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Balázs Orbán's itinerary in Egypt in the mid-19th century **

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On the 100th anniversary of his birth, in 1929, the writer, scientist and politician Balázs Orbán was called by Kálmán Szentmártoni, a Hungarian folk collector, historian and teacher in Transylvania (1879-1968), “the greatest Szekler” and “one of the most valuable individuals of the Szekler people”.¹ Which was probably right. Orbán, as a writer, ethnographic collector and politician, had done a lot for his beloved homeland, Szeklerland (Székelyland). This patriotism is evident for the most part in his enormous work, *The Description of the Szeklerland* published first between 1868 and 1873.² We can also recall another work of great importance by Balázs Orbán which he wrote and published earlier. The six-volume travel guide, *Traveling in the East*, summarizes Orbán's youthful experiences, a lengthy journey he made between 1846 and 1848 in Southeastern Europe and the Middle East.³ Meanwhile, he had toured Egypt and, as a keen-eyed observer, recorded many important details for readers interested in the country's modern history. I attempt to account for these below.

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¹ Kálmán Szentmártoni, “Emlékezés Bárá Orbán Balázusra, a legnagyobb székelyre, születésének századik évfordulóján,” (Remembrance of Balázs Orbán, the greatest Szekler, on the 100th anniversary of his birth) in *Ki volt Orbán Balázs? Emlékezés a legnagyobb székelyre, születésének századik évfordulóján. 1829.feb. 3. – 1929.feb. 3.*, (Who was Balázs Orbán? Remembrance of the greatest Szekler on the 100th anniversary of his birth) Székelykeresztúr: Székelykeresztúri Kaszinó, 1929. 10–23.

² Balázs Orbán, *A Székelyföld leírása történelmi, régészeti, természetrajzi s népismei szempontból*, (Description of the Szeklerland in historical, archaeological, natural and ethnographic terms) I–VI. Pest: Ráth Mór, 1868–1873.

³ Balázs Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, (Traveling in the East) I–VI. Kolozsvár: Stein János, 1861.

Balázs Orbán's interest in the East was justified, among other things, by his origin. He was descended from a noble Szekler family. His great-grandfather received a noble title from Maria Theresa in the mid-18th century. His father, Baron János Orbán, fought as a military officer in the Napoleonic wars and later became a parliamentarian. His mother, Eugenia Knechtel, was born into a Greek family in Constantinople⁴ which is an important detail in understanding his life's trajectory.

Balázs Orbán travelled extensively throughout his life, and this desire to travel, as many have emphasised,⁵ was not about pursuing adventures but about his desire for knowledge. He studied in Székelyudvarhely (today Odorheiu Secuiesc, Roumania) at the Roman Catholic High School and then at the Reformed College. At the age of 17, he and his parents traveled to the Bosphorus to take over the family heritage of the deceased maternal grandmother, and from there to the Middle East.

The Constantinople branch of his family went through some amazing turns and set-backs. His maternal grandfather, János Knechtel was a well-known mining engineer in Selmecebánya (Banská Štiavnica, Slovakia). Shortly after Sultan Mahmud assumed the throne (1808), he went to the Ottoman Empire to help reform the economy as superintendent of treasury mines. He married Mary Foresti, the daughter of a wealthy Greek merchant from Istanbul. The well-off couple soon had a daughter, Eugenia (mother of Balázs Orbán). Knechtel wanted to return home after the end of his employment contract and take his daughter to a Hungarian school at any cost, but his wife did not want to hear about it. Therefore, he took Eugenia without the knowledge of his wife from the coast of the Bosphorus to Hungary and sent her to a boarding-school in Kassa (Košice, Slovakia), then paid the costs of college education for three years. While on his way home to the Ottoman capital to relocate his wife to Hungary there occurred a terrible accident in which he was shipwrecked, drowned and was thus unable to tell his wife where he had taken their daughter to study.

His widow, Mary Foresti, through the Austrian embassy, had looked for her child for years to no avail, and no one inquired after Eugenia in her three years in Kassa. Then a certain Pál Orbán (paternal grandfather of Balázs) and his wife, whose daughters were also raised in the Kassa nunnery, had compassion on the girl and took the orphan home. Eugenia grew up in the Orbán's house in Kassamindszent (Valaliky, Slovakia), and years later married one of the sons of her benefactors, the aforementioned János, who was much older than her, after returning from the Napoleonic wars as a hussar captain. The couple moved to the Lengyelfalva (Polonița, Roumania) family estate next to Székelyudvarhely. Five children were born of their happy marriage, Balázs was the second (1829).

⁴ For the history of the family see Kálmán Persián, *A lengyelfalvi Orbán bárók. Családtörténelmi tanulmány*, (Orbán barons of Lengyelfalva. Family history study) Kolozsvár: Stief Jenő, 1911.

⁵ For example, Gábor Balás, *A székelyek nyomában*, (In the footsteps of the Szeklers) Budapest: Pano-ráma, 1984. 328–333.

