

# The Remains of Islamic Budapest

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For one hundred and fifty years the Ottomans ruled over Budapest until their fateful defeat at the gates of Vienna. The city was a provincial capital and a garrison town with a skyline dominated by lofty minarets. However, almost all that is left today is the turbe of Gul-Baba, a Bektashi warrior-saint. On a recent visit to Hungary, Faisal Bodi went along to pay his respects.

Every evening, as the setting sun spreads an eerie glow over Budinis Gothic skyline and its denizens rise for another night of debauched indulgence, it is left to the shrine of a sixteenth century saint to remind visitors of better times.

From his perch on a leafy promontory called Rose Hill, the statue of Gul Baba turns its back events that have earned Hungary's capital a reputation as eastern Europe's Amsterdam. The bronze sculpture is recent - an unnecessary erection raised in memory of a man who would probably turn in his grave at the slightest suggestion that stone and metal would serve him better than prayers.

Yet for a Christian city with a almost disapprovingly on the typically sanguinary record in inter-faith relations, it is an overdue gesture - a belated acknowledgement of the debt Budapest owes to its Ottoman heritage.

A companion of Sulayman the Great, Gul Baba was a martyr in the campaign that liberated Budin in 1541 following two earlier short-lived conquests (the modern Budapest was only formed in 1872 by a union of Budin on the Danubéis western bank and Pest in the east).

Some time after his death, a mausoleum was built on the site where he fell and was buried, under the order of the Ottoman Military Commander in Hungary, Mehmed Pasha. The turbe was built as a tribute to Gul Baba's services in effecting a successful outcome to battle. The precise nature of these services is not clear but Gul Baba was a Bektashi dervish and preacher of extraordinary religious conviction and courage. One can assume that his supplications were especially weighty and that his sermons conveyed upon soldiers something of the spiritual gravity of the task at hand.

Writing in the 1950's Ismail Balic describes Gul Baba as a major figure in the Ottomans western-bound army. "The life story of the Derwish of Rose-Hill cannot be completely told. He comes from Marsiwan (Asia Minor) and took part in many of the government's battles during the times of the sultans, Mehmet al-Fatih, Bayazid, Selim I and Sulayman al-Qanuni. Generally he acted as a military Imam and as such did much for the moral upliftment of the troops."

"He also wrote poems and prose. Some of his manuscripts on mystics are to be found in the works Miftah al-Ghaib (Key of the Unseen). Some of his poems have been preserved for us is a small hand-written booklet, Guldeste (Bunch of Roses),

although many of his manuscripts have probably been lost. He wrote all his works under the name of Mithali.

Today Gul Baba's newly renovated turbe, an octagonal structure capped by a turquoise dome, survives as one of the city's few Ottoman monuments. Guarded around-the-clock by two armed policemen, it still attracts the occasional Muslim tourist or bus-load of Turkish pilgrims. The entrance to the mausoleum is closed off but previous visitors have left the following description of its interior:

"The tomb is of smooth stone. In the middle of it is the grave of Gul Baba. Above it is a green wooden sarcophagus with Arabic ornamented script and covered with cloth. The inside walls are green and covered with verses from the Quran in calligraphy. The wooden floor is covered with valuable carpets

Having fallen on the battlefield Gul Baba was denied the opportunity to see Budin, a hitherto rural backwater, grow into a sizeable city under Ottoman suzerainty. With a population of barely 5000, pre-Ottoman Budin was an unremarkable town inhabited by a mixture of Christian, Jewish and gypsy families. Under Uthmaniyya rule, however, it flourished. Muslim functionaries alone soon came to outnumber the original inhabitants by a ratio of five to one. But Budin was primarily a strategic military town. Lying on the Danube, it was an ideal staging post for a march on the most prized possession of them all, Vienna, the capital of the Hapsburgs.

The needs of the Turkish garrison spawned new local industries. Artisans from the Balkans (tailors, shoemakers, barbers, tinsmiths, gunsmiths) manufactured clothes, boots, vessels and arms that suited Balkan and Turkish tastes as did the market of Budin. The Turks also brought superior methods of skin dressing to those employed by Hungarian tanners. These were adopted not only in the towns inhabited by the Turks but also in the country.

The Ottomans built bathhouses (some of which exist to this day) fed by the therapeutic thermal springs which gush from the area. They converted the church steeples into minarets to signal the supremacy of Islam. These features gave Budin the look and feel of an Islamic city. Poets extolled its beauty in songs that were in turn intoned by folk singers.

At its height, Budin had 61 beautiful and impressive mosques, 22 prayer houses, 10 madrasas, a number of libraries, some dervish cloisters (tekkes), numerous wells valuable for their architecture, five massive hostels, several public kitchens for the poor and an antique bazaar.

But Budapest's Golden Age was short-lived. In 1686, three years after the Ottoman defeat at Vienna, the Hapsburgs overran the town consigning Budin to a fate that befell most Muslim towns hapless enough to pass into the hands of medieval Christendom.

Most of the town's Muslims had already fled but for the 3,000 who chose to remain the story was a typical one of extermination, enslavement or conversion (for the latter, the Hungarian lexicon has retained the title *ujkeresztan* or new Christians). Apart from the legend that the Duke Charles De Lorraine, head of the army that took Budin, adopted a little girl called Fatima, there is no evidence that a single Muslim survived with his faith intact.

Budin was completely destroyed and every trace of Islam bar several public baths and miraculously, Gul Baba's tomb, survived. The turbe and the waqf for the site, together with a nearby Bektashi cloister, fell into the hands of Jesuits who turned the mausoleum into a chapel. When the Jesuits were suppressed by the state in 1833 the turbe came under national control and once again started to attract pilgrims. Shortly after this change the Sultan Abdul-Aziz visited the grave during his famous tour of Europe.

Muslims would have to await the Austro-Hungarian capture of Bosnia in 1878 before returning to the city. The conquest led for the first time to the integration of Muslims into the Austro-Hungarian empire. Bosnian Muslims formed a colony in Budapest and lived alongside Turkish businessmen. The group was reinforced by the presence of the Bosnian regiment of the Austro-Hungarian army.

This Muslim colony prevailed until the inter war period after which it gradually disappeared due to integration and indifference. The 1926 census showed up just 447 Hungarian Muslims. In 1932 two of their number travelled to the Middle East to raise money for a mosque and a school. The failure of this mission conspired with the Second World War Nazi occupation of Budapest to ensure that they never got built.

In days gone by Gul Baba's turbe was said to be the centre of Islamic activity in Budapest. As the festivals of Eid approached men, women and children made their way there to recite the fatiha and avail themselves of the baraka descending on the site. There is surely a sad irony in the fact that today, almost a decade after Budapest emerged from behind -the Iron Curtain, the opening day of Ramadan saw only a solitary Muslim paying his respects to one whose heroic death eased the way for Islam's penetration of eastern Europe.