

A Night at Burg Bernstein

— Delving into Austro-Hungarian History —



by Duncan JD Smith

30

Straddling the border between Lower Austria and Burgenland, Austria's easternmost state, lies the *Bucklige Welt*. This "hilly world", where the last ripples of the Alps give way to the Puszta, was for centuries the fortified borderland between East and West. Here were the marchlands of the Holy Roman Empire, where sturdy castles (*Burgen*) and buttressed churches protected Western Europe — Christendom — from Avars,

ABOVE: Burg Bernstein stands on a prominent crag in the hill country of Austria's Burgenland region (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

Magyars, Mongols, and Turks. Hungarians call the place *Őrvidék*: the Land of the Sentinels.

Of the fortified castles in this region, the most alluring is Burg Bernstein. Some say it is named after the *Bernsteinstrasse* (Amber Road), an ancient trade route used to transport amber from Baltic shores down to the Mediterranean. Attractive though this notion is, the geography just doesn't fit. Others have suggested the name is derived from the Old German for 'burning stone' but proffer no reason as to why. What is certain is that, until the end of the First World War, when

the area was ceded to Austria under the Treaty of Trianon, Burg Bernstein lay squarely in Hungary, hence its original name, Borostyánkő. The sleepy village of Bernstein im Burgenland sits on the Kaltenecker Landesstrasse, a gloriously scenic road that runs south from the Vienna-bound B55. It comprises little more than a cluster of houses, two churches, a café and a mineralogical museum. Beyond the tiny main square, a tree-lined avenue sweeps up to the red-roofed castle, perched aloft on its wooded crag.

The story of Burg Bernstein and those who have lived here is a long and tumultuous one. The bare bones can be found in history books but the real colour can only be gleaned first-hand. Fortunately the guardians of Burg Bernstein have for almost a century welcomed travellers, regaling them with intriguing tales of the place. The current incumbents, Alexander and Andrea Almásy, are no different. They welcome their guests warmly in the castle courtyard — itself already a world apart — where the story of Burg Bernstein begins to unfold.

The castle is first documented in the late 12th century and was for several centuries juggled between Hungarians and Austrians. Thrice it resisted Turkish siege only for its Gothic keep to be destroyed in the early 17th century, when the powder magazine exploded. The surviving 15th-century bastions were then given the present oval-shaped baroque accommodation range, which clings to the irregular contours of the crag.

Burg Bernstein was sold in 1644 to the great landowning Batthyány family, whose crest adorns the main staircase. It was they who installed the magnificent *Rittersaal* (Knights' Hall), with its equestrian reliefs, where today's visitors dine by candlelight. After passing briefly through the hands of Edward O'Egan, the Batthyány's profligate Irish manciple, the castle was then sold in the early 1890s to Eduard Almásy (1836–1917), an untitled relative of the rich Hungarian Counts Almásy.

RIGHT: One of the traditionally furnished public rooms at Burg Bernstein (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

Eduard, Andrea Almásy's great-great-grandfather, was attracted not only by the semi-feudal life that still existed here, and the good hunting, but also the fact that Burg Bernstein stood at the end of the Eurasian Steppe, which stretches away eastwards all the way to Manchuria. For Eduard was an explorer and ethnographer, who spent time in China's Tien Shan Mountains searching for the origins of the Magyars. His was an important quest at a time when Hungary was seeking to reaffirm its nationhood and break free of Habsburg rule.

STAYING AT BURG BERNSTEIN

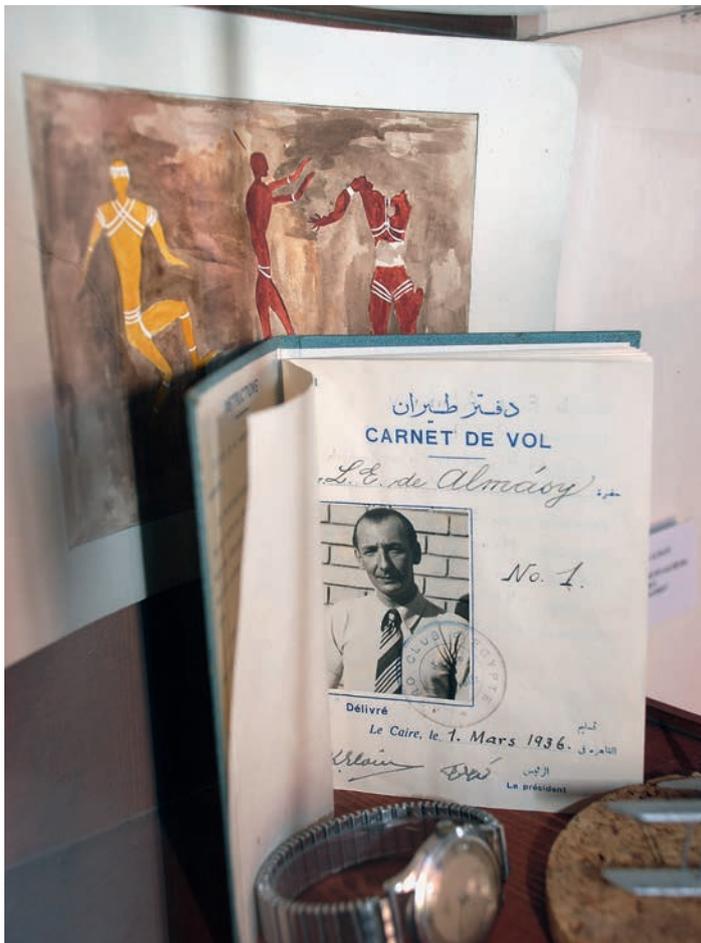
When night falls at Burg Bernstein it does so with gusto. Guests retire to their accommodation on the first floor — and it is there the stories really begin. The well-appointed suites have scarcely altered since the 1920s, and consequently nor has their atmosphere. Television and telephones



have no place here, and the only heat comes from antique tiled stoves fuelled from the corridor outside, all so as not to detract from an ambience now rare in Austrian castle hotels. Three suites warrant special attention for the characters that once occupied them.

