

## PROLOGUE

*Budapest, early 1990s*

The young man scurried across the Chain Bridge towards Pest. It was just past twelve noon on an overcast March day. The pedestrian walkway vibrated to the rhythm of the bustling traffic. In the line of mostly second-hand cars, one could still glimpse the occasional Lada, Trabant, or Škoda, remains from the rapidly disintegrating material heritage of socialism. A cold wind whistled through the bridge's metal bars. The broad ribbon of the Danube was furrowed by ruffling ripples. The man stared at the small cruise ship bobbing upstream in the direction of Margaret Island. Its deck was completely deserted. He had spent a whole year in this city, he thought to himself, but not once had he taken a river tour on one of these boats. One might say he had barely left the libraries, and now he was suddenly pierced by a vague sense of loss. He shifted his gaze to the frilly white spires of the Fisherman's Bastion, then to the gloomy facade of the Royal Palace. Gaping at its foot was the mouth of the tunnel excavated under Buda Hill. The young man winced, glanced at his watch, and continued quickly on his way. Several times the wind blew the hood off his head, revealing bristling black hair and a pale face that showed evidence of many books read. He was dressed in a sage-green down jacket and baggy jeans, and under his arm he gripped a worn-out leather satchel. He had the look of a man who had experienced the collapse of communism without having noticed the changes around him, absorbed in a private idea that had consumed his full attention.

When he reached the end of the bridge, the young man turned left towards the imposing neoclassical building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences perched on the banks of the Danube. He produced his reader's card at the entrance, and the doorman, used to seeing him almost every day, gave him a polite nod. Instead of going to the reading room of the Oriental Library, however, as he had always done before, the young man headed for the Academy's restaurant. He was stopped at the entrance by a particularly pompous maître d' in a well-worn tuxedo and bow tie, who had the bearing of a guardian of the gates of Heaven.

"*Kihez jött?*" the headwaiter asked him unceremoniously, fixing a stare of disapproval on his shapeless shoes.

"I have a meeting with Academician Mészáros," the young man replied in passable Hungarian.

"*Mi a neve?*"

"Nestor Nestorov."

The headwaiter looked in the fat register lying open on a special stand. He slid his finger over the pages and nodded. Nestorov was about to rush into the restaurant, but the man stopped him.

"*A kabátot adja le a ruhatárban.*"<sup>1</sup>

Approximately two minutes later the young man returned from the coat-check, now in only a pullover sweater, from beneath which the edges of a wrinkled pink shirt peeked out. The notes of a muted waltz could be heard in the half-empty restaurant. The heavy chandeliers and red plush drapes seemed to be frozen in the era of Franz Josef the First. There was a soft clacking of utensils and jaws. An elderly gentleman waved at him from a table by the window.

---

1 The coats must be left at the coat-check.

“Academic Mészáros, I’m so sorry for being late,” Nestorov mumbled, sitting down across from him and propping his satchel against the leg of his chair. “I had to make one last inquiry at the Archives...”

“A glass of champagne for my guest,” Mészáros said to the waiter who had come running. “And one more for me. Relax a bit, young man! You’ve earned it.”

Mészáros was an eccentric old codger with a snow-white beard and a moustache that curled at the ends like scimitars. He wore a square black tasselled *tubeteika*, and beneath his jacket – a burgundy velvet vest, ornamented with woollen braiding and golden brass buttons. He was one of the most eminent Orientalists in Hungary, continuing the glorious work of passionate scholars of the East such as Ármin Vámbéry, Ignác Goldziher, and Gyula Germanus. Over the last year, it had been Nestorov’s good fortune to carry out post-graduate work under him at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

“To your health!” the academician said and raised his glass. “I can boldly say that you are now sufficiently prepared to subdue the heart of Asia.”

“What are you saying!” Nestorov responded, blushing. “I’m still at the beginning of my career.”

“A man learns as long as he lives,” Mészáros agreed. “But in this single year, you have achieved remarkable progress. Rarely have I met such a motivated young scholar. What are your plans from here on out, if it’s no secret?”

“I –”

“One moment!” the other interrupted. “Let us order first. You haven’t had breakfast, have you? It shows. I would wager that you’re dying of hunger. I suggest the fish

paprikas. Here, they make it with catfish from the upper current of the Danube, somewhere near Visegrád. Where the catfish comes from is very important. Whether they pull it out before Budapest or after, you can imagine why... And a bottle of furmint, by all means!" the academician concluded, smacking his lips voraciously.

Once the waiter had left with the order, he turned back to his guest.

"So, we were speaking of your plans. I understand you're flying to Sofia tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'm returning to Bulgaria. I plan to finish my PhD at the Institute of Ethnology in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. And of course, I'll try to organize an expedition to Central Asia."

"On the trail of the ancient Bulgarians, eh?" Mészáros smirked.

