Traveling in Hungary using public transportation
as seen through the experiences of the Senns

After our initial breakfast in the hotel, we were anxiously awaiting our first foray into the city of Budapest. We each had our set of travel equipment. Mandy had five or six layers of assorted shirts, some type of leg warmers and insulated pants. She had a scarf, a coat, gloves and some earmuffs. To complement her clothing attire, she had a travel pouch that could clip to a belt or hang around one’s neck. I had a t-shirt, a long sleeve shirt, a coat, gloves and some earmuffs. My accessory equipment included my fanny pack equipped with two, 1-liter Smartwater bottles and a travel pouch. My fanny pack is quite roomy so I carried the maps, information booklets, compass (you never know), Franklin translator, granola bars (you never know), pen, paper, mints, first aid kit, camera and batteries. There was still some room for other small items that we might have opportunity to purchase.

Mandy spent immeasurable time preparing for our trip and had a great list of things for us to do. She decided that we would endeavor to go to the Buda Castle on our first day. In her preparation, Mandy also studied the Hungarian language so that she would be able to communicate. She quickly learned why Hungarian is one of the most difficult languages to learn. As we departed the hotel, Mandy asked the front desk attendant for directions to the castle. He started with one set of directions and then changed his mind to what he must have thought would be easier for us. As far as he was concerned, his English was fluent but from our perspective, he was a little difficult to understand. He provided us with the option of walking 200-300 meters in one direction or 150 meters in the other direction. He seemed uncertain of the location of the bus stop at the 150-meter location so we opted for the extra walk and the more certain destination. As we approached the Metro stop but were still quite a few meters away, the bus passed us, stopped at the sign and then departed. We were not sure how long it would be for the next bus and considered walking further. Instead, I took some pictures of the ornate buildings in the area. Soon, another bus appeared, stopped for us and we embarked on our first bus ride.

The next quandary to tackle was when to get off of the bus. We really had no idea so we stared out the window with hopes of seeing something promising. Our peering was soon rewarded when we saw some near vertical, train tracks that indicated we had arrived at the funicular. We exited the bus and headed for the funicular ticket booth. We scoured the information sign and determined that the price to ride the funicular up the hill was 500 Hungarian forint (HUF) and the price down the hill was 400 HUF. I decided that a ride on the funicular was a ride on the funicular and that one ride was plenty. Since we only needed one ride, it made perfect sense to me that we should ride downhill and save 100 HUF. That shouldn’t be surprising to anyone who knows me. I began to search for alternate transportation up the hill. We already purchased a Budapest Card, which enabled us unlimited use of the public transportation system for three days. The funicular was not part of the public system but I was confident that some form of public transportation was nearby and I was determined to discover it. I found a bus stop that looked as though a bus leaving from there would take us to the castle so we proceeded toward it. I was quite proud of myself when we got onto the bus, rode up the hill and got off the bus just
outside the other end of the funicular. Mandy was not terribly impressed but at least acknowledged the success of my endeavor.

We walked through the streets, visited a few small shops, turned down a ride in a horse drawn carriage (I am sure that it would have cost extra.), roamed around the castle and had a wonderful time. When we finished, we headed toward the funicular station. We walked down a street toward the station but could not find it. We backtracked, headed down another street but still could not find the funicular. We decided to try the first street again, went further down the street and finally located the station. We paid our fee and entered the funicular. It was a pleasant ride and I was able to set aside the additional cost so that I could enjoy the 80-second trip. When we arrived at the end I attempted to take a picture of the funicular system. In order to do so, I had to walk away from the exit. As I began to head toward the ideal location for my Kodak moment, a dutiful funicular employee grabbed my arm. This person began explaining something to me as I stood there with a mystified look on my face. I am sure that her Hungarian was wonderfully clear but all that I could say was, “Do you speak English?” She had a frustrated look on her face and pointed in the direction of the exit. Not to be outdone, I thought that I could out point this woman and, perhaps, still take my picture. I pointed to my camera and then up the hill to indicate that I wanted to take a picture. I also knew that my two points beat her one point so I was in the lead. She gave me a look and nodded. As our trip continued, I saw this look quite frequently on a variety of Hungarian faces. After a short time I began to speak out my interpretation of this look under my breath to Mandy. One catch phrase of the trip became, “Stupid American.” I am almost convinced that once people were certain that we were illiterate, they were saying, “Stupid American” in Hungarian. This was never enough to dissuade me and in the funicular situation I successfully obtained the picture I desired.

