



# **YURTS AND MONASTERIES**

MONGOLIAN TREASURES  
AT THE FERENC HOPP  
MUSEUM OF ASIATIC ARTS

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OF ASIATIC ARTS

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Edited by  
Györgyi Fajcsák and Tímea Windhoffer

*Yurts and Monasteries. Mongolian Treasures at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts*

Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts, Budapest, 2022

## THE VOLUME

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Photos: Gellért Áment, Áron Harasztos, Ferenc Balázs

Image processing and cover design: Roland Szántó

Map: Narmer Architecture Studio: Lilla Vincze

Photographic credits: Sylvia Cseh

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2022 © HUNGART

Published by: Dr László Baán, Director General

Museum of Fine Arts – Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts, Budapest, 2022

The Museum of Fine Arts is maintained by the Ministry of Human Capacities

Printing: EPC Nyomda

ISBN 978-615-5987-77-9

Cover illustration: 'Endless knot' motif. Detail of a Khalkha Mongolian men's tunic. Silk, Mongolia, 1965

## THE EXHIBITION

Exhibition concept: Tímea Windhoffer, Györgyi Fajcsák

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Education booklet layout: Miklós Szegő

Technical team: the museum's art handlers and colleagues of the Maintenance Department

Thanks are due to the staff of the Financial and the Legal Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, who participated in the realisation of the exhibition.

Special thanks are due for the realization of the exhibition to: Ágnes Birtalan, Gergely Csiky, Péter Erdélyi, Mrs. Jenő Fullajtár, Béla Kelényi, Attila Rákos, Alice Sárközi, Krisztina Teleki

Special thanks are due to the following institutions for their cooperation:

Museum of Ethnography; Hungarian Geographical Museum in Érd; Museum and Library of Hungarian Agriculture; The Oriental Collection and the Department of Manuscripts and Rare Books of the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; the Manuscript Archive and Klebelsberg Library of the University of Szeged; The Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies at Eötvös Loránd University; Hungarian National Museum, Research Centre for the Humanities (A member of the Eötvös Loránd Research Network)



# CONTENTS

9 **Györgyi Fajcsák:** Foreword

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## 1

**'Mongolian attire was presented to the esteemed guest'**

The Intellectual and Material Heritage of Hungarian-Mongolian Academic and Diplomatic Relations

- 17 **Attila Rákos:** Hungarian Expeditions in Mongolia and among Mongolic Peoples
- 25 **Gergely Csíky:** Hungarian Archaeological Fieldwork in Mongolia
- 33 **Krisztina Teleki:** Hungarians in the 'New Mongolia' in the 1920s
- 41 **Tímea Windhoffer:** Mongolian Diplomatic Gifts Presented during State Visits in the Second Half of the 20th Century

## 2

**'I could see something that great expeditions cannot see'**

Researchers – Themes – Expeditions

- 53 **Györgyi Fajcsák:** The Art of the Nomadic Peoples from the Northern Borderlands of China. Collecting Work Carried out in the Ordos Region by Zoltán Felvinczi Takács between the Two World Wars
- 79 **Tímea Windhoffer:** Lajos Ligeti's Travels in Inner Mongolia as Reflected in the Artefacts Donated to the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts
- 95 **Gábor Wilhelm:** Vilmos Diószegi and His Shamanic Research
- 103 **Ágnes Birtalan:** *'They move about in search of water and pasture.'* The Material Culture of the Mongolian Nomads

## 3

**'In Lamaism, all religious works of art and all images of the gods are known as "supports"'**

Mongolian Buddhist Art and Some of its Characteristic Object Groups in the Collection of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts

- 119 **Alice Sárközi:** An Iconographic Description of Altars in Tibetan-Mongolian Monasteries
- 131 **Ágnes Birtalan:** Family Altars in Yurts
- 141 **Zsolt Szilágyi:** The Historical and Cultural Role of the Mongolian Jebtsundambas
- 151 **Judit Vinkovics:** Objects Related to Dzanabadzar and His Followers in the Mongolian Collection of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts
- 165 **Krisztina Teleki:** Depictions and Sacred Texts of the Buddhist Goddess and Dharma Protectress Śrīdevī in the Mongolian Collection of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts
- 175 **Tímea Windhoffer:** The Iconography of Vaiśravaṇa Images in the Mongolian Collection of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts, Based on a Votive Text
- 187 **József Végh:** The *Gcod* Ceremony in Post-Communist Mongolia