Years later Mary Foresti, in Istanbul, learned that her beloved daughter whom she believed dead was alive and she immediately visited Eugenia at Lengyelfalva in Transylvania. It was agreed that the wealthy widow would build a palace in Istanbul for the Orbán family, to whom she would leave everything. Balázs Orbán was attending a college in Székelyudvarhely when his parents announced that their house had been completed at the Bosphorus. In April 1846, they abandoned their beloved Szeklerland and traveled to Constantinople, hoping for riches. However, another terrible turn came during their journey they learned that Mary Foresti had died, due, perhaps to poisoning, and a *waqf* (Muslim foundation for gracious purposes) took hold of her mighty fortune. The Orbáns obtained only a few houses and some cash from the fabulous heritage. The parents didn't leave it at that and they attempted to obtain a favourable judgment in Istanbul, but the case lasted for 17 years and finally failed.⁶

The young Balázs Orbán did not want to wait for the endless lawsuit in Constantinople and asked his parents for permission to travel to the Holy Land and to the coast of the Nile and to Greece, the ancient homeland of European civilization, to quench his thirst for knowledge. As he later noted, "The favourite dream of my childhood was to travel once to the east, the homeland of the great, the wonderful and the mysterious".⁷ All the more so since "the East has always been the home of secrets, riddles, always covered with veils of mystery, science has worked hard, but it has hardly been able to break any corner of this veil, barely penetrating the borders of this mysterious homeland, and what he has been able to discover and decipher so far is just riddle and supposition."⁸

This effort was in line with the general interest of the 19th century in the East, which consisted of affection for the expanding world towards the exotic and, in the case of Hungary, specifically the exploration of the Hungarian roots in the East. We can read: "At least I have broken a path to the east, which is hundreds of times important to us Hungarians, whose vocation is to mediate between East and West, and who is also interested in the East as the glorious homeland of our ancestors."⁹ On the way, Orbán kept a diary in the form of a set of accounts written for his childhood friend Dániel Dózsa. He wrote his travel experiences many years later based on these accounts and his research in London. For this reason, perhaps, *Traveling in the East* speaks in second person singular to the reader (Dániel Dózsa), which makes the text noticeably more intimate and personal.

⁶ Imre Mikó, "Orbán Balázs – a szülőföld szerelmese," [Balázs Orbán, the motherland lover] *Korunk*, Vol. 27 (1968), No. 7. 943–950.

⁷ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. I. I.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. III. 179.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. I. II. The ancestors of the Hungarians migrated from Western Siberia to the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century.

Traveling in the East is much more than just a guide as it isn't satisfied with the simple description of foreign countries. Its purpose is to convey new knowledge and information to the Hungarian readership, because, as our author writes, "all of us have a duty to throw a grain of sand at the splendid building of our national culture". Then he adds it as an *ars poetica*:

The main purpose of my study was to provide sufficient insight into the historical value of the landscapes I traveled to, that the sons of my country have at least a general knowledge of the past of less literary Eastern countries and nations, and my historical sketches are to give some guidance to those who want to travel to the East someday and want to study in more detail there.

Whatever sublime is a landscape, a country: its intrinsic value is lent by the vicissitudes of the mankind there, therefore, *I regard history as an indispensable accessory to the value of travel descriptions* [my italics – PÁF]. For this reason, I have tried to deal with the criticism I have of my choices and use of historical sources.¹⁰

Balázs Orbán, who calls himself a "champion of science",¹¹ did so. Sometimes he sings pathetically and poetically of the cities and landscapes he roamed, his descriptions are not only fairy-tales, but are also pictorial and the reader savoured the succession of words and sentences. These are complemented by historical treatises which are, practically speaking, compulsory accessories so as to go beyond the actual travel descriptions. Orbán's method was to go back to the beginning of history and to derive from it the history of a settlement or religion (such as Islam or the ancient Egyptian religion). These historical essays are mainly based on antique traditions, legends, myths and are full of biblical quotes, but they do not lack the latest research findings of the time. For example, the Szekler traveler reconstructs the events of the Crusades based on the famous work of Michaud (1767-1839).¹² Certainly he turned the leaves of the grandiose enterprise, written in large part by Jomard (1777-1862), on the description of Egypt.¹³ Although these sometimes lengthy descriptions (more than ten pages for Alexandria, twenty pages for ancient Egypt, almost fifty pages for Islam) may be boring and uninteresting to today's reader, for contemporaries in the mid-19th century, who had little information about Middle Eastern history – "which is only vaguely known to us" –, they filled a gap.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, Vol. III. 154.

¹² [Joseph-François] Michaud, *Histoire des croisades*, I–VII. Paris, 1812–1822. This work was published in two volumes in Pest in Hungarian in 1853, but Orbán used the original.

¹³ *Description de l'Égypte, ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'Armée française*, 23 volumes, Paris, 1809–1828.

For example, the modern part of the Egyptian historical summary is quite accurate, suggesting that Orbán also consulted sources to speak to recent events.

The journey began in April 1846, starting with the Transylvanian Lengyelfalva. From there, his route lead through Brassó (Braşov, Roumania) and Ploieşti to Galac (Galaţi, Roumania) on the Danube, where the Orbán family received notice of their grandmother's death in Constantinople and after some debate, they decided to continue the journey. From the port city they proceeded by steamboat to the Ottoman capital. It was then that they met a senior Turkish official, and this encounter caused some disappointment for Balázs Orbán because the pasha did not look exactly as he imagined. He attributed the pursuit of European fashion to the reforms begun shortly before¹⁴ in the once "dreaded" but now "crumbling" Ottoman Empire, and condemned it: "What surprised me the most was the simple clothing of the pasha (...), which consisted of a black suit and a simple fez (red cap). I imagined a Turkish pasha in a bright national suit laden with gems; but the reform also stripped the Turkish of its ancient form, they have thrown away their ancestors' clothing, they are slowly losing their ancient virtues along with their clothes, and they are slowly learning from Europe the cries of a perverse embourgeoisement."¹⁵ After a short stop in Varna (Bulgaria), the family arrived in Istanbul on May 11th, which fascinated the young Orbán.