Much to the relief of the bottom end funicular station attendant, we exited the area. Across the street was the Chain Bridge. This was the same bridge that was the target of a night picture the evening before. It had a pedestrian walkway that allowed people to have a nice stroll across the Danube River and we decided to take advantage of this. When we were about half way across we noticed a significant increase in wind velocity and a related decrease in wind chill factor. We decided that while the walk across the bridge in early March was fun and necessary for the timing of our trip, a late spring or summer stroll would probably be more pleasant.

Our mission after leaving the funicular and crossing the river was to locate the open market. We determined that we needed to take the number 2 train along the Danube until we found the market. There was a stop for the 2 train next to the chain bridge and we were able to find the market very easily. We took a leisurely walk around the market. Most of the first floor was food with a very market-like presentation. There were dead animal carcasses hanging all over the place and much processed meat to augment the scene. The variety of fruit and vegetables was quite impressive and everything looked quite palatable. We were not in the grocery-shopping mode so there was not much of interest here. The second floor had the typical assortment of tourist junk and this was more along the line of what we sought. The items were quite pricey so we did not purchase many treasures there. After a time, we came across an area that had three or four stands of prepared food. It was mid afternoon and we were a bit hungry. After all, we were in Hungary.
(That was a running joke. The people in Hungary had heard the hunger joke theme so often that it had grown quite tiresome for them. It was new to me so I did my best to get significant mileage from my puns, much to the chagrin of those who lived there.)

The delectable selection of dishes was quite appealing to the palate. Mandy spied some goulash that resembled what she remembered her Hungarian grandmother preparing. She asked for a bowl and then asked what I wanted. As I was contemplating an answer to her question, I noticed a person behind the counter pick up a bowl that would hold at least 1.5 liters of Mandy’s selection. It was after 3:00 p.m. local time and I knew that we would be going to the Southard’s house for dinner. Mandy and I would have difficulty eating all of that goulash even if we didn’t have an impending dinner so I opted to share. As Mandy took the first bite, her face lit up with excitement. She exclaimed that this goulash was as nearly as good as her grandmother’s and she was excited. She immediately dipped the spoon in for a second time and moved it toward my mouth. I was impressed with the taste. Mandy noted that this version had beans but that her grandmother’s did not. In the end, she ate about 1/3 of the bowl and I ate the rest. Our bellies were full as we headed toward the exit of the market. At least I thought that was the case.

Mandy spied a bakery shop and decided that she wanted to see if they could match one of her grandmother’s special Hungarian cookies. We walked up to the counter and began to scan the selection. Mandy asked a question and received a puzzled look in return. It was clear that the person did not speak English and I thought this would be an interesting communication to observe.

Mandy pointed to two types of cookies that she wanted to purchase. The person behind the counter appeared to ask how many of them Mandy wanted. Mandy held up four fingers on one hand, held up two fingers on the other hand and said, “six.” The young lady behind the counter nodded and proceeded to put on a plastic glove. I was delighted to see her concern for the sanitary conditions but I was uncomfortable with the look on her face. She seemed like a woman on a mission and I decided to call her Olga. I noticed that the cookies were sold by the kilogram and based on the look on Olga’s face; I was concerned that she intended to sell Mandy six kg. of these cookies. I placed my hand on Mandy’s shoulder, leaned forward toward her ear and whispered, “I think you just ordered six kg. of these cookies!” Mandy turned toward me with a look of dreadfulness and quickly redirected her attention back to Olga. Mandy held up the same six fingers and repeated the word six a couple of times. Each time she repeated the word she thrust her hands toward Olga for emphasis. Olga nodded but still had the same determined look on her face. Mandy and I were both delighted when she stopped at six cookies, sealed the bag and placed it on the scale. She typed a few numbers on the register and turned the LED monitor toward us so that we could see the price. She didn’t even bother trying to communicate verbally and her face changed from a determined look to the SA look. That’s right, stupid American. Mandy paid her the money, accepted the bag of treats and we departed. As we walked away, I wondered if Olga really understood English. I found it hard to believe that she would work in this market, which was obviously a tourist magnet, and not be able to speak English. As we left with our goodies I thought I saw a sly look of self-gratification come across her face. Perhaps I read her wrong.
Mandy wasted no time opening the bag and enjoying the treats and she even shared them with me. She was once again very pleased with the wonderful taste of the food and the fond memories of her grandmother that the food conjured. Now we were both quite full. We moved from the market to another metro stop where we found a tram that crossed over a bridge to the side of the Danube where our hotel could be found. After exiting this tram we saw a tram that we thought would take us to our hotel. We were not very sure about the destination of tram 19 but we took it anyway. The tram headed in the right direction and we got off in the general area where we thought we could find our hotel, the Best Western Orion. We walked through a park area and arrived at the front door of our hotel. We were very pleased with our command of the Budapest public transit system and felt ready to tackle it again after a good night sleep.