## 4

**'What I saw was simply beyond imagination...'**

Historical Photographs of Mongolia

- 211 **Zoltán Bereczki:** Lajos Ligeti's Photographs from His Expeditions to Inner Mongolia
- 219 **József Végh:** A Photojournalist in Mongolia (1959 and 1972). Photographs Taken by Miklós Rév in the Collection of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts

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## APPENDIX

- 226 **Bibliography of Hungarian Archaeological Excavations in Mongolia**  
Compiled by Gergely Csiky
- 229 **Bibliography**
- 240 **List of Illustrations**
- 246 **Map**

KRISZTINA TELEKI

# Hungarians in the ‘New Mongolia’ in the 1920s

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## YEARS OF TURMOIL: 1919–1921

Following the collapse of Manchu overlordship (1691–1911) in Mongolia, the Tibetan-born Buddhist spiritual leader (the 8th Bogd Gegeen, 1870–1924) was chosen as the theocratic ruler of independent Mongolia, under the name Bogd Khaan.<sup>1</sup> He exercised religious and secular power between 1911 and 1921: in 1912, his residence, a city founded in 1639 that was also known as Urga, became the ‘monastic capital’ (Nislel xürē, or Niislel Khüree) of Mongolia.

A tripartite agreement on Mongolian autonomy was signed by Mongolia, Russia, and China in 1915 in the Russian–Mongolian border city of Kyakhta–Altanbulag. In 1919, the Bolshevik government that took power following the 1917 October Revolution in Russia recognised the independence of Mongolia, although it was not long before the Chinese Kuomintang laid claim to the territory of Mongolia and its army invaded the country, occupying the capital city and taking the Bogd Khaan prisoner. The Austrian baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg (1886–1921) united the Russian White units and in 1920 liberated the Mongolian capital and expelled the Chinese troops from the country. However, when the White Guardists set about plundering and slaughtering, the young Mongolian revolutionaries turned to the Bolsheviks for help: in 1921, the Red Army, combined with Mongolian troops, liberated the capital and drove out the White Guardists. The victorious revolution is commemorated in Mongolia on 11th July. Appreciative of the help afforded by the Bolsheviks, the newly established (provisional) Mongolian people’s government set out on the path towards socialism. The first modern buildings<sup>2</sup> were constructed in the Mongolian capital in the 1920s; the People’s Republic of Mongolia was declared in 1924, and the name of the capital city was changed to Ulaanbaatar (meaning ‘red hero’).

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE HUNGARIANS

In 1873, the linguist Gábor Bálint of Szentkatolna spent six months in Urga.<sup>3</sup> In 1876, József Zichy and Ágost Zichy passed through Mongolia, while in 1898 Jenő Zichy led an expedition to Mongolia.<sup>4</sup> In the context of an expedition to Inner Asia led by Béla Széchenyi between 1877 and 1880, the geologist and geographer Lajos Lóczy also visited the Gobi Desert. These noble-born intellectuals and scientists<sup>5</sup> were still able to witness the Buddhist Mongolia of the Manchu era.<sup>6</sup>

Several decades later, some of the Hungarians who had been taken prisoner of war by the Russians during the First World War, and who had been liberated from prison camps in Siberia, set off westwards to return home, while others attempted to reach home by heading east, through Mongolia and China. Four of those who chose the eastern route spent several years in Mongolia and played a part in the building of socialism.<sup>7</sup> Another two reached Ulaanbaatar in the early 1920s and were able to participate in the establishment of the Mongolian People's Army. The present paper explores the activities in Mongolia of these six individuals whom we know of by name.<sup>8</sup>

## JÓZSEF GELETA

Engineer József Geleta (1895–1965) lived in Mongolia from 1920 to 1929. An officer during the First World War, he was taken prisoner and ended up in Siberia.<sup>9</sup> He did not take part in the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, nor did he join the Red Army: he simply wanted to return home. He arrived in Mongolia before the White Guardist army led by Ungern-Sternberg. He lived initially on the northern border of the country, in Kyakhta, where he married. In 1920, he moved to Urga, the Mongolian 'monastic capital,' where he became an electrotechnical expert at the Ministry for National Economy. (fig. 1)

Drawing on the recollections and observations of József Geleta, László Forbáth wrote the exciting adventure novel *A megújított Mongólia*, which was translated into English as *The New Mongolia*<sup>10</sup> in 1936, while several Mongolian translations and summaries have also appeared in recent years. Geleta designed the Bömbögör



1 József Geleta with three Mongolian friends

nogön ('round, green') theatre, the building of which was also used by the National Assembly, as well as the Urga power station and numerous public buildings:

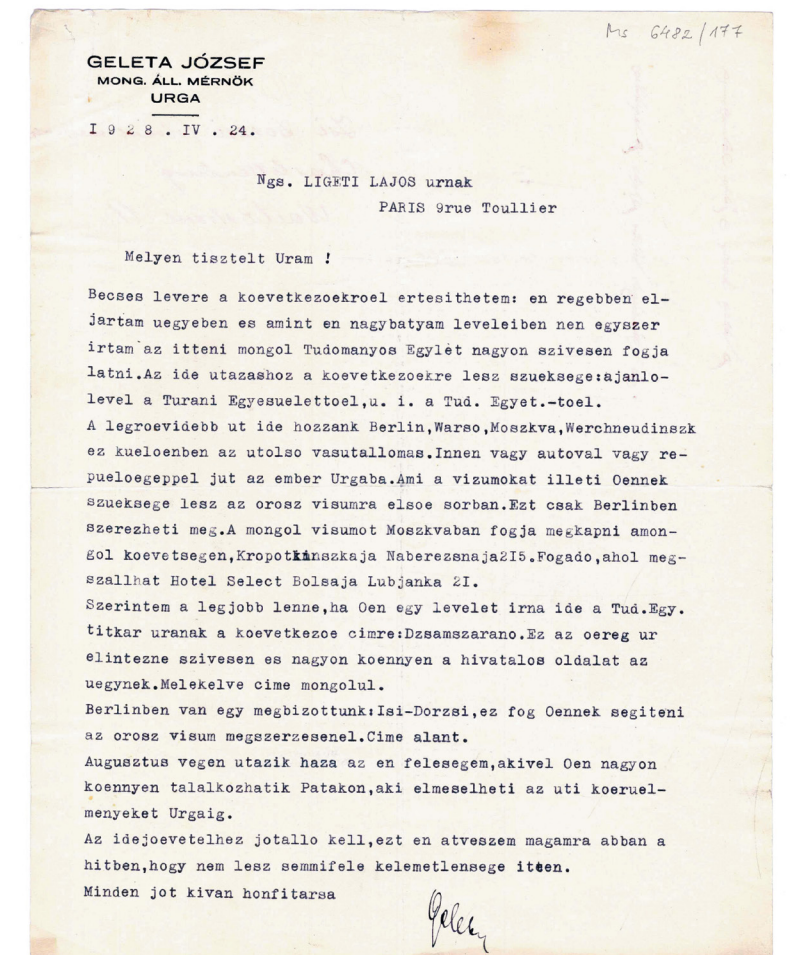
'I was commissioned to carry out the work. Within a few months the power works was completed... I was awarded the contracts to build Mongolia's first Parliament and theatre, in a competition in which one of my rivals was a reputable architect named Afanazich Sergeievich Kotov.<sup>11</sup> 'The most popular public institution is the National Theatre — designed by me — which also serves as their Parliament.'<sup>12</sup>

According to Forbáth, Geleta became a figure trusted by the Mongolian government. (fig. 2) He was appointed as a lecturer at the college in Urga and was given a good salary; he was permitted to take photographs, and he helped to transform the palace of the Bogd Khaan into a museum following the Khaan's death in 1924:

'It was at Dzun Chure [monastic quarter] that the sale of the last Bogdo Gegeen's effects took place... [one] large room contained a magnificent collection of some thousands of clocks and watches. When it was decided to convert the palace into a museum the work was entrusted to me... At the sale in question I bought an Austrian-made travelling bag, a fire-lighter and an enormous table-knife used by one of the Grand Lama's body-guards, an eight-foot giant.<sup>13</sup>

Besides the items mentioned above, Geleta managed to take home several objects from Mongolia, as well as objects that he acquired in China on his journey home. We have no information about how many items he brought back with him, although at the time of the Ferenc Hopp Memorial Exhibition in 1933,<sup>14</sup> ten items owned by Geleta were put on display. These were mostly articles for personal use, such as tableware and fire-lighters, although the materials in the exhibition also included three paintings, probably *thangka*. Unfortunately, these items were not acquired for the Ferenc Hopp Museum's collection, although a snuff bottle (*xörög*) (fig. 3) was eventually given to the museum by Geleta's wife.