However, the loss of inheritance and the prolonged litigation made him sad and he bitterly reproached Ottoman justice: "In this country, where there is no law, where judges openly bribe themselves, and where he has a legitimate income which can pay better, it is a very difficult task to sue. We went to the courts daily, rattling the doors of truth everywhere which had not opened to us."¹⁶ In March 1848, the news of the European and Pest revolutions was received in Constantinople, which Orbán welcomed, and he then decided to travel to the Middle East instead of waiting. He again boarded a steamboat and arrived through the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanelles and the Greek Archipelago (Samos, Rhodes), including Cyprus, on the morning of April 4th to Beirut. He spent a month in Lebanon and Palestine, where he made important and interesting observations.¹⁷

In relation to Syria, Orbán talks about Egypt's conquests in the 1830s, the English-Turkish-Austrian intervention of 1840, and the exodus of Egyptians in relative

¹⁴ In 1839, Hatti Serif of the Gülhane started the so-called *Tanzimat* (Reorganization), a series of reforms that transformed the empire's legal system in several waves. The aim of the modernizing reforms was to reduce the backwardness of the empire from the great European powers.

¹⁵ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. I. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁷ Péter Ákos Ferwagner, "Orbán Balázs útleírása Libanonról és Palesztináról," [Balázs Orbán's travel description of Lebanon and Palestine] in Péter Ákos Ferwagner (ed.), "*Uralkodjék köztünk ész, érdem, igazság*". *Köszöntő tanulmánykötet Kövér Lajos 65. születésnapjára*, ["Let's rule among us reason, merit, truth." A gratulatory volume for Lajos Kövér's 65th birthday] Szeged: SZTE Újkori Egyetemes Történeti és Mediterrán Tanulmányok Tanszék, 2019. 139–157.

detail. It is typical that in this conflict, he definitely backs the Egyptian governor Mohamed Ali and is unsparing in his criticism of the Ottomans and the British:

England expelled [Mohamed Ali] from Syria, who was destined for the civilization of southern Turkey, and he restored the Turkish shadow rule, unable to keep order among the people who hated him, which is in perpetual struggle with independence-seeking peoples and can only sustain themselves by inducing the ever-revived fratricidal civil wars. But England does not always take into account the interests of the peoples. England tends to pursue its own selfish interests. Mehemed Ali's growing power threatened his Indian estates and trade, and Mehemed Ali had to fail! People's rights violations, termination of contracts, all the tools were good, what led to the goal.¹⁸

After traversing the Levantine coast and Palestine, Balázs Orbán's original plan was to sail in a ship from Jaffa and head for Damietta in Egypt, but the departure of the sailboat was delayed, so he decided to return to Beirut and from there sailed aboard a French steamer to the Nile. This decision would seem to have saved his life. He later learned that the Arabian sailboat, after being able to set off, was overcome by a storm and sank. On May 9, Orbán boarded an Arab orange transporter ship in the port of Jaffa to reach Beirut at a good speed in 16 hours. From there he set sail for Egypt on the 16th, and his steamer set upon the 18th at Alexandria. He immediately fell in love with Egypt, "whose past is miraculous, its present is amazing".

Our traveller was roundly fascinated by the "fabulous" city, the Abukir Castle and the other landmarks. At the time of the mooring, he was interested in the history of Alexandria, where, as he states, science and art flowed into Hellas so that "from there, like the rays of the sun, they would flood the whole earth".¹⁹ In the distance, "the smoke of Rozette's factories" immediately appears to him evidently referring to the industrialization of contemporary Egypt but there was not much time to contemplate it, as he and his companions were locked up in a not very comfortable quarantine for eight days. He states that Alexandria was made great by its intellectual life, being the "science workshop", and its center was the library. He became convinced that the other landmark, the Lighthouse of Alexandria (Pharos), was not destroyed by the conquering Arabs, as many believed, but by an earthquake at the time of the Arab conquest. He noted that Egypt, on the one hand, surrendered to Muslims almost without resistance, and, on the other, that Coptic Christians persecuted by the Byzantine court accepted the conquerors as liberators. Orbán viewed the decline of Alexandria's significance in his era as due to trade routes to China and India which had shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic

¹⁸ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. II. 3.

¹⁹ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 37.

following the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope. He correctly states that the city had 5,000-6,000 inhabitants when Napoleon appeared in 1798, and then adds: "However, now Mehemed Ali of Macedonia is paying close attention to the beautification of the city, which was also founded by a Macedonian hero [Alexander the Great], and with the completion of the Mahmoudiyah Canal, the line of trade, once again directed to Alexandria, the city is expanding and beautifying daily."²⁰

In 1848, Orbán estimated that Alexandria had a population of 60-70,000, and this population, attracted by trade, was very diverse.²¹ He attributes the merit of developing the city to Mohamed Ali because the Pasha recognized it as the only safe harbor on the Egyptian and even Syrian and Palestinian coasts. He therefore made it the center of foreign trade and linked it to the Nile to guarantee drinking water supplies.²² However, foreign trade was a state monopoly ("government uniqueness"), since "producers can sell their crops only to the government and at cheap prices set by it" (rice, cereals, cotton, indigo). These products from all parts of the country are accumulated in warehouses in Alexandria." Balázs Orbán observes sharply that this state monopoly "impoverishes the poor people of the arable land" and covered not only Egyptian but also foreign products (Arabic coffee, spices, Syrian tobacco, African ostrich feather, ivory, gold). We are told that these products are being auctioned and that Mohamed Ali sets the lowest price according to the lowest European prices. "Most cotton, rubber, indigo goes to Trieste, Liverpool, Marseille and Livorno, rice and opium to Smyrna, Constantinople and Athens. Grain to Naples, Palermo, Malta and the Canary Islands. For this large-scale trade, the government has 700 sea and 1800 river and coastal ships." And the consequence?

