

Beyond the “Pesti vicc”

Wikipedia is smart and simple. “A joke (or gag) is a phrase or a paragraph with a humorous twist. ... Jokes may have a punchline that will end the sentence to make it humorous.”

Unfortunately, this almost inexhaustible fountain of human knowledge does not have an article for a unique form of humour: the “Pesti vicc”, jokes created in the idiopathic social and cultural environment of the Hungarian capital. In this issue, the Budapest Business Journal launches a new series of articles to initiate its readers into the world of Pest jokes. We intend to explain the term, introduce its historical, social and cultural background. To make our explanations clear we shall use jokes as illustrations, although we are aware of two insurmountable obstacles: firstly, jokes must be *told* – its an oral genre, secondly, to appreciate political jokes one usually needs a profound understanding of the Hungarian social and political situation. Which, as many Hungarians believe, is a joke in itself.

A man dies and goes to heaven. As Saint Peter takes him around, he sees a huge room full of clocks. “Why do you need so much clocks?” the man asks. “These are not clocks but lie-detectors. If a person lies only a few times, the hand turns slowly, if he lies a lot, it turns fast.” “And where is Orbán’s watch?” “Oh, it’s in my room. I use it as a fan.”

To understand the peculiarity of the *Pesti vicc*, we first should try to define it. *László Erőss*, a noted Hungarian journalist compiled a book under this very title „*A pesti vicc*” (Gondolat, 1982). Erőss sums up its main characteristics as follows: in terms of style it is biting and critical; in terms of language it is fast and easy to understand; in terms of content it is cheeky, iconoclastic and sharp. *Róbert Takács*, a historian, in his essay *Pesti Jokes during Socialism* (Kétezer, 2006, Issue 7-8) recounts all the trivialities (Pest jokes breed on the asphalt / in the cafés; it always shows life with a twist; it is quibbling; it’s bourgeois, it’s blithe, it desecrates, etc.) before stressing the point: people are thirsting for laughter to dissolve stress. And stress is often induced by politics. The *Pesti vicc*, thus, was a form of “*jus mormorandi*”, the right to grumble, a form of protest against oppression or just the abuse of authority.

But what is it that makes the *Pesti vicc* so special? After all, jokes, along with anecdotes, funny stories and comic tales have become part of the folklore in almost every country of the world. On the net you can find thousands of joke collections about ethnic groups, professions, animals, family members, etc – yet, only one which is directly linked to a city.

Or more precisely: to a *part* of the city. *Pest* had been separated from the country’s capital, *Buda* by the river *Danube* until the first suspension bridge across the river was built in 1849. A flat, provincial town with inhabitants numbering only a few thousand people until the mid-19th century, *Pest* became an important trading centre and soon the engine of Hungary’s modernisation only after the unification of three separate small towns, *Óbuda*, *Buda* and *Pest*, in 1873.

László Erőss believes, the *Pest* joke is exactly the same age as the Hungarian capital itself. He claims, the *Pesti vicc* was born on October 30, 1873 at 11:04, when the document ratifying the merger of the three separate entities was signed to create Hungary’s new capital city. The grandiose event of unification offered an excellent opportunity for newspapers to poke fun at the shallow pompousness

and unscrupulous roistering of the celebrations. Joke magazines were full of vitriolic cartoons and accounts of the rollicking parties, balls and soirées. The jokes, full of scornful mockery, expressed the common men's disdain for the hideous showing-off of the riches.

At the time Pest's population was a strange mix. In the early 1800s, Pest had only 35,000 inhabitants. By 1850 this number had grown to 127,000 and soon after the unification, Pest alone had almost 300,000 townspeople. This huge growth was the result of an immense influx of landless villagers looking for jobs at construction works and in mushrooming factories on the one hand, and various ethnic groups including Germans, Czechs, Serbs, Romanians and Jews, attracted by new business opportunities on the other. This rapid growth also meant that there were relatively few "indigenous" inhabitants in Pest, most of those swarming into the town were strangers to it, strangers to each other.

Pest's rapid development also meant that, with most of its inhabitants being first-generation country folk, it remained somewhat provincial even by the end of the century. This, as Erőss puts it, made its society "drollly muddled", particularly in terms of cultural traditions. The freshly arrived urban dwellers looked at each other with curiosity, mixed with suspicion. They observed a grotesque strangeness in the others' accents, clothes and manners. Ridiculing others strengthened their group identity and made them believe they held the upper hand.

This odd social mix, this variety of cultural traditions and psychological effects, all combined, brought about the phenomena of the *Pesti vicc* – a real urban folklore.

Kohn and Grün meet in Váci street in 1963. They are both very glad to see the other. "You don't say Kohn, you are alive? The last time I saw you was in 1956..." "I was released just recently." "Goodness me! What did you do?" "I? I did nothing." Grün shakes his head. "Don't try to fool me, Kohn. For nothing, you could have got only three years."

The linguist *László Cseresnyési* points out another important attribute of the Pest jokes (A thesis about the Pest /Jewish humour. Kétezer, 2006, Issue 7-8). In 1910, 23% of the inhabitants of Budapest declared themselves to be followers of Judaism. The Hungarianised Jewry, says Cseresnyési, played a decisive role in shaping all aspects of urban culture, humour included. The emergence of idiopathic Jewish humour not only coincides with the accelerating assimilation of Jews at the end of the 19th century, but it is explicitly a product of it. The character of assimilated Jews was shaped by the ambivalent experience of social acceptance and exclusion. Humour can work only in an ambience in which it is evident that everything has its flip side, that values are relative and that human aspects are diverse, concludes Cseresnyési.

Behind Jewish jokes there is a peculiar *Weltanschauung*: twin currents of anxiety and scepticism, wisdom and melancholy. They are full of understatement and self-mockery. Always very critical, expressing a never abating affection for the freedom of thought. Like Jewish people, Jewish humour is optimistic in the long run, but pessimistic about the present and the immediate future.

Erőss also recognizes that the Pest jokes reflect a strong Jewish influence. "There's no Jewish culture without Jewish jokes and there's no *Pesti vicc* without the underlying spiritual ascendancy of Jewish jokes", he claims.