Geleta's reminiscences and Forbáth's exciting account provide a faithful reflection of events in the 1910s and 1920s and the transformation of the world of the Mongolian Buddhist lamas and the enigmatic city into a modern world. The book contains around a hundred photographs: 55 on religious subjects, five on political or historical subjects, and 40 images of everyday life and landscape photographs.<sup>15</sup>



2 Letter on a letterhead sent by József Geleta from Mongolia to Lajos Ligeti

### ANDOR RADNÓTI (ROTH)

Miskolc-born Andor Radnóti, or Andor Roth (1893–1964), studied in Balassagyarmat<sup>16</sup> before being accepted to the Budapest University as a medical student in 1914. He became a prisoner of war but was liberated as early as 1915. He worked in the Red Cross hospital in Verkhne-Udinsk (later Ulan-Üde) and subsequently founded a Red Army detachment with his Hungarian colleagues. He worked as a doctor for the Hungarian troops near the river Selenge and was later the director of the hospital in Kyakhta. He married Ada Abramovna and they planned to return to Hungary via Mongolia and China. However, their plans were thwarted by the invasion of the Chinese Guomindang army and the incursions by the White Guardists. With the support of the writer and politician Ts. Dambadorj (1898–1932) and the Buryat intellectual C. Zhamcarano (1880–1942), Radnóti became acquainted with the leaders of the Mongolian revolution: he became the doctor of General D. Sükhbaatar (1893–1923), and at the same time one of the first representatives of modern medicine in Mongolia. In 1921, he fought at Kyakhta, and he was also a member of the Committee for the Assessment of War Damage under the direction of the provisional government of Mongolia, chaired by Kh. Choibalsan (1895–1952). As an advisor to the Mongolian People's Army, he was the director of its medical division. He also taught, although in 1922 he requested to be discharged from his state positions.



3 Snuff bottle (Khalkha: *xörög*)  
Mongolia, second half  
of the 19th century



As proved by his extant documents, on 1 April 1922 he received official permission to use three cameras 'for non-military purposes,' and he also owned a gun.<sup>17</sup> It was Radnóti who took the famous group portrait of the leaders of the Mongolian revolution (Sükhbaatar, Choibalsan and Khuva) and he also took photographs of the 1922 Naadam festival,<sup>18</sup> organised on the anniversary of the revolution, in which even the political elite of the time participated.<sup>19</sup> He also recorded for posterity the 1922 ritual procession of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, and Workers' Day on 1 May — in other words, historical moments of encounter between traditional culture and the beginnings of socialism.

Radnóti returned to Hungary in the 1930s. Before returning, he worked for a German–Mongolian trading company, and also practised as a doctor in China. In 1942, he was deported along with his family to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, where his son died. After 1956, he became a doctor for the Hungarian police and obtained the rank of lieutenant colonel. At the invitation of D. Tsevegmed, head of the Mongolian State Cultural Committee, he visited Mongolia in 1958 to inspect the work of provincial hospitals.

Andor Radnóti's Mongolian-language papers (as well as papers in Russian and Chinese), his personal correspondence and written accounts, as well as 66 photographs taken by him (30 on religious subjects, 15 of political figures and 21 landscapes and portraits) are held in the Hungarian National Museum.<sup>20</sup> Radnóti is regarded as a veteran of the People's Revolution by the Mongolian state. (fig. 4 and 5)

### PÁL BÁDER

Pál Báder, a young bricklayer from Budapest, was conscripted in 1913.<sup>21</sup> He was captured in 1915 and held in detention as a prisoner of war in Verkhne-Udinsk where he worked as a mechanic. He took part in the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 and worked as a border guard near Kyakhta. In 1924, he moved to Altanbulag, on the other side of the border, and from there to Ulaanbaatar. Working as a bricklayer, he took part in the construction of several buildings in Ulaanbaatar,

4 Buddhist pilgrims at the  
*stūpas* and prayer wheels  
behind Gandan monastery  
Nislesl xurē, 1922

5 Procession of Maitreya,  
the Buddha of the Future,  
with foreign (Hungarian?) participants  
Nislesl xurē, 1922v

including the university, hospitals, and schools. He returned home with his Russian wife and family in 1958. His son, Jenő Báder,<sup>22</sup> worked as a doctor in Ulaanbaatar, in the Mongolian People's Hospital: in 1955, he was head of the Department of Surgery and was awarded the title Mongolian doctor of merit. After retiring, he served at the Embassy of Hungary in Ulaanbaatar.

## JENŐ SALLAI

According to the recollections of Jenő Báder,<sup>22</sup> Jenő Sallai (maybe Szalai or Szalay) ended up in Mongolia having been interned in camps in Siberia, where he was given the nickname 'the German,' as a blacksmith with a reputation for being extremely precise and reliable. On leaving Ulaanbaatar, he lived in Altanbulag until the 1950s.

## JÁNOS MÉSZÁROS AND ... PÁNCZÉL

Based on the recollections of Jenő Báder,<sup>23</sup> two Hungarians were also living in Mongolia in the 1920s as training officers and military advisors for the Mongolian People's Army.

Tall and lanky, János Mészáros (d. 1956) was captured by the Russians in 1916. He joined the Bolsheviks, later becoming leader of the guard at Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow. He ended up in Mongolia as a result of army movements, and in the 1920s he participated as a military advisor in the training of the Mongolian cavalry. He later became an officer under the Horthy regime in Hungary. We have no further information about the other individual, apart from his surname, Pánczél, although we know that he took part in the training of the Mongolian People's Army in the early 1920s. (fig. 6)

## SUMMARY

In the 1920s, Hungarians living in Mongolia were not only witnesses of — and, thanks to their professional skills, also participants in — the historical, political, economic, and cultural transformation of the country, but their stories also evoke decisive moments in the lives of Hungarians both during and after the First World War. The events of one hundred years ago are still alive in the novel *The New Mongolia*, in the photographs taken by József Geleta and Andor Radnóti, and in the recollections of Jenő Báder, which record for posterity the unique meeting points in the histories and cultures of the two nations. This year, the Hungarian Embassy in Ulaanbaatar is erecting a commemorative plaque in honour of József Geleta and Andor Radnóti, on the centenary of the 1921 People's Revolution.



6 1 May or review of the troops with foreign (Hungarian?) participants Nistel xurē, 1922

## NOTES

- 1 Szilágyi 2011; Szilágyi 2013, 333–363.
- 2 'There are in the whole of Mongolia but few solid — i.e. wooden or stone — buildings, and even these are for the most part temples or lama monasteries ... Urga occupies 30 square miles to its 80,000 inhabitants.' Forbath 1936, 13, 137.
- 3 Birtalan et al. 2016.
- 4 For details of the Zichy expeditions, see Slobodník 2020, 17; see also the study in the present volume by Attila Rákos, 'Hungarian Expeditions in Mongolia and among Mongolic Peoples'.
- 5 On explorers in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, see Mészáros et al. 2017, 465–498.
- 6 On the shrines in the monastic capital city, see Teleki 2012a.
- 7 In the midst of the fighting between the Chinese, the White Russians and the Bolsheviks that took place between 1919 and 1921, several Hungarians may have attempted to return home via Mongolia, as also noted by József Geleta: 'In the vicinity of Chorin-Chure [the monastery of Čoirin xūrē in what is today the province of Dundgov', or Middle Gobi] ... I found a doctor's diary in one of the torn and bloodied pockets, one of the Hungarian prisoners of war had apparently joined the Chinese troops as a doctor and he too had met his death here.' Forbath 1936, 164.
- 8 For summaries and articles on a similar topic: Obrusánszky 2012, 103–122; Teleki 2012b; Teleki 2012c, 221–227; Teleki 2018, 61–75.
- 9 Nagy 1985, 311–312.
- 10 Forbath 1936.
- 11 Forbath 1936, 189.
- 12 Forbath 1936, 225.
- 13 Forbath 1936, 259–261.
- 14 Felvinczi Takács 1933.
- 15 The source of the pictures is not certain, and the captions are sometimes misleading. József Geleta's granddaughter, Gyöngyvér Bácskai, mentions the family living in several locations: Nógrád-patak, Kiskunhalas, Budapest. József Geleta is buried in the Catholic cemetery in Kiskunhalas, beside his wife and his daughter, Tatjana Geleta. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHSAE3VisNY>
- 16 Kara 1971. A brief biography of Andor Radnóti is also included in a Mongolian-language publication: Anon. 1969.
- 17 Kara 1971, 2.
- 18 On the festival, see Birtalan 2013, 11–16.
- 19 Several pictures were published. See Čulūn 2020, 219–241.
- 20 György Kara published 14 of the documents earlier held in the Museum of the Hungarian Labour Movement. In 2006, the Hungarian National Museum donated copies of the photographs to the Mongolian National Museum. In 2014, the Institute of History of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences signed an agreement with the museum on the publication in Mongolia of Radnóti's documents and photographs.
- 21 Károly Nagy recorded the interview with Jenő Báder in the 1970s. Nagy 1985, 307–316.
- 22 Nagy 1985, 313.
- 23 Nagy 1985, 313.