"I am certain the descendants of our ancestors are still there somewhere. Perhaps under another name, or even with an entirely different appearance. Or more likely, quite the opposite – it is we who have become different, while they themselves are still the same..."

"The theory of the lost nation," noted the academician with a tinge of scepticism.

"I will find this nation!" Nestorov declared with excitement. "Whatever it costs me. I consider this my highest patriotic duty."

"As you have already seen for yourself, we Hungarians have a rich tradition of searching for our roots," Mészáros replied calmly. "As early as the thirteenth century, a Catholic priest, Brother Julian, undertook a journey along the Volga River Valley in search of the Magyar tribes that

remained in the ancient lands. According to his accounts, they were living just a few days' journey from the town of Bolgar, the capital of Volga Bulgaria."

"Yes, back in those days we were neighbours. The connecting link, in my opinion, is the tribe of the Onogundur, whom some here call the Hunno-Gondurs. And from there they get the name Hungarian. I, however –"

"This could be a wonderful dissertation topic!" Mészáros declared.

"Yes, yes," the young man nodded absentmindedly. "But I'm actually interested in a much more ancient period. The lands of our genesis, the cradle of our nation... Under communism, this was a taboo topic. Proto-Bulgarian studies was shoved under the rug. They tried to prove that our ancestors were some small horde that dissolved into the sea of Slavs, almost without a trace. Only that there are traces! As long as you care to see them."

"Eat, eat!" the academician invited him, tucking a colossal napkin under his own chin. "I hope you're not afraid of spicy foods. Just smell that aroma! And how nice and thick it is! *Bon appetite*, young friend!"

He stirred the red sauce with large pieces of fish swimming in it. He boldly took a scoop of a spicy paste and stirred it into the dish. Nestorov did the same, adding boldly, "We Bulgarians are not afraid of spicy foods."

His face retained a stoic expression as the flames devastated his mouth. Only the droplets of sweat that broke out on his forehead betrayed the dramatic state of his tastebuds.

"Do you know, I have a proposal for you," Mészáros began. "A position is opening up for a researcher at the

Institute of Ethnology. I've been observing you carefully this year. I think that you are exceptionally suitable. You would receive a permanent contract, and you'd be able to bring your family here. What do you say?"

"I'm truly flattered!"

Nestorov wiped away the sweat that had collected above his eyebrows.

"In Hungary," Mészáros continued disarmingly, "they allocate a great deal more money to the sciences than they do in your country. And Oriental Studies is on an incomparably higher level. We have a tradition in this field here. We are the last steppe nation of Europe!"

"We are also a steppe nation! And even much more ancient..."

"Colleague! I have not invited you here for a debate."

"I'm sorry." Nestorov stuck a few morsels of bread into his mouth to quell the fire. "But I'm afraid I have to refuse."

"Don't rush! You haven't even discussed it with your wife. You're expecting a child soon, if I'm not mistaken?"

Nestorov smiled, suddenly tender.

"In two weeks. That's exactly why I'm returning home a little early."

"Your wife is an archaeologist, is she not? We could also find something here for her."

"You clearly don't know Roza," the young man replied, shaking his head. "She wouldn't abandon her site for anything in the world. She's a hereditary archaeologist. Her grandmother started those digs back in the day. They dis-

covered a silver stirrup there, with the symbol of the Dulo clan on it!”

“But are these sites really passed down hereditarily?” Mészáros asked in astonishment.

“This isn’t just science. It’s a cause!” Nestorov began zealously, overlooking the other’s biting remark. “I also turned down the University of Heidelberg for the same reason. My path is different. The spirit of our ancestors is calling!”

“I was at least obliged to try to draw you in.” Mészáros sighed, stared at the straw-yellow reflections in his glass, and noted pensively, “Furmint is one of the most ancient wine grape varieties. The famous Tokaj dessert wines that stupid tourists buy are made from it. True connoisseurs, however, recognize only dry furmint. Well, let’s drink to the advance of Proto-Bulgarian Studies!”

Nestorov was not much of a fan of white wines; his student years had passed under the auspices of the domestic Targovishte vodka, but he nevertheless had to admit that the wine was superb.

“I have a small gift for you.” Mészáros unfastened his satchel, pulled out a folded piece of paper, and handed it to him. “This is a copy of a map that I discovered in the archives of the Calcutta Asiatic Society in ’78. It’s the personal work of Sándor Csoma of Koros, who was the librarian of the Asiatic Society. It documents the peoples who inhabited Central Asia during the Han Dynasty. The Yuezhi nation is also marked on it; according to some hypotheses, they were part of the ethnogenesis of the ancient

Bulgarians. Naturally, one cannot too much rely on these maps, but I thought it would be of interest to you.”

Nestorov’s fingers trembled slightly as he unfolded the sheet.

