

Mark & Judy's "Behind The Iron Curtain" Tour 2019
Part 3: Hungarian Goulash in Budapest



Our final Danube River destination: Budapest, Hungary. We have no idea what to expect!



Skies are overcast as we glide under the Chain Bridge on this early September misty morn.



Our first stop is the Hungarian Parliament, iconic symbol of Budapest.



Completed in 1904, it was a statement of the wealth & power of the Austria-Hungary Empire.



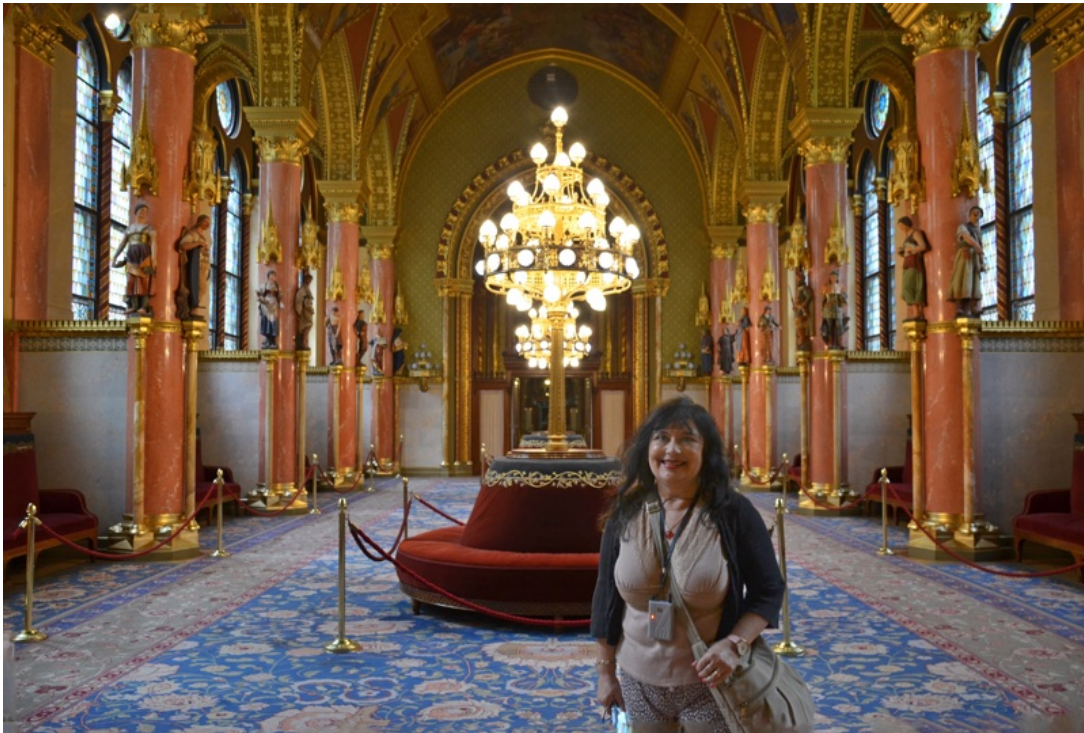
We think it's one of the most beautiful buildings in the world!



It has that dreamy fantasy fairy-tale-like exterior.... wonder what it's like on the inside?



