiny of millions of Europeans living along the Danube River. Masterpieces of European art, literature, and architecture were and are still created along the river and can be admired like a string of pearls. Landscapes of unsurpassed beauty cast a spell on the visitor.

In this book the reader goes on an unforgettable journey of history and everyday life, and will emerge from it with new horizons, insights into different cultures interwoven with intense positive and negative relations, and a fascination with and empathy for the other.

Danube is a treasure chest for students who are interested in a part of Europe which once proudly called itself the heart of the continent—and geographically it still is. The interests of students do not necessarily have to be only in European history, because Magris' profoundly perceptive study of central European history also deals with questions of philosophy, art, politics and natural history. By showing how different cultures and religions mingled, cooperate and clashed throughout the centuries, he also draws an extremely knowledgeable and fascinating picture with deep intercultural insights into the lives of both ordinary people and individuals who shaped European history. How vivid and full of surprise history continues to be is illustrated with the book's opening map of Central and Eastern Europe, where Germany is still divided and Yugoslavia still exists. Starting with this map, which changed dramatically only a short time ago, the reader is immediately aware that in history nothing is static or set, and that life and history may change overnight, that it is worth learning about other cultures in order to understand one's own and be prepared for changes at home.

The book consists of nine chapters beginning with "A Question of Gutters". Magris addresses such different issues as the dispute about the real source of the river Danube,

the Holy Roman Empire of German nationality, the German destiny “as a way of living out the clash between Germans and Slavs in the vast territory and throughout the centuries during which they have been face to face” (p. 32), and Heidegger’s flirtation with Nazism. Each chapter brings us further along in the river’s travel to the Black Sea. On the way Magris introduces the people—ancient, past and present—living on the banks of the river, their values and traditions, their ups and downs in history, their tragedies—be it war or personal issues—and everyday life, their constant mingling throughout the centuries, caused by the very river which flows through their territories. The river with the many faces, the connecting element, the stream of life, the unified and the divider—that is the Danube. This river has played a decisive role in the lives of many people belonging to different cultures who have also been brought together by the river’s connecting power.

In the second chapter, “The Universal Danube of Engineer Neweklowsky”, we come to know German cities and some of their famous or notorious sons and daughters. Among them, Ulm, which in 1890 could boast the tallest cathedral in the world, and is also where the Nazi resistance fighters Hans and Sophie Scholl, Field Marshall Rommel and Albert Einstein were born. Nazi Camp doctor Josef Mengele from Günzburg; the writer Mariluisse Fleisser from Ingolstadt; Regensburg as one of the hearts of the Holy Roman Empire; Agnes Bernauer from Straubing; and the Venice of Bavaria, Passau which lies at the confluence of three rivers—all serve as foils for Magris to explore the good and evil in history and humanity, starting with the Song of the Niebelungs and ending with today’s party conventions. By analyzing the deeds and actions of famous, notorious, fictitious and quite common people, Magris asks what makes us act as brutes, cowards, or benevolent and responsible citizens. Clearly, these are questions from which we can all learn.

In the third chapter, “In the Wachau”, the author again chooses well-known cities and people to make us understand the complexity of life and how near and far good and evil can be from each other. In Linz, the capital of Upper Austria, the German poet Goethe wrote some of the greatest love poetry of all time. Yet Linz was also Hitler’s favourite city, where he wanted to retire after finally consolidating the Third Reich that was to last a thousand years. Magris’ mastery in bringing together completely different events, places and persons of world history, and thus finding a totally convincing interconnectedness, is shown in his juxtaposition of the Nazi camp Mauthausen and the altar of St. Sebastian in an Austrian baroque monastery with pictures of the famous painter Albrecht Altdorfer, reflecting on both literature (Goethe) and music (Beethoven).