“Unbelievable!” the young scholar exclaimed, thirstily drinking in the meandering lines and columns of unintelligible characters. “It’s a pity I don’t know Chinese. Yet,” he added with confidence. “The Chinese sources are worthy of special attention.”

“Csoma himself most likely copied the map from another, older source during his stay at the Zangla Monastery. Unfortunately, he did not leave any explanatory notes...” Mészáros continued, “You do know who Csoma was, don’t you?”

“Um, I’ve heard of him...” Nestorov looked slightly worried, like a student who has drawn an exam question he hasn’t prepared for. “Wasn’t he some kind of linguist?”

“Some kind of linguist!” parroted the academician sarcastically. “You passed his bust in the lobby of the Oriental Library every day, and you didn’t even bother to learn anything more about the man. Truthfully, I’m disappointed.”

“My time was calculated to the second,” the young scholar said in justification and adjusted his glasses nervously. “I had so much to read! I didn’t want to burden my brain with extraneous information.”

“Yes, this is how one sometimes misses what’s most important,” nodded Mészáros. “Because Csoma’s story could be your own. There is a great lesson concealed in it. Csoma was also looking for the cradle of the nation. Steadfastly and methodically, with an unquenchable passion, until his last breath! His entire scientific work was subordinated to



this supertask. To discover the descendants of the ancient Magyars.”



“And what happened? Did he discover them?”

“Oh, how impatient you are!” Mészáros smiled cunningly and added, “Perhaps he did discover them. For himself...”

He took a sip of wine, twisted his moustache, and continued:

“Csoma was born in Transylvania in 1784. He was one of the Székelys, a Hungarian ethnic group considered by some to be the descendants of Attila. His father was a petty nobleman. Csoma received his elementary education in his native village of Kőrös, after which he studied at the famous Protestant Bethlen College in Nagyenyed. There, he first became acquainted with the theories of the origin of the Magyars, which gradually took possession of his mind. His gift for languages was impressive, and he was sent to continue his education at the University of Göttingen. He mastered thirteen languages while still a student, among them Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, and Persian. He was well-

known to be a total ascetic, devoted entirely to scholarship. At the age of thirty-five, he abandoned his academic career and decided to set out for the east, to search for the roots of the Hungarian nation. The popular theory at that time was that the ancient Magyars were related to the Yugur nation, the so-called Yellow Uyghurs. Completely alone, with just a few florins in his pocket, he crossed the Balkans in the harshest winter on his way to Constantinople, but the rumours of a plague raging in the capital changed his plans. From Enos, he went to Alexandria, but it was soon necessary to flee the plague again. He went to Cyprus, and from there to Beirut, and from Beirut – on foot to Aleppo, changing his appearance along the way, donning eastern garb so as not to arouse suspicion. He continued with various caravans on to Mardin, Mosul, and Baghdad. He ended up in Teheran without a single penny, but he was rescued by the British chargé d'affaires, who gave him refuge and financial support.”

Mészáros had grown heated as he spoke; an inextinguishable longing blazed in his eyes, as if he himself had traversed the dusty roads of the East, alongside countless caravans inching along under the clear sign of the crescent moon. His voice shook and he became excited, running off the rails of academic restraint.

“From Teheran, under the name of Skander Beg, he continued to Bukhara, Balk, and Kabul, crossed Peshawar, headed for Kashmir, and reached Ladakh, a small Buddhist kingdom on the Tibetan border. His journey took a year and a half, with the larger part of the road being covered on foot, since he didn’t have money for horses or camels. Csoma believed that the land of our forefathers lay

on the other side of Tibet. He intended to cross the Himalayas through the Karakoram Pass and to descend into the Tarim Basin. His ultimate goal was Yarkand, a small town on the border of the Taklamakan Desert. There, the Yugurs supposedly awaited him, and the sonorous Proto-Hungarian language would flow. At least, this was his hope. Fortunately for him, and fortunately for science, this last part of his plan was not realized.”

“How was that fortunate?” Nestorov spontaneously inquired.

“Because the emir of Yarkand probably would have beheaded him,” Mészáros informed him coolly. “This was the era of the Great Game: England and Russia were fighting for supremacy in Central Asia. The region was shaken by conflicts and spy mania, and Christian foreigners were looked upon with a particularly unfavourable eye. How many travellers bid farewell to their heads! The Chinese authorities, however, didn’t grant him access to this region, and he remained in Leh, the capital of Ladakh.”

Mészáros licked his parched lips and took a sip of wine before continuing.

“In Lahore, Csoma became close to the British researcher William Moorcroft, who had set out with a large expedition to Bukhara. Moorcroft, for his part, was tracking down the descendants of the famous Sogdian steeds. At that time, the British in India were having problems with their horses and were looking for a way to improve the local breeds.”

“The heavenly horses of the Tocharians!” interjected Nestorov, in a desire to show that he was knowledgeable. “Legend has it that they sweat blood. Emperor Wu of the