This uniqueness of government ruined the indigenous merchants and enslaved the poor farmer, who could hardly win with effort and diligence to drag on a miserable existence. Conversely, for franc traders this is quite ben-

²⁰ Ibid, 49.

²¹ According to the literature, at the end of the 18th century there were indeed about five thousand, in 1820 the population was 12,500, in 1846 slightly more than estimated by Orbán, about 100,000, and in 1882 already 230,000 inhabitants. In 1907, the population was estimated at 400,000. Cf. Balázs Réti, "Alexandria és a brit tengeri uralom," [Alexandria and the British Maritime Authority] *Mediterrán Világ*, No. 33–34. 2015. 86–107.; Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts. The Middle East in the Great War*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. 1st chapter.

²² Named after the Ottoman Sultan, the more than 70 km long Mahmoudiya Canal was excavated from 1819 from Alexandria to the village of Atf, the Rosetta (Rashid) branch of the Delta. As a result, internal communications began to improve, transportation costs were reduced, and the city was supplied with a constant supply of fresh water. Its permanent dredging and maintenance was only solved in the second half of the century. Cf. Z. Y. Hershlag, *Introduction to the Modern Economic History of the Middle East*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980. 93–94.

eficial; many will become rich in a few years, and as a result the number of strangers settling in Alexandria is thousands in every year.²³

Our traveler describes the port city with a history as having a pleasant climate, and it is no coincidence that the viceroy Mohamed Ali likes to spend his summers in Alexandria, as Cairo is so hot. A governor from the viceroy's family managed the city and well-organized police keep an eye on the public order. "Each working class has its own sheikh, who collects taxes and keeps order. Europeans are subject to the authority of their consuls and are exempt from all taxes." That is, the capitulations were in effect. The European quarter, Orbán says, is insignificant, but the Arab quarter "with its Moorish-like mosques and fantastic houses is much more beautiful and picturesque". The Arab quarter also had the advantage of being in the shade because of its narrow streets, so upon them the sun doesn't shine. But, sadly, our traditionally Szekler traveler remarks, "Mehemed Ali is not in this opinion. By his decree, the old streets are all now being demolished and replaced with wide streets, and provided with European-style houses. In a few decades, Alexandria will lose its eastern character and become a city that can be seen everywhere in Europe."

We also witness an unexpected event. In the middle of a beautiful garden open to all was Mohamed Ali's "seraglio", and Orbán, walking in the garden, met the son of the viceroy similarly named.²⁴

When he saw that we were strangers, he entered into conversation with us (in French with the purest accent) and asked if we wanted to see the inside of the seraglio. To our affirmative answer, he gave us a bey from his entourage, and with his guidance we went through all his rooms (the viceroy taking a ride). They are furnished with the most luxurious and tasteful furnishings in a European manner, except for a few rooms which retained their oriental character. What surprised me most about a Muslim home (which according to the Qur'an decree one should not to make pictures of one's apartment) was a picture gallery full of famous paintings, where oil portraits of the viceroy, Pasha Ibrahim, his sons and other relatives were hung.²⁵

Our author points out that Alexandrian defences were very much strengthened with the help of French military engineers and is therefore "one of the strongest

²³ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 55.

²⁴ The literature also mentions the son of the sovereign named Mohamed Ali, who survived him, as well as the dozens of children of the viceroy borne by his wife and various concubines. Kenneth M. Cuno, *Modernizing Marriage. Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015. 31–32.; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 27–28.

²⁵ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 56–57.

military points". Although the area is barren, the Mahmoudiya Canal is rich in vegetation and was a favorite destination for residents as there were cafes and ice cream parlors. Even Mohamed Ali had a country cottage here, which he "usually visits twice a day, in his carriage, preceded by two Arabs (who carry coffee-making equipment) in dromedary, and two whipping runners. Many times I saw Mehemed Ali with his snow-white beard and dignified face take a drive."²⁶ According to the description, the ruler was polite to the Europeans:

The viceroy, but most of all his sons raised in a European way, are very fond of Europeans, very polite towards strangers, and can often be seen driving out or walking arm in arm with Europeans, which, in any case, points to the rise above prejudice derived from ignorance. At all, Europeans enjoy great privileges and honors, and more Europeans are employed in the military and in civilian offices (the Alexandria police chief is also a European) and as a result of this allurements, the number of Europeans settling in Egypt is increasing every day.²⁷

At the beginning of June, Balázs Orbán left Alexandria with a sailing ship instead of a daily steamer on the Nile. He mentions that the Mahmoudiya Canal is also used to irrigate the area, and that there are warehouses on the shores where the country's produce, "the fruit of the bloody sweat of a few million people", is stored. Along the canal are the estates ("farms") of Europeans, and, as a spectacular sign of modernization, telegraph-poles align. The Nile fascinated Orbán, who also indicated that it was quite cheap to travel on sailboats on the river (he and his traveling companion paid 40 piasters for a cabin to Cairo). He describes the monotonous work of irrigation: "Everywhere on the coast the poor fellah works diligently for the benefit of another." He depicts the lively children swimming behind the ship, begging for money from travelers. Orbán conveys an interesting picture of the Nile villages and mud houses:

On the banks of the Nile, the villages (...) consist mostly of mud huts. The reason for this is, besides the poverty and indolence of the people, that the fellah builds her house only for one year. In times of flood, poor people flee to the mountains with their buffaloes, goats, and camels (they have no furni-

²⁶ It is almost impossible for Balázs Orbán to have seen Mohamed Ali drive out in Alexandria. The ruler was already very ill at that time, and his son Ibrahim had to take over the government of Egypt in 1847, one year before the arrival of our traveler. Orbán may have confused the viceroy with someone, or he may have been misinformed. Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali*, op. cit. 96., 255–256. Much later he makes a reference to the health of Mohamed Ali when he writes that he lives in his Cairo's palace for "security and health" reasons but does not elaborate.

