

Protagonists

Dezső Bánffy (Hungarian politician, who served as Prime Minister from 1895 to 1899) once asked Hungarian playwright and author Ferenc Herczeg why it was that while all opposition newspapers were so interesting, pro-government papers were all horribly bad and boring. Herczeg, who himself often contributed to papers, was a bit upset about this thinly-veiled hint and gave a smart reply: "The reason is very simple, Your Excellency. While opposition newspapers are written for the public, pro-government papers are written for you."

As explained in the previous part of this series, *Pest jokes*, as a genre, originate in traditional anecdotes. While an anecdote is usually a longer story, a joke is short, often surrealistic and fictional. Unlike anecdotes, jokes must have a punch-line. If they did not have one, they are called an anecdote.

The main difference, however, is that anecdotes are always based on a real incident involving *real* persons. Jokes always operate with fictional characters, some of which, popping up again and again, may become regular protagonists. In *Pest jokes* typical returning characters include:

- *Aristid and Tasilo*, two dumb noblemen;
- *Jean*, the dumb count's French butler;
- *Móricka* (little Maurice), a shrewed, naughty little Jewish guy, often making bawdy remarks;
- *Pistike*, another little kid, but not so smart;
- *Nyuszika*, the brainy Bunny and other members of the animal kingdom;
- *Kohn and Grün*, typical Pesti Jews;
- the *Székely góbé* (an indigenous Hungarian in eastern Transylvania) and his family. Talks little, a staid man with a very peculiar way of thinking;
- the *Gypsy* personifying all the negative features other Hungarians also have but would never admit.

The cradle of Pesti jokes

By the turn of the century, Budapest had grown into the tenth largest city of Europe. At this time, the Hungarian capital, with a population of 617,000, had 198 gin shops, 1,650 pubs and 570 coffee houses. Coffee houses, as such, played a key role in joke-making, as these were *the* places where the *literati* – journalists, playwrights, writers, poets, artists, etc. – came together and discussed the latest political issues, revelled in the latest sex scandals of celebrities and exchanged gossip.

Károly Szalai in his book "Satire and humour" writes: "...coffee houses from which the first jokes poured out into urban folklore were called 'coffee fountains'. Regular customers included newspaper editors, theatre directors, agents, dramatists, translators – in short, members of a social circle which was essential to shaping the satirical literature of this epoch. ... Their lifestyle – spending the entire day at the coffee-tables – also affected their works. What appeared in the newspapers and humour magazines, was, in most cases, written collectively."

In the enchanting world of Budapest cafés, the *Pesti vicc* found its true home. *Ervin Szabó* (1877-1918, librarian, journalist) wrote: “Yes! The coffee-house is the only large-scale cultural institute of Budapest. Cultural institute! Because it is democratic. It is available for all, for a few pennies... I can meet my friends, read the papers in a well-heated, well-lit, cosily arranged place.”

The constant bantering with each other and with outsiders produced fertile soil for jokes ridiculing with ruthless irony the pompousness and hypocrisy, the narrow-minded provincialism of urbanising gentry, the unbearable snobbism of *nouveau riche*, all the characteristics truly describing the rapidly changing social mix of Budapest.

Real or fictional stories, quips, gibes and the like were exchanged or noted down to be sent to newspapers and humour magazines. In 1912, there were already 24 humour weeklies and monthlies published in Budapest. These papers were filled by the best brains of the time, lavishing readers at regular intervals with scores of satires, parodies, *krokis* (another Hungaricum: a short story with a twist usually dealing with an actual issue), cabaret sketches, and jokes, jokes, jokes...

Aristid and Tasziló

In the earliest joke cycles the main target was the gentry: landowners fed up with the unexciting country life who moved to the city and tried to integrate themselves into the “upper crust” but lacked the necessary manners, education and refinement. Apart from *de genere* (often impoverished) counts and barons, there were hundreds of newly created noblemen, some receiving titles from Emperor Franz Joseph for their merits, some simply buying it for a few grand.

Contributors to humour magazines created fictional characters to personify dumb and thick aristocrats. For some mysterious reasons the two “counts” representing typical pre-war noblemen – foolish, lazy and conceited, of no use to society – were named Aristid and Tasilo. It would be interesting to know who created the first Aristid-Tasilo jokes. Unfortunately, your author’s persistent and thorough investigations to unfold this mystery to date have yielded no results.

The two names themselves must have been a source of laughter in those days. They were strange and weird-sounding for the Hungarian ear. Among *parvenus* a sign of snobbery was (and has remained ever since) giving foreign or foreign-sounding names to offspring instead of traditional and generally accepted Hungarian first names.

If it is true in general that a joke must be *told* otherwise it loses all its flavour and effect, then, for Aristid and Tasilo jokes this conclusion stands even firmer. Pseudo-aristocrats often spoke with “uvular Rs”, (similar to how the French pronounces “Rs”) a sign of priggishness and affectation. Jokesters, therefore, have to exaggerate this style of speaking to give an idea of the snobbery and narrow-mindedness of the character. Aristid and Tasilo jokes are usually dialogues, like this one:

*Aristid takes his friend to the races and begins to explain the rules. “You see Tasilo the eight horses at the start box. The one which crosses the tape first takes home the 10,000 pound first prize.”
Tasilo is surprised. “If that’s so, then why do the other seven stretch themselves?”*

Most of the Aristid and Tasilo jokes are based on puns and are typical examples of dry humour.

Aristid, in deep mourning, stands at a taxi station with a huge telescope hanging from his neck. "Hello Aristid...What happened?" "I'm waiting for a taxi. A relative of mine has died. I'm going to the funeral. " "But why you have this telescope with you?" "The deceased was a very distant relative..."

Many are peppered with sexual connotations and can hardly be printed in a decent publication like the BBJ.

After World War II, the abolishment of hereditary titles was soon followed by the elimination of the entire noble class. Although Aristid and Tasilo once or twice re-surfaced in updated versions of old jokes, they gradually disappeared from the mainstream: aristocrats, both clever and dumb, became the pariah of the classless communist society. They were pitied, but not despised any more. A joke could have begun like this: Aristid and Tasilo are quarrying stone together in the Recsk forced labour camp.... But by then, many of Budapest's legendary joke makers were dead and their beloved coffee houses had also transformed into dismal and uninspiring bistros and espresso shops.