The fourth chapter, “Café Central”, bring us to Vienna where the Danube is not blue but murky yellow. We are shown different facets of this splendid city in which both European history and culture were shaped. Magris leads us to places, churches and houses such as the public pawnshop from Elisa Canetti’s *Auto-da-Fé*, the Central Cemetery; Café Landmann where the antipode of the Viennese spirit Georg Lucács gave

a lecture; the Saint Marx cemetery where Mozart was buried; the old Jewish cemetery; the house where Joseph Roth lived; the Karl-Marx-Hof, a vast and famous complex of workers' dwellings and a monument of the Modern; the Crime Museum; Freud's house and surgery; the I.B.M. Centre, and Empress Sissy's villa. Again, these different places are invisibly interconnected and follow a certain guiding thread—namely the depths and heights of the human spirit. We understand that one does not exist without the other, and that dividing lines are vague and not always easy to make out. We all have both sides in us. The way Magris highlights this relation between the famous and notorious with the common people draws itself like a red line throughout each chapter and is one of the reasons why the book is so appealing. The exhibition at Vienna's Künstlerhaus, "The Turks Before Vienna", is living proof for Magris that "The meeting between Europe and the Ottoman Empire is the great example of two worlds which, while hacking each other to pieces, end by a gradual understanding, to their mutual enrichment (p. 179)."

While the previous chapter crossed the border of the former Kingdom of Hungary at Haydn's birthplace Eisenstadt, where the "lethargy of Pannonia (p. 212)" began, the fifth chapter, "Castles and Huts", brings us to one of those parts of Central Europe which throughout the course of time somewhat vanished into oblivion, but has once again become an indispensable part of the European continent. Bratislava, until 1918 regarded by the Viennese as a pleasant suburb, is the capital of one of the most ancient of Slavic people. For two centuries it was also the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary. It is one of the hearts of Central Europe, "with layer open layer of centuries forever present, unresolved conflicts and lacerations, unhealed wounds and unreconciled contradictions (p. 220)." The author described with deep and compassionate understanding the struggle of a small people forced to shake off the disdain or indifference of greater nations. Now, the Slovaks who are in a phase of historical regeneration and have retaken possession of their own history are again about to shake off the complex of feeling small.

The sixth chapter, "Pannonia", follows the flow of the river through Hungary, a country often torn between East and West, having been conquered by the Turks, made part of the Hapsburg Empire, and made a Soviet satellite state. For a long time the function of Hungary was "to defend the multinational nature of the Hapsburg Empire, splitting Germanism and Slavism and preventing either of them becoming supreme (p. 242)." Magris takes us to Hungarian cities like Sopron; Fertöd, the Versailles of the Esterházy; Estergom, the birthplace of the first King of Hungary; Szentendre, the Montmartre of the Danube; bringing us at last to the loveliest city on the Danube, Budapest. For Magris it is a city which gives him the hope that Europe is not finished. He writes, "Familiarity with the case of Central Europe, and its rehearsals, in any case induces us not to believe in irreparable destinies, but rather in the principle of indeterminacy (p. 265)." In contrast to Vienna, which glorifies itself in the past, Budapest is a robust, full-blooded city, in which one can discern the strength of present and future Europe, and

which has found a way of making use of all its multiple energies. Here in Hungary the Danube seems to be a river of past, present and future, and represents the meeting between East and West, the confluence of the Caucasus and German culture.

In chapter seven, “Grandma Anka”, the author begins with his grandmother in her home town with the Serbian name Bela Crvka (White Church), though it also had a Hungarian, Romanian and German name. Next he travels to the Danube’s Banat region. The Banat is exemplary for its mosaic of peoples, and the superimposition and stratification of races, powers, and jurisdictions. Here one finds both Romania and former Yugoslavia, which was still on the Europe’s map when the book was published. Magris foresees the tragic turmoil and developments that the break-up of this state would produce. He predicts, that “Like the Hapsburg mosaic, that of Yugoslavia today is both imposing and precarious. It plays a very important role in international politics, and is determined to check and to annul its won internal tendencies towards dissolution. Its solidarity is necessary to the equilibrium of Europe, and its disintegration would be ruinous for this balance, as that of the double monarchy was for the world of yesterday (p. 332).”

From the Serbian part of the Banat where Serbs, Hungarians, Slovaks, Romanians, Ruthenians, Germans, Bulgars, and gypsies are living together, we move to the capital of the old Banat Temesvár/Timisoara/Temeschburg in the Romanian part which is the center of the Swabians (the Germans in Romania), and on to Siebenbürgen/Transylvania, which, with its Saxons, is the second center of Germans in Romania. Sibiu-Hermannstadt, Brasov-Kronstadt and Cluj-Klausenburg were always melting pots of peoples who through their constant mingling had to become aware that they have much in common, and developed a special identity. The term “Transylvanismus” is defined as a multiplicity of peoples brought together by a feeling of belonging to a mixed, composite part of the word. From Transylvania the journey takes us to the Serbian Athens, Novi Sad, the capital of the Vojvodina and then further on to Belgrade.