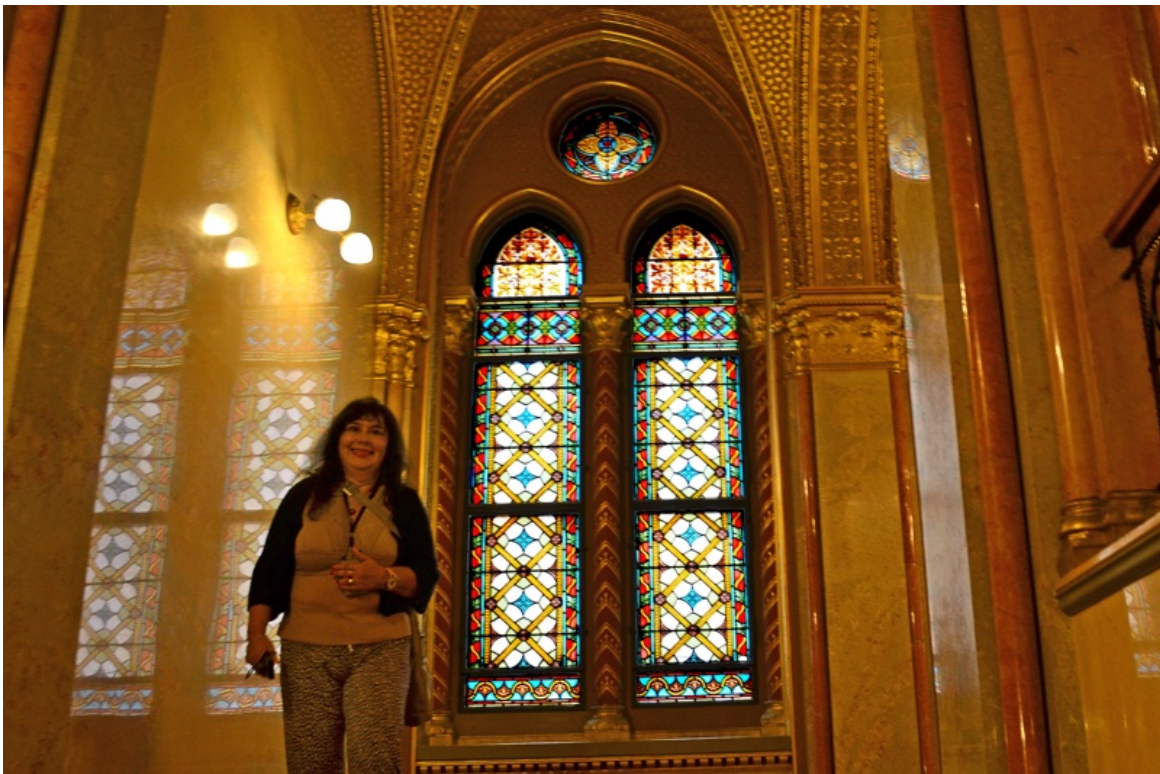
WOW—totally NOT disappointed! The Grand Entrance Hall, covered in gold leaf!



Just a little sitting room, quite informal....



View across the courtyard through a stained glass window (great shot, Judy!)



There is a lot of stained glass, and it's beautiful!



The Grand Assembly Hall, where the Parliament meets. Impressive!



A super-wide-angle panoramic view as we depart. Magnificent!



It's election season, and....



....finally, a politician who tells the truth! "Vote for me, I'm a real Schmuck!"



♪ “You can check out any time you like, but....” (you all know the rest)
Such a lovely place, I’m sure, but fortunately, we are not staying here.... instead....



We’re puttin’ on the Ritz! Top-shelf all the way with Tauck Tours! (Oh no, I didn’t pack my tux!)



We've got the afternoon free, so we strike out on our own to admire some of the city's eclectic architecture, most from the late 19th Century.





OK, it's not all so eclectic—remember, Russia dominated them from 1945-1989, and the Communists were not renowned for their contributions to world architecture.



This Beaux-Arts building was finished in 1898 to house the New York Life Insurance Company. It was renovated from 2001-2006 to become the New York Palace Hotel, now the home of....



The New York Cafe, billed as “The Most Beautiful Restaurant in the World”!
(there’s Judy standing at our table in the center)



And indeed it is! It’s like dining at Versailles!
(and like Versailles, it is mobbed with tourists—but I was smart and made a reservation on-line)



“Romeo, oh Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?”



Here I am, bay-bee!
We can't decide if this is true old-world elegance, or over-the-top tourist kitsch.
The answer — both!



The band plays a series of rousing Hungarian folk tunes and gentle lullabies for the diners.



They alternate sets with soft background piano music, mostly light classical and old standards, although I did catch the “Flintstones” Theme and Queen’s “We Are The Champions” in there.



We are right on time for Afternoon Tea! We start out with a bowl of Goulash, which in traditional Hungarian style is more of a soup than a stew (no noodles), with chunks of meat, carrots, potatoes, and of course paprika! Next—the dessert tower, with macarons, tarts, and strudel! Judy broke her diet for this one! Sooo worth it for only €60 total—and you get a show!



Back at the Ritz-Carlton, we exult in plushness. Hmmm... my Gypsy Queen says she's mixed up a special batch of Love Potion No. 9. See you later!



Later that evening we took a little stroll across the street from the hotel.
We're right next to the Budapest Eye, a giant ferris wheel .
(no, we didn't go up—probably should have.... oh well, next time...)



