



## THE ORBAN BROTHERS

By WERNER BERGENGRUEN

*Many modern German short stories favor historical topics. The author of this one, who is well known in modern German letters, has chosen 1453, one of the decisive years in Occidental history, for the period of his story. Telling it with masterful restraint, he has interwoven the fate of nations with that of a historical personality, Orban the gunsmith, and his new weapon.—K.M.*



**J**OHANN Hunyadi, Governor of Hungary, had in his service twin brothers by the name of Orban, hot-blooded men with active minds, deeply devoted to each other until a girl brought discord between them. In the events which we shall narrate here, this girl will have no part, or the most important part, according as to how you look at it, and will remain nameless.

Although the difference in age between the brothers was no more than a quarter of an hour, they are called the older and the younger in this story, as their given names have not been handed down and are anyway a matter of indifference. For a man's given name is often enough a coincidence and an outward attribute; but with his family name a man is bound up in such a way that it is not the name which appears as part of his character but rather the man himself who appears as part of his family name.

The older of the brothers was a scribe versed in law and in negotiations, the younger a master gunsmith. The art of casting and setting up cannons was held in high esteem; whoever mastered this art was considered to be worth more than five noblemen since, after all, every king could create hundreds of the latter by a word or letter.

At that time, envoys of the Byzantine Emperor appeared in all Christian countries to persuade the rulers to send aid to the threatened city of Constantinople; where they did not succeed in this, they sought at least to enlist proven experts in the art of fortification and ballistics, holding out great promises to such men.

An offer of this kind was also submitted to Orban the younger at a time when he was occupied with dubious and unkind thoughts about his own fate and that of his brother and the girl. He listened to the envoy and promised him a reply for the following day. The envoy left, and an hour later a Turk appeared in his place. For between Hunyadi and the Sultan there was at that time a peace treaty covering a number of years, and at Hunyadi's court there were sometimes Turkish delegates to be seen. Orban the younger did not give a definite reply to this Turk either.

Now the younger brother went to the older and told him about the two offers. The conversation took place in the study of the older brother, before whose door the younger had seen the little lapdog which his brother had presented to the girl. Hence, when he had finished his report, Orban the younger said:

"I wouldn't like to stay here, I suppose you can understand that. Perhaps we shall be able to live together again as friends some time in the future. Now all I ask of you is that you advise me which offer to take, as you are more experienced in such matters than I am. And then you must also see to it that the Governor releases me from his service."

Orban the older arranged for both the brothers to be received on the following day by the Governor. Johann Hunyadi said: "I have nothing against your trying your luck elsewhere. My country is at peace, and I am glad to save a salary. If you wish to return later, I shall take you on again."

Hereupon the brothers asked the Governor to decide which offer the younger twin should accept. The Governor said: "Everybody knows that I have been at war with the Turks since I was able to lead an army

and that I shall also be at war with them in future until I cannot lead an army any more. Hence it should be my wish that your art be used in the defense of the Christian city of Constantinople. But I am also old enough to know, that in all the entangled affairs of men and states, black and white are never as clearly defined as on the squares of a chessboard. You have probably heard of the strange prophecy made to me by a Byzantine pilgrim when, after the battle of Kossova, I had to flee secretly through enemy country and had reached the depths of my misfortunes: namely, that the Christians would never be able to live in peace until the Greeks were exterminated and that, in order to put an end to the mishaps of Christianity, it would be necessary for Constantinople to be destroyed by the Turks. So decide as you think fit."

Hereupon the younger brother accepted the Greek proposal, although the Turkish one offered him greater advantages. With the Turks, so he reasoned, he would as a Christian be entering upon too uncertain conditions, and it would anyway be more fitting to live among and to help Christians.

The brothers embraced each other at parting, and the older one said: "I do hope that God will protect you. If anything should happen to you it would weigh upon my soul. But the girl is stronger than I, and I cannot do without her yet."

**O**RBAN the younger arrived in Constantinople and marveled at all the pomp and splendor there. He was given a magnificent apartment, with walls of Greek marble—only that there were no servants. He was provided with a spacious foundry—but the tools were dilapidated. He made urgent requests for new equipment; but the Greeks smiled at his zeal, and the high officials let it be noticed that he was making a nuisance of himself. At the same time, however, they lamented about the huge siege fortress which the Sultan was having erected on the Bosphorus, and said: "It won't be long before the encirclement of the city is complete and the siege starts."

The Emperor was still in contact with the regions of the West, so that fresh arrivals were still joining his army, among them recruits from Hungary, some of them being people from

the gubernatorial court who were acquainted with the Orban brothers. Although the younger twin tried to go out of their way, he could not avoid hearing about his brother and his love affair. Thus he was not allowed to forget his unhappiness.

Across the Golden Horn, opposite Constantinople, lay Galata, a trading center of the Genoese. Surrounding it were fields and meadows belonging to the citizens of Constantinople. For his work, Orban frequently required things he could not obtain in the imperial capital, no matter how urgently he requested them; the signature of some official was lacking, or the request had first to be submitted to some authority. So he got into the habit of making purchases among the Genoese of Galata, although it appeared doubtful to him whether he would ever get back his money.

Men from Constantinople had come to look after their fields at Galata. They met Turkish horsemen who were grazing their beasts in the wheat; a quarrel instantly flared up, blood flowed, and this was the first clash in the long struggle for the imperial city. Orban happened to be on the way to one of his Genoese merchant friends. He noticed the crowd, heard the shouting, and hastened to the spot. Both sides got assistance. Finally the Turks drove many of the Greeks off with them as prisoners. Among them was Orban.

The column met Mohammed, the Sultan of Sultans, whose face darkened with rage. He was still too young to show mercy and ordered the prisoners to be killed. As he rode on he turned back, and his glance fell upon Orban, who was not dressed in the Greek fashion. He beckoned him and asked: "Who are you? What are you doing among this rabble? Don't you know enough to keep away from them?"

Then he ordered a horse to be given to Orban, who had to ride next to the Sultan so that the latter should lose no time. The Sultan asked: "How much does the Emperor pay you?"

Orban named the sum. The