The first is the Nussbaum Suite. With its robust vaulted ceiling, this surviving fragment of the original castle was once used by Burg Bernstein's most famous son, László Ede Almásy (1895–1951). Like Eduard his grandfather, László craved adventure and obtained his pilot's licence whilst studying at Graz Gymnasium. After that he spent three years in Eastbourne, England learning English, then returned to Hungary in time to become an observer in the fledgling Austro-Hungarian air force.

A collection of personal artefacts belonging to László Ede Almásy (photo © Duncan JD Smith).



The well-appointed suites have scarcely altered since the 1920s, and consequently nor has their atmosphere. Television and telephones have no place here, and the only heat comes from antique tiled stoves fuelled from the corridor outside.

Dismayed at the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (most Magyar aristocrats were Habsburg loyalists), in 1921 he drove the last Emperor-King, Karl, from Switzerland to Budapest in an attempt to regain the Hungarian crown. Although the mission failed, László was granted a title for his efforts, albeit one only dispensed orally.

So it was that the self-styled Count L. E. de Almásy swapped a rapidly changing Hungary for Egypt, where he was appointed the Graz-based Steyr Motor Company's agent. As keen on driving as flying, he offered motor tours to local pashas and well-to-do tourists, developing a passion for desert exploration in the process.

It was in this capacity that László set out to locate the fabled oasis of Zerzura, first mentioned in mediaeval Arabic texts. Whether he was successful or not is a moot point but along the way he did find the Cave of the Swimmers. This prehistoric rock shelter in the Gilf Kebir, an unexplored plateau on the Egyptian-Libyan border, is decorated with extraordinary paintings of men apparently swimming, suggesting this part of the desert once received abundantly more rainfall than it does today. The story provides the backdrop for Michael Ondaatje's 1992 novel of desert passion, *The English Patient*, and the film of the same name in which László is played by Ralph Fiennes.

Back at Burg Bernstein, one of several display cabinets in the corridor outside the Nussbaum Suite contains some of László's personal effects. They include his Egyptian pilot's license, wristwatch, cigarette case, and a watercolour he made in the Cave of the Swimmers (a wall plaque in the castle gatehouse records how the Arabs nicknamed him *Abu Ramla*, Father of the Sands).

Another cabinet contains artefacts pertaining to László's older brother, János Almásy (1893–1968), who occupied what is today the Pascha Suite. A very different character to László, he was more of a businessman, always on the lookout for ways to replenish the castle coffers. One of his ventures was the Styrian Jade Company. Exploiting an abundance of locally mined serpentine, a green-

RIGHT: The horoscope in the courtyard at Burg Bernstein was cast and painted by János Almásy (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

grey mineral that carves easily, János cleverly passed it off as jade to gullible buyers in faraway England.

One of the best Burg Bernstein stories concerns the sales agent secured by János for this venture, who made the long journey by train and horse-drawn carriage all the way from London to the castle. Bram Stoker's Gothic horror novel *Dracula* was enormously popular at the time, and the agent's journey eerily matched that of fictional solicitor Jonathan Harker on his way to Transylvania. One can only imagine the agent's horror, when upon arriving at Burg Bernstein during a storm he was greeted by János wearing his favourite black cloak! The agent kept his stay short, refusing to sleep in the castle at night, and soon fled. The ghoulish János took delight in memorialising the event by scorching the name 'Dracula' over the fireplace in the family's private library! János certainly had a devilish streak. He cast and painted his own horoscope at the far end of the castle courtyard and allegedly conducted a dalliance in the 1930s with Unity Mitford, the English socialite known for her admiration of Hitler.

János' wife through all this was Mária Róza Prinzessin Esterházy von Galántha (1900–1971), who for half a century occupied the aptly-named Prinzessin Suite. Following a horse-riding accident and a bout of polio, poor Mária was confined to



a wheelchair. Her former bedroom still contains a signed communication from the Pope, and a Madonna hangs in the hallway outside. This is supplicated by the castle's resident ghost, that of one Catarina Frescobaldi, who died in the castle in 1480, which flits along the corridor with impunity. Like all good castles, a night at Burg Bernstein just wouldn't be complete without a ghost rattling around the place! ■

Duncan JD Smith is an urban explorer, travel writer, historian, and photographer. He is the author of the 'Only In' guides, a series of guidebooks that probe the hidden corners of various cities. Find out more about the guidebook series at www.onlyinguides.com.

VISITING BURG BERNSTEIN

Rooms at Burg Bernstein, including those once occupied by Eduard, László, János and Mária, are all available to rent (ghost included) from late spring until October by contacting www.burgbernstein.at. The 2018 season starts on 1 June. The distinctive castle gardens filling the old moat are also open to visitors and add much charm to the scene.

The village of Bernstein is well served by bus. From Vienna, it is about a two to three-hour journey

by bus to Bernstein, normally with just one change of bus along the way (which may be at Oberschützen, Oberwart or Eisenstadt). Since the closure in 2011 of the Pinkatalbahn (Pinka Valley Railway), Bernstein has been trickier to reach for dedicated rail travellers. The nearest railway station is at Friedberg, but bus connections from there to Bernstein are abysmal. Buses to and from Hartberg station are better, but still require a change of buses.