In chapter eight, “Doubtful Cartography”, Magris focuses on Bulgaria, a chief nucleus of Great Slavia, the territory where the Church Slavonic language was created by the monks Cyril and Methodius. Magris tries to give an objective picture of today’s situation, of the feeling of brotherhood between Bulgaria and Russia based on the struggle for liberation from Turkish oppression. For him, “Coming once again to nationhood later than others, Bulgari lives in various periods at the same time (p. 342).” In addition, Magris addresses the Haiduks, who were guerilla fighters for freedom; the exodus of the Circassians from the Caucasus to Danubian territories; and finally leads the reader to the city of Ruse, Elias Canetti’s birthplace.

After crossing one of the longest European bridges at the Bulgarian-Romanian frontiers, we travel in chapter nine, “Matoas”, to Bucharest, the Paris of the Balkans and a capital still under communist rule. It is “not only a city of crowds and bazaars, but also

of great air elegant spaces, green parks and boulevards, (. . .) neo-classical building and others in the style of the Stalin-era (p. 366).”The journey goes on to the bay where the Argonauts were supposed to have anchored after returning from Colchis. From here the Danube begins to split up into the famous delta comprising a perfect network of canals. The lighthouse of Sulina marks the point where the river flows tranquilly and slowly into the sea. At first, one may get a disappointing impression of the grand river, which can tell stories of love, diplomatic intrigues, and the fashionable life of the belle époque, but is now properly regulated and channeled and flows rather unspectacularly into the Black Sea. However, “The canal runs on, runs on, calmly and confidently into the sea, and it is no longer a canal, a limitation, a Regulation, but a flowing outwards that opens and abandons itself to all the waters and oceans of the entire globe, and to the creatures living in their depths (p. 401).”With these moving and poetic thoughts Magris ends his journey.

This splendid book brings to life a German-Magyar-Slavic-Romanic-Jewish Central Europe. The sovereign of this multicultural mixture of different peoples addressed himself to “my peoples” and the national anthem was sung in eleven different languages. When reading this uniquely stimulating book one begins to feel that every nation is destined to have its day. There are no lesser or greater civilizations, rather a succession of up and downs in the history of people. By describing the existence of so many different people, the book encourages students to understand life in its very essence. Life, as Kierkegaard says, can be understood only by looking backwards, even if it has to be lived looking forwards. The author makes us understand that strength, intelligence, stupidity, beauty, cowardice and weakness may happen in everyone’s life, sooner or later. This profound wisdom may have long-term implications for every reader.

When reading *Danube* students may be overwhelmed by the encyclopaedic knowledge Magris demonstrates while negotiating the centuries and territories. They may even get a little confused by his constant switching from one issue to the other, literally from the sacred to the profane. However, it is also this explosion of ideas, events and reflections that makes up the beauty and elegance of the book. This is the attraction for U.S. students who want to step onto another continent with a different history than their own, experience a truly international outlook, and learn about forbidden or forgotten parts of Europe, which Magris plucks out of gloom and oblivion, so they sparkle in all their former splendor. It is not absolutely necessary to know every European ruler, poet, artist, politician, philosopher or scientists mentioned in this mosaic of spectacle, incident and reflection, Magris’ graceful art of telling his story draws every reader, even those with a limited knowledge of facts and names, into Central European history; and in the end leaves him more knowledgeable, more tolerant, enlightened and interculturally sensitive than before.

Reading *Danube*, one cannot escape its fascination and one wants to pack a bag and go there, see the landscapes and cities, and get to know the people whose destinies have

been shaped by this truly European river. Both the old cultural landscape of Germany and Austria, and the forgotten Central Europe which has risen like a phoenix from the ashes, cast their spell over us. Students for whom the book will work as a travel incentive will learn as much about themselves as they will about the Danube and the people living there. Hopefully they will achieve a new and sharper sense of self while interacting with Central Europeans, and observing and absorbing a life different from the one they have known. The book has already elegantly invited them to reflect on their values, norms and traditions while reading. This process will continue in a much more pronounced way when they are actually abroad. Distance from their culture will inevitably lead to reflection on home and its meaning and peculiarities. Thus, it is a worthwhile read for any student with interest in other cultures and history, and relevant to study abroad.

Barbara Gügold
IES and Humboldt University Berlin