²⁷ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 58.

ture). The water inundates the village and the mud huts collapse, only some minarets and palm trees mark its place. When the vehement river flows back into the bed after its adventure, when the heat of the sun dries the water, the earth draws in the sludge, (...) when the earth, like a magical force, covers its green mantle, escaping to the mountains and heights, the fellah returns, guided by the slender towers and palms, to his ruined hut and rebuilds it from the same mud for the next year.²⁸

Our traveler gives a thorough description of Egyptian farmers. He believes that they come from a mixture of conquering Arabs and indigenous peoples of the country. According to him it is rare that the conquerors merge with the aboriginals for two generations and lose their original character (“national character”) to become Egyptian. In Orbán’s eyes, the fellah is a very diligent, peace-loving, working people; it takes little to satisfy him, “but if the plow horns are to be replaced with a sword, he is a very good warrior”, as evidenced by Mohamed Ali’s successful campaigns. “Wide breast, muscular arm, relatively thin leg, expressive, deep-lying black eyes, forward curved forehead, flat short nose, large mouth with dense white teeth, protruding cheekbones and short lip characterize them. Their complexion is dark yellowish, but rather caused by the sun’s warmth, they wear an indigo-dyed long blue shirt and white turban, footwear is not used.” Women get married and give birth at a young age, and rarely give birth to a child after the age of 30, which Orbán says is due to the exhaustion by the hard work. The land cultivated by the fellahs is not their own, but state property, maybe “owned by some rich landlords, mosques, schools, priesthood, so they are only tenants, they should not pledge it, they should not sell it”. They were poor because all their produce was obligated by the government to be sold at ridiculously low prices for a quarter of the real price, moreover, they had heavy tax burdens, and therefore “they are left with little or no fruit of their labor. They are poor, the saddest of all serfs.”²⁹

Similarly, the Szekler traveller describes the Bedouins in great detail. These nomads are inhabitants of the desert, who rarely come to trade to the cities on the banks of the Nile. They were formed of sixty tribes (he gives the names of the more important ones), and their number may have been about one hundred thousand. Orbán distinguishes between those on the West and those on the East, the former of Maghreb, the latter of Arab and Palestinian origin. They differed from each other not only in their physique but also in their clothing. A small number of Bedouins had already settled in villages, but if the government wanted to tax them or recruit them, they would immediately go into the desert. They earned their living from escorting or robbing caravans. Their religion was a peculiar Islam: “We don’t

²⁸ Ibid., 64.

²⁹ Ibid., 65.

pray because we have no water for washing; we don't keep Ramadan because we fast all year long, and we do not go to the mosque, we do not make pilgrimages to Mecca, for Allah is everywhere present." The tribes spoke different dialects of Arabic, which were otherwise different in every province and city. The Bedouins were very averse to the military, so – "like our Gypsies" – they cut off their index fingers and break their first teeth. "But Mehemed Ali also violently captured many of them, and once enlisted, they surrender and are very good soldiers, excellent unrivalled riders."³⁰

The author finds the Nile travels basically pleasant, but he does not hide suffering a lot from parasites and inextirpable rats on the boat at night. He found it interesting that at the mooring a stake is lowered into the bed instead of anchoring and the sailors tie their barge to it. In the event of a windfall, they swam ashore and towed the boat along the shore with the help of ropes. And all this naked. And what was not typical of him, perhaps a more civilized European might speak from Orbán: "At all, the Egyptians have no idea about the sense of decency."

At the summit of the delta, our hero witnessed spectacular work led by a French engineer. Dams were being built using steam engines and 10,000 fellahs ("poor fellahs are hauled in for public works and receive no pay") to improve irrigation. When the work was done, the government's income would double – said Orbán's prophecy. Nearby is the "beautifully located kiosk" of the viceroy, surrounded by military tents. "In Egypt at all, the military is not in barracks, it is under tents." Already on the main branch of the Nile, the pyramids soon appeared, and "passing by the smoky buildings of some factories, we arrived at Bulaka [Boulaq], a suburb of Cairo, in the evening".

Before discussing the Egyptian capital, Balázs Orbán gives a detailed account of Islamic history and does so in an understanding, tolerant way. He calls the Prophet Muhammad a "great soul", and says of the Qur'an that it "incorporates the principles of purest morality", and then states that, contrary to common accusations, the holy book of Muslims is patient with other religions.³¹ He is obviously mistaken for attributing the stopping of the Muslim conquerors in the Frankish Reich to Charles the Great's victory in the Battle of Tours (Battle of Poitiers, 732), as it is well-known that in reality the victor was Charles Martel, the Frankish major-domo (mayor of the palace). He calls the Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786-809) the "King Matthias of Islam", referring to one of the most prominent rulers of Hungarian history in the 15th century, whom the Hungarians have for ever given the adjective "The Just". He gives a detailed account of the struggles of Mohamed Ali in the early 19th century to gain power and the main features of his rule and politics. The following lines show that he held the ruler in high esteem: "Egypt will surely make

³⁰ Ibid, 67.