The next day Mandy decided to go to the János-Hegy Libegő, which means “Janos Hill Chair Lift” in English. The Libegő would take us to the highest point in Budapest. At the top, there were some hiking trails and Mandy wanted to explore. She is such a sweetheart in that she was interested in the trails because she knew that I love hiking and being outside. We had been walking in Aiken to prepare us for walking in Budapest and hiking on some trails.

After a nice breakfast with eggs Gary’s way, we headed out of the hotel. We stopped at the front desk to ask the attendant how to find the Libego. He eagerly started to tell us how to go and then changed his mind. He mentioned a number of trams and buses that eventually became confusing. Finally, I took out a pad and paper and wrote down that we would take the 18 tram followed by the 56 bus. He directed us to go out the hotel door, take a right and get on the tram. We headed into the cold morning with anticipation in our step as we sought the tram.

When we arrived at the Metro stop that we used the night before, we noted that trams 19 and 41 were listed to stop there but there was no indication of tram 18. Could the attendant have mentioned the wrong tram? That was possible. Could I have written the wrong tram number? That was not possible, of course. Could we have been at the wrong metro stop? That was quite possible and we were not sure whether to get onto the tram hoping for the best or find alternate directions.

I love to ask people for directions and noticed some people standing nearby. Since Mandy was more capable with Hungarian (she knew 12 words and I knew 2) I decided to let her ask for directions and sacrifice my interest. As I looked at the people standing there and studied the person Mandy approached I was a little concerned. The gentleman, and I use that term loosely, looked a little rough around the edges and more apt to mug Mandy than provide helpful directions. My protector instincts kicked in so I positioned myself in such a way that I could quickly render her assistance. Fortunately, my initial impression of the gentleman was incorrect and he proved to be very helpful. He even spoke English, or so he thought. In comparison to the front desk attendant at the hotel, the front desk attendant was quite fluent.

We were able to surmise that we were to get onto the tram and head the way he pointed. It seemed like we were supposed to go two stops and get off. After that we were supposed to be at a main station where we could board a bus. We got onto the tram with our helper. His two associates each got onto different cars of the tram, which I thought was odd. After the tram was underway, our helper pulled a red, cloth armband from his pocket and placed around his bicep.
The band had some Hungarian words on it but none of them matched the two words that I knew. Oh, wait; I was up to three words! However, I was still unable to recognize any of the words on his armband. He now looked official, approached us and said, “Ticket please.” From our earlier encounter with him he knew better than to ask us anything in Hungarian.

Two stops later, Mandy and I disembarked from the tram and were accompanied by the three ticket checkers who joined us when we embarked the first time. The tram went on while Mandy and I stood there, mystified by our surroundings. It must have been clear to the ticket checkers that we were completely out of our element. We obviously could not even follow simple directions eloquently provided in our own language. One of these people was a woman, I did not notice her gender at first, and she approached Mandy to lend some assistance. She asked Mandy if we needed some help and then began a conversation. At the end of the conversation we learned that we disembarked too early. The gentleman who helped us initially gave us one of those SA looks as he made eye contact with his buddy. The next tram arrived within a few minutes and we boarded. The very helpful lady who had not given us the SA look began checking tickets at the other end of the tram. When she came to us we started to produce our tickets for her but she waved at us, gave us a look of familiarity and proceeded to the next person. We had made a friend in Budapest.