A preview of St. Stephen's Basilica, bathed in an eerie purple light. It's our first stop tomorrow.
Good night for now!



Inside the Basilica, it is awesome! It took 54 years to build, completed in 1904.



Stephen was the first King of Hungary, 1000 years ago. Born a pagan, he was baptized and became a devout Christian. For this reason he was declared a saint after his death.



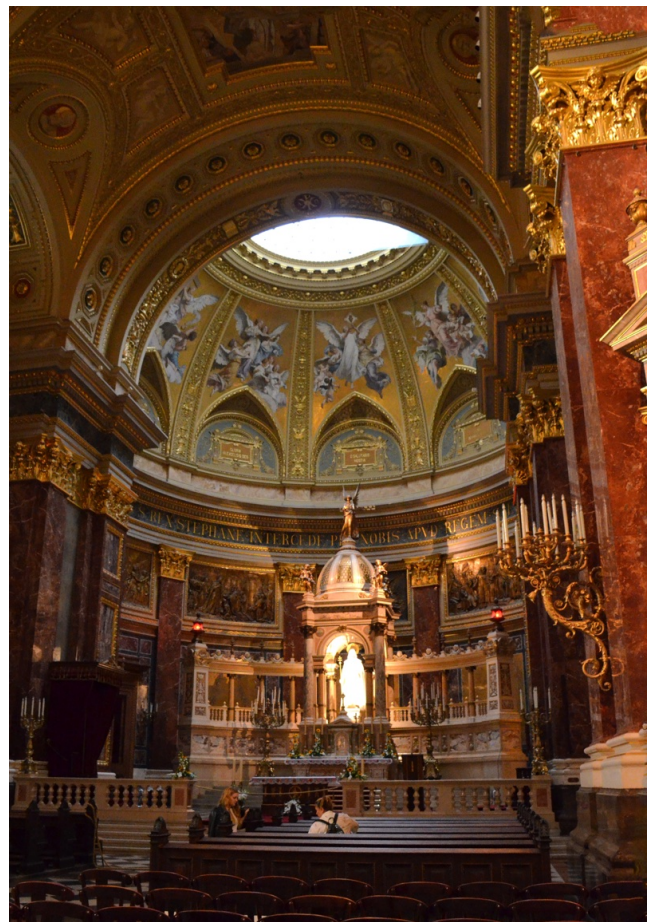
In this reliquary, the right hand of St. Stephen. Apparently this was quite the rage for Catholic churches back in the day. Judy tells me there was even a black market for body parts!



People line up to see it!
(In Budapest, when they say “Talk to the Hand” — they really mean it!)



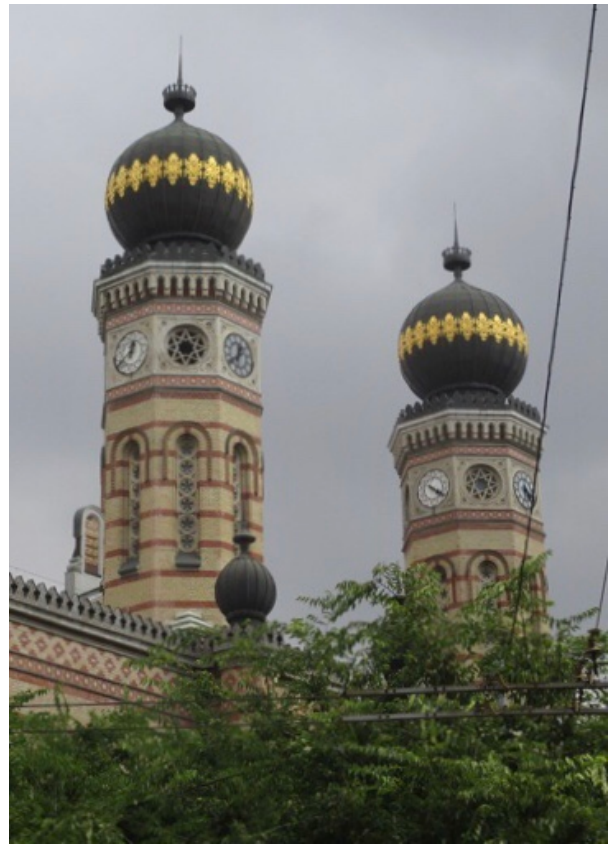
Above the reliquary, the saintly King pledges his crown & sword to his new religion.