³¹ Ibid, 73–74.

itself independent sooner or later, and at the time of the first major complication in Europe, the Turkish empire, which is already confined to the mercy of others for the sake of petty political ends, will collapse, and then Egypt is called upon to group the power of Islam around it and to build a new one on the ruins of the old empire.”³²

Balázs Orbán liked Cairo, just as he did Alexandria. He writes with great respect about its history and believes that presently it is the second most important city in Islam after Istanbul. He estimated its population at 400,000, perhaps overstating it a little bit.³³ He states that some of the inhabitants are Coptic (who do not give their share) who he believes are the descendants of the Egyptian natives. They include landowners and clerks, but hardly industrialists. Our traveler states that “this is the most beautiful species I have seen”, but adds that Coptic clothing is no different from that of Muslims. He sees that trade is mainly conducted by Arabs, while the craft industry is held mainly by Syrians, Greeks and Jews. Each craft has its own sheikh, and the most important ones are concentrated in their own quarters within the guild. The town’s 25,000 homes were “built in the purest Eastern style that European tasteless architecture has not yet nested”. There were many narrow alleyways, and there were some where two people could not fit side by side. Orbán notes with regret that, as in Alexandria, “Mehemed Ali’s innovative passion begins to impress, some streets have already been cut (...), and Cairo is slowly losing its fantastic character that strikes the stranger everywhere”.³⁴

The 400 Cairo mosques are dubbed “the most amazing specimens of Moorish architecture”, which also surpass Istanbul’s mosques in their beauty. He praises the literacy and “modernity” of Mohamed Ali for allowing strangers to visit the inside of the mosques. He’s just sad because these great buildings are in such bad shape that they almost let them crash, as if Muslims were “ashamed to see in their decline of character those who are reproachfully recalling a bygone era of a more beautiful past”. He pays homage to the splendor of al-Azhar, whose school is still famous, “students from the most remote Muslim provinces still come here”. He has a considerable income, a library and even an asylum for the blind. We also learn that Cairo mosques are not only places of worship, but also accommodation for travelers; and even tired believers are happy to spend their free time there mingling and resting.

Our author considers Cairo’s bazaar the most interesting, largest and richest after Istanbul, where “every merchant class has its own street”. They sell cashmere scarves, jewelry, guns, tobacco, books. There is a huge crowd where “all kinds of

³² Ibid, 115.

³³ Modern research estimates the population of mid-19th-century Cairo to be 300,000 to have doubled by the turn of the century. Cf. Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo. 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971. 120.

³⁴ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 122–123.

languages are in turmoil". Orbán believes that Cairo's trade is very high because it is at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe. The main commodities are cotton (110,000 bales a year) and indigo, and there are also industrial plants founded by Mohamed Ali (silk factory, cloth factory, saltpetre factory, etc.). Our traveler emphasizes that "all factory and retail business is in the hands of the government". From Suez, Indian and Arabian goods are carried by 70,000 camels to Cairo. Due to the development of trade, a railway connection between Suez and Cairo was being planned and work had already begun.³⁵ We also obtain knowledge of another project: "An other huge plan awaiting realization is the interconnection of the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea by a navigable canal for sea-going ships, which, if realized, will have a huge impact on Egypt's future and development." Visionary words!

Balázs Orbán also talks about slave trade in the Cairo bazaar, then introduces and seems to misunderstand Egyptian marriage practices. He begins by saying that "Cairo is the home of love adventures" where "women can be bought for money". He outlines the conduct of marriage and divorce, and interestingly treats as one Armenian, Coptic, and Turkish (Muslim) customs, which he says "differ only in form, but in effect are the same". His conclusion is that "those who like frequent marriages and love-changeability should go to Cairo".³⁶ He witnesses a wedding and states that Arab hospitality is "limitless".

He goes on to describe Mohamed Ali's coming to power and strongly condemns the "cowardly" and "terribly wild" mode in which the Mamluks were slaughtered by the vali. He considers, however, that the example was infectious, since Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) soon treated the Janissaries in the same way.³⁷ More interestingly, Orbán describes the mosque where Mohamed Ali's family is buried and notes that Pasha Ibrahim is also there.³⁸ It is evident that he incorporated that later this into his itinerary, since the son of the ruler was still alive at the time of his visit to Egypt. Ibrahim died only in November 1848. Keep in mind that *Travel in the East* was written about ten years later, which is why there may be

³⁵ The first railway line was finally delivered not from Suez to the capital but from Alexandria in 1852, sooner than the first railway in Sweden or Poland! Cf. Péter Ákos Ferwagner, "Munkásmozgalom és nemzeti forradalom Egyiptomban – a korai időszak" [Labour movement and national revolution in Egypt – the early period], in Iván Harsányi – Gábor Székely (ed.): *A nemzetközi munkásmozgalom történetéből. Évkönyv 2019* [From the history of international labour movement. Year-book 2019], Vol. XLV. Budapest: Magyar Lajos Alapítvány, 2019. 42–52. The Suez-Cairo section was completed in 1858.

³⁶ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 133.

³⁷ In June 1826 more than 20,000 were murdered. İlber Ortaylı, *Az Oszmán Birodalom leghosszabb évszázada* [The longest century of the Ottoman Empire], Máriabesnyő – Gödöllő: Attraktor, 2004. 30–31.

³⁸ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 141.

subsequent insertions like this. What escapes us, however, is that while Orbán talks about Ibrahim's death, he remains silent about Mohamed Ali's passing.