At each successive stop, Mandy and I searched for some clue that it was time to disembark. We did not want to get off too early again so we were hoping to uncover some definitive reason to leave the tram. At one stop just about everyone exited the tram. Mandy and I looked around and then made eye contact with our new friend. She said, “Must get now,” and motioned to the door. We thanked her and noticed that she now gave us the SA look. As I always say, if you don’t get the reaction you want, try, try again. We proceeded around the front of the tram and noticed why we had to “get now.” There were no more tracks for the tram. We took a few more steps and paused. There were a number of buses but none that had the number 56, as indicated by the front desk attendant at the hotel. Our new friend had disappeared into the crowd so we could not return to her for further instructions. My guess, however, was that she and her coworkers were somewhere close by where they could watch the activity of the SAs.

There was a common theme each time we received directions that day. We were supposed to do something at Moszkva Tér. We determined that we were at Batthyány Tér, which probably explained why there was no bus 56 in sight. Mandy selected another person to have the opportunity to provide us with assistance and pointed to the Libego on this simple map that we possessed. This person waved her hand at us and continued on her way. The next person tried to help and we heard that same Moszkva word again. This made us more optimistic and we were grateful to him when he pointed to an escalator that led downstairs.

The escalator led us to an underground connection system that was busy with human activity. We were immediately amazed by the amount of wind underground and how cold it was. We wandered aimlessly for a while and decided to descend another set of escalators that led to some other, deeper cavern. We discovered two trains headed in opposite directions with no obvious indication to us as to where they might be going. We were clueless. The trains departed and so did we. We returned to the upper level of the underground station. Mandy went to a ticket window and asked the person there for some assistance. She pointed to the set of escalators that
led down to the lowest dungeon from where we just came so we returned. An interesting note about this lowest level was that it was heated. Mandy was able to find a place under a vent that was nice and “toasty.” We had no idea what train to take so we stayed under the vent to allow Mandy to warm up. After she was a little more comfortable we headed back up to the main area where the ticket booths were located. When we got to the top of the escalator, we were asked for our tickets by a different group of authorities. I was very happy that we did not have single tickets because I am not sure we would have been able to explain why we went down stairs and back up without actually getting on a train. After our Budapest Cards were approved we contemplated our next move. Mandy asked an unsuspecting passerby for some assistance but was ignored. She thought about going back to the ticket booth person but felt silly about asking the same person for directions again. I was up for trying to figure it out on our own, since I enjoy asking for directions so much.

We headed back down the escalator to the warm center of this subterranean structure and found another warm vent. We stayed for a while and watched a few trains pull up to the station, stop to exchange passengers, and then depart to some unknown destination. Eventually, I made a very important discovery. After the trains departed and the tunnel was clear, words were visible on the opposite wall of the tunnel! I looked at these words and recognized two of them. One was Batthyány and the other was Moszkva. I also noticed a small series of arrows that I deduced indicated the direction the train on that side of the station would travel. In order to confirm my theory, I looked to the other side of the station, which was also trainless at the time. To my gratification, the same series of words was on that opposite wall. The series of arrows on that wall pointed in the opposite direction from those I first noticed. Now we were onto something.

In a short time another train approached that was headed toward Moszkva. We first noted its eminent arrival by the gust of cold air that blew our way as the piston-like action of the train forced the air in the tunnel toward us. We entered through the open doors of the stopped train and grabbed one of the leather straps to help us maintain our balance when the train moved. We prepared for our journey with a great sense of accomplishment. As we traveled to Moszkva, I wondered how many different people had used the same support strap onto which I now clung. I wondered where those hands had been. I wondered how many of them had some nasty form of Eastern European flu. I wondered how many hands had wiped a runny nose. I wondered as I wandered out under the ground.

Moszkva was the first stop after Batthyány so our ride was fairly brief. After leaving the train, we found another set of escalators positioned in a fashion similar to the set at Batthyány. Both places had four sets of escalators. In Batthyány, there were only two sets working, one going up and one going down. At Moszkva there were three working sets of escalators. Two took pedestrians upward and one took them downward. One nonworking set was partially disassembled, exposing the motors and mechanisms beneath. From this I surmised that the two nonworking sets at Batthyány might have also been broken and not just off because they were deemed unnecessary. At the top of the escalator, we found ourselves still underground. This time we had to take stairs to the surface so we proceeded to the fresh air above. We were greeted with a mass of transit possibilities. There were buses all around the square. There was a series of tracks circling the central area, indicating the end of a train line. There were various trams on the tracks with different numbers. Mandy found another person and pointed to the Libego area on her map. The person said, “56 two stops” and went on his way. I directed Mandy to wait
where she was as I investigated the trams. The last one on the circle was number 56, which matched the number we evidently were supposed to take. As I approached the tram it pulled away and passed me. I noticed that no one was aboard and I hoped that it was just moving forward to its proper pickup location. I began to follow the tram at a quickened pace, which happened to be back in the direction where I left Mandy. I saw Mandy heading across the circle with an apparent mission in mind. The tram stopped where Mandy was and I soon joined them. We decided to try this tram and found a seat. As we pulled from the station, we noticed a bus approaching. It had a big 56 sign on it, which caused Mandy and I to exchange looks of doubt. At the second stop it looked like we were in a residential area. Our recollection of a premature departure earlier was still strong so we decided to second guess our directions and stay on the tram. After a few more stops, we got to a busy area and decided to disembark. There was a mall across the street from where we were so we headed for it hoping to find someone who spoke English. We had been told that many of the younger people, younger than us of course, were able to speak English. We went to a small shop and Mandy asked the young worker how to get “here” while she pointed to the Libego on her map. The worker shrugged her shoulders to indicate that she did not know. It was unclear to us if she did not know how to speak English, where the libego was located or why she was being pestered by these SAs. We went to the next shop and found a very helpful young woman who spoke English fairly well. She was unsure about the location of the libego but walked to the next shop to ask someone. Finally, she informed us that we needed to get on the 158 bus to get where we wanted to go. We exited the mall area and proceeded to the bus stop. From where we stood, we could see a Shell station, MacDonalds and Pizza Hut. It struck me as funny to see this corner of America on a corner in Budapest.

We boarded the 158 bus and proceeded to the Libego. After a few stops, Mandy decided that we should get off. Across the street from the bus stop was a flower stand. It was evidently some kind of national women appreciation day so there were many flower vendors. This particular gentleman did not speak English very well but seemed to know exactly where the Libego was located. With a questioning look he said, “You…” and made a walking motion with his hands. We nodded and he pointed up the road with a look of dismay. Actually, it was probably another SA look. We started to walk up the road, which was at a steady incline. We walked about 500 meters and came to another bus stop. The road appeared to continue in a steady uphill climb and we thought we could see where the Libego might be some distance up the hill. We decided to wait for the next bus. Fortunately, we had gone around a bit of a corner and were now out of sight of the flower stand. Throughout this process, Mandy made continual reference to a tourist information book about Budapest. It was in this book that she learned about the Libego. While at this bus stop, Mandy found a very important sentence in an obscure location of the book that read, “Then take the 158 bus to the end just before the U.S. Embassy Residence.” It seemed as though we had a plan and we were finally executing it correctly.

The book was correct and we soon arrived at the end of the line for the 158 bus. A few meters away was the U.S. Embassy Residence complete with Old Glory flying. Beyond the residence we saw an unusually shaped building that we decided must be the Libego building. We went up the steps to the building, noticed the Libego sign and entered through the door. We finally conquered the public transportation system in Budapest.
After our Libego trip (you can read about that interesting journey later) we headed for the bus 158, metro stop. We were confident that our trip back to the hotel would be more successful than our journey that morning. Before we could get to the stop, we could see the bus approaching. It arrived at the stop before we did but the driver was kind enough to wait for us until we boarded. We took the bus back to Moszkva Tér, took the train to Batthyány Tér and took tram 19 back to the hotel. It was a piece of cake and we were quite pleased with our command of public transportation, once again.

Mandy decided that we would go to the Fatál restaurant for dinner. We decided that we could do this with three trams and we were correct. The next morning we planned to take a trip to Szentendre. This was another city some distance away from Budapest and required a 45-minute train ride. The problem would be to get to the proper train station. We were happy to learn that the train left from Moszkva Tér and we were now experts at how to travel there. We had no problem getting to Szentendre and back.

Our final experience with public transportation was after church on Sunday. We decided to take a trip on the Children’s Railroad. It is a tourist destination where children run every part of the train except the conductor position where there is an adult. We took a tram, a train, another tram and then the cog railway before we could get to the children’s railroad. I am happy to report that all went well. After the Children’s Railroad ride we even found an out-of-the-way restaurant called, Náncsi Néni that we planned to visit. The food was great. We made it home safely, quickly and without asking a single person for directions.

We were done with public transportation in Budapest and considered ourselves to be experts. After further consideration, I am quite amazed with the sense of accomplishment that we felt by simply figuring out how to travel around a city. It sure seemed momentous at the time.