It's another fabulous showcase of wealth & power. They just don't make 'em like this anymore!



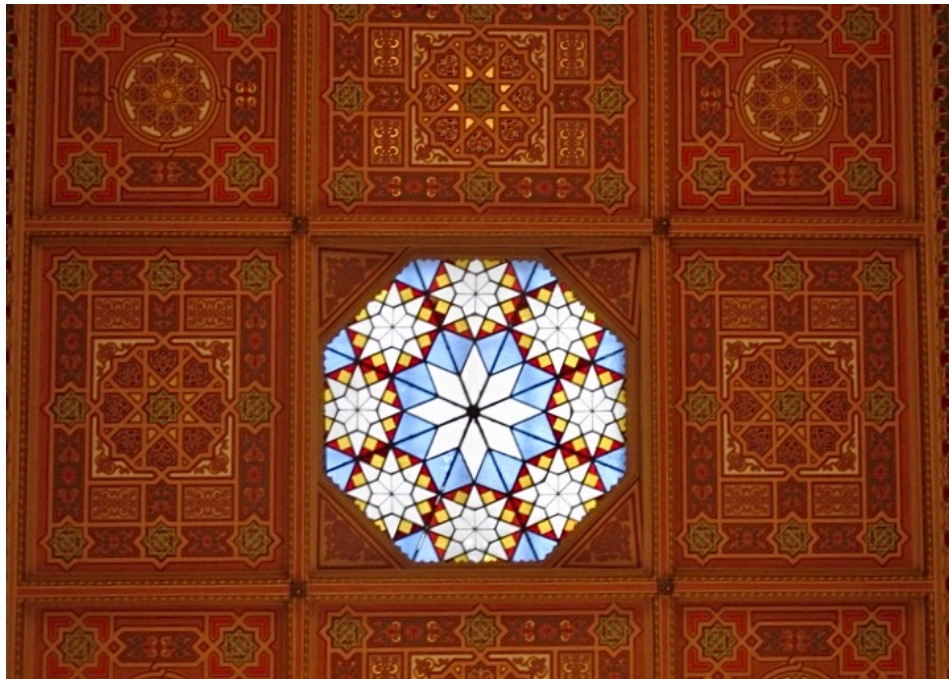
Equal time for my peeps! The Great Synagogue, largest in Europe. It can hold 3000 people.



Many 19th Century synagogues were built in the Moorish style. The architects weren't Jewish & had no basis in Judaism, so when they thought "Middle East", this is what they came up with!
The towers are like a hybrid between church steeples and minarets.



Inside it's elegant & majestic—but—it looks a lot like a church!
If you look closely at the arrow, there's even a pulpit, and we don't have those in synagogues.
There was a festival going on, and those big screens were unfortunately blocking the full view.



Close-up of the ornate ceiling and skylight.



The temple was heavily damaged in WWII. Fund-raising for restoration in the 1980's was spearheaded by Hungarian-American Jews Tony Curtis and Estée Lauder.



Glad they got some of that gold leaf for us Jews (although we probably got it wholesale)! Although I admit this is the closest I've been to a synagogue in years, it was gratifying to reconnect with the glorious history of my people in Europe.



Sadly, that history also includes the Holocaust. In the courtyard, memorial stones mark the mass graves of thousands of Jews who died from starvation & disease in the Budapest Ghetto.



The leaves of this stainless steel weeping willow are inscribed with names of families sent to concentration camps. At least 400,000 people were systematically exterminated by the Nazis. Horrible, horrible.



Fortunately there is now a vibrant Jewish neighborhood around the synagogue. It's estimated around 75,000 Jews now live in Budapest.



Great product placement, right across the street from the Synagogue. Since there was NO WAY it could EVER compare to a REAL New York Deli, I never even considered going in!



Back to church!

The roof of this church is covered with ceramic tiles made by Zsolnay, a venerated Hungarian porcelain manufacturer since 1852.

We would have liked to admire it for longer, except....

....it was pouring rain!

But we were prepared in our watertight raincoats. Hey, ya gotta be tough if ya wanna be a world traveler!

After all, come rain or shine, the Vacay must go on!





I capture a mirror selfie at the tour group's gala farewell dinner at a refurbished mansion. Judy is feeling warm and sentimental (or maybe she just had a little bit too much wine....)



We vow that someday we will return to this beautiful city!
Live for Vacay!