After getting to know Cairo better, our passenger made a trip to the outskirts of the town, to Heliopolis. He rented donkeys for this purpose, because in the Egyptian capital, "donkeys are replacing horses and carriages, these means of transport having ears stand on every street corner". Long pages cover Napoleon's campaign, military events and battles. His sympathy turns more to the French than to the English, because their victories represented in his eyes the triumphs of Orbán's ideal, the republic, and freedom, and although he admits that Napoleon exerted his dominion over the Egyptians, he said he did so in the "holy name of liberty", so it is excusable. He also states that the presence of France has had a positive effect on Egypt's development, thanks to which the country on the Nile is one of the most advanced nations in the Islamic world: "If Egypt is more cultivated today than other Muslim provinces, and if the plant of civilization could have taken root there, it is thanks to the plowing of its land by the French Republic, it is thanks to the graves of the republic that have cut off the weeds of prejudice and fanaticism, and the land fertilized with their blood has become receptive to the acceptance of culture and, perhaps later, freedom."³⁹ Orbán's Heliopolis excursion was ended by an impending "dangerous wind", the khamsin. He said that only because of the melons they had, they did not dry out and drown. After being exhausted due to the sandstorm, he returned to his Cairo accommodation and slept 24 hours without a break.

Then came the visit to the Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx. Although Giza, a huge metropolis now part of Cairo, was seen by our Szekler traveler as an "insignificant city", he added that it is famous not only for pyramids, but also for having the world's largest "egg-brooder oven", which hatches out 7-10,000 chickens a day! Also noteworthy is the settlement's cavalry school, which is run by a French officer, "where the best officers of the Egyptian army come from". Indigo cultivation was also taking place in Giza. We learn that the seeds are imported from Syria and the government supports the cultivation of the plant. Although domestic consumption is high, the country exports large quantities (200,000 *occa*⁴⁰) of indigo annually. When he looked at the pyramids, the author is shocked: "A certain sacred fear pushed my heart, and I felt myself dwarfed and destroyed at the feet of these gigantic works." To visit the Cheops pyramid, Orbán received leaders from the local Bedouin tribe appointed by the government for this purpose, to climb the immense structure. Because the Bedouins were intrusive, he had to put them in order with the whip. Orbán notes, incidentally, that in this country, "European can freely distribute hits by whip", which says a lot about the relationship between strangers

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 152.

⁴⁰ 1 Egyptian *occa* = circ. 1,235 kg.

and indigenous people.⁴¹ He climbed to the top of the pyramid in 25 minutes, and he was not happy that tourists seemed to break and take away pieces of stone. Luckily, "this vandalism was banned by Mehemed Ali". The spectacular panorama compensated our traveler for all the trouble.⁴²

The Bedouin leaders also guided Orbán and his companion inside the pyramid. It was an unpleasant but typical experience:

I just noticed that our polite Bedouins, who until now had always been spoiled before, separated from my companion and began to solicit baxis (gifts), I replied that by negotiating the right price with the sheik, they would not receive any more, but they brought up the objection that by dividing it up across the village, they get little of it; I promised that when we went out they would receive it, but that promise couldn't dampen them, and they started to grab my pockets, losing my peace of mind, I nailed them to my pocket pistol, and they put out the candles with cold blood and left me in the dark, because I had matches, I lit a candle, and thinking that it would be foolish to fight with four such strong criminals on the silent lap of the pyramid, I gave them some piaster, and then peace was holy, and while I was forced into the king's room, my companion was treated in the same manner in the queen's room. This case was later told to one of my compatriots in the service of Pasha Soliman, who wanted to bring in the whole village.⁴³ "In vain would you do that sweet fellow countryman", I told him, "for I would not know which one he was, for you know that the Bedouins are as much like one another as they are the children of a father". "Doesn't matter!", he replied, "I'll flog 50 hits on the sheikh's sole and he'll give it out, otherwise, it is our duty to punish such offenses in order to protect other travelers from such treatment". It was only after a long pleading that I could persuade him not to cudgel all the village.⁴⁴

Balázs Orbán also visited Memphis and the ancient sights there. He wanted to travel to Upper Egypt and the Sinai, but he was distracted by the heavy costs and summer heat. There was no choice but to return to Alexandria, towards which he left Cairo on June 14, 1848 aboard a Nile sailboat. We get a detailed description of the river delta, which was once a fertile country variegated by canals, but now "on-

⁴¹ Even at the turn of the century, it was common practice in Egyptian industrial plants and transport companies that indigenous subordinates were physically assaulted by European foremen. Cf. Ferwagner, *Munkásmozgalom és nemzeti forradalom Egyiptomban...* op. cit.

⁴² Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 163–164.

⁴³ Balázs Orbán does not mention who this alleged Hungarian might have been, nor did I find any other trace of him.

⁴⁴ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. III. 170–171.

ly the immediate coast of the Nile is cultivated, the middle [of the delta] is deserted, plain, unmoved”.

We also learn about the characteristics of the Nile flood. “When the level of water is normal, the water [of the Nile] is clear, transparent and drinking water for all of Egypt (...); it is used as distilled water in factories and chemical operations”.⁴⁵ An important bit of information is that threshing of farm work is done by a machine powered by animals called *norag*, which is remarkable because in the mid-19th century, agricultural work was not mechanized even in Central Europe.⁴⁶

But in vain, because the work of the peasant is subsidized by the state, and in this connection, Orbán returns to the line of thought he has repeatedly stated: “Such a blessed land is Egypt and yet the people are poor and miserable because they are politically oppressed, because by working for others, he neglects cultivating the land that is barely plowed to reward the work in the richest way. “And the reason for the misery is the lack of freedom: In a government based on exploitation principles like Egypt, where all land is owned by the government and the priests, where the people are just working cattle for them, or even the piece of land on which the poor fellah builds her mud hut, others say to herself, where all its produce has to be handed over by the government at a pot price, where the people are overtaxed: there, with three harvests, the people are miserable and poor, there neither material enrichment nor spiritual development is possible.”⁴⁷ Our author soon arrived at the coastal Rosetta (Rashid), about which he states that at the beginning of the 19th century it was still the most important Egyptian port, but after the construction of the Mahmoudiya Canal, it lost its importance to Alexandria, so that its population could be no more than 10-15 thousand.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, state-run steam-powered textile factories produce, which “make a noise in the silent city”. The overall picture is positive, the houses and streets are beautiful, the mosques are similar to those of Cairo. Unfortunately, unbelievers cannot visit them because “Rosette residents, much more fanatical than Cairoans and Alexandrians, forbid the *giaours* them”. The bazaar is big but empty. The “fairy groves” of the city are charming places, “but what is the fairy garden, what is a fertile land, what is the rich gift of nature, if one is bound by chains to the beautiful land; what is the eternal clear sky worth if the day of liberty does not shine on it forever?” This recurring thought continues shortly thereafter: “Great Egypt, which once defied the power of all Europe, the proud mistress of the East, the secret house of wonders and mysteries, the land of greatness, the rich fiancée of nature, what have you become?! With the glo-

⁴⁵ Ibidem, Vol. IV. 52.

⁴⁶ The functioning of the Egyptian *norag* was described in 1918 by an American newspaper. Cf. *Commerce Reports*, Washington, No. 121, 23 May 1918. 728.

⁴⁷ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. IV. 54.

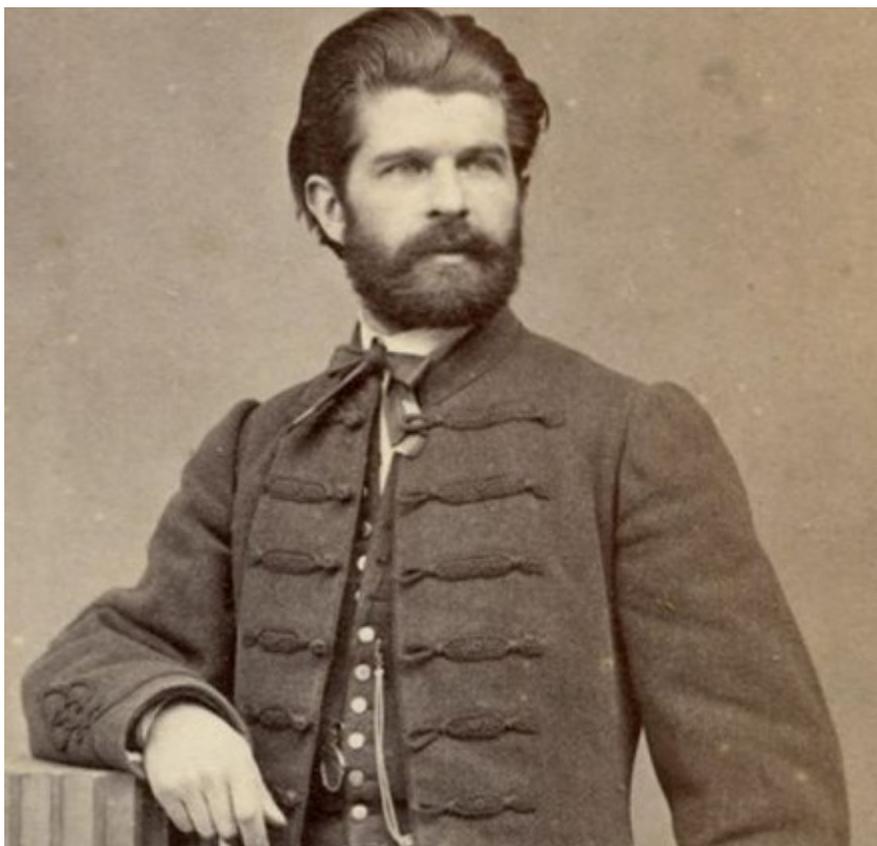
⁴⁸ The estimate is supported by modern research. Cf. Justin A. McCarthy, “Nineteenth-Century Egyptian Population”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Oct., 1976), pp. 1-39.

rious memory of your greatness of the past, there is nothing more you can present than a sadly ringing chain under your beautiful sky!”⁴⁹ The Hungarian reader of the late 1850s and early 1860s may have had a hard time getting rid of the feeling during the Habsburg absolutist rule, that Balázs Orbán, who is committed to the revolution and freedom, did not actually address these lines (or not only) to Egypt, but to his beloved country, Hungary, and Egypt could be replaced with Hungary without further ado.

Our Szekler traveler spent a total of two months in the country of the Pharaohs. On June 28, he left Rosetta for Alexandria, and when he left, “the smoke columns of the Rosette factories were visible above the palm trees”. And from Alexandria he sailed to Greece on 8 July. He stayed there in the summer and early autumn, traveled all over the country and visited many islands. On October 29, he returned home to Istanbul to his parents. He did not return to Hungary and his beloved Transylvania until the end of the 1850s, after visiting England.

Balázs Orbán's Egyptian travel guide is not only interesting in itself. In addition to presenting the situation of the country he traveled to in 1848, he also provides valuable information to his contemporaries and those interested in posterity about public conditions, habits, etc., as well as providing detailed information on the history of the visited regions, cities and peoples. And all that at the highest standards of the epoch, using fresh work. He presents information to the contemporary Hungarian readership that was unknown at the time. But he is not satisfied with that. He constantly voices his hatred of all forms of tyranny, his desire for freedom, his deep faith in human progress, and by his own modest means he contributes to the political debates of Hungary in the late 1850s. It is obvious whose party he is attending.

⁴⁹ Orbán, *Utazás Keleten*, op. cit. Vol. IV. 58.



Balázs Orbán in the 1860s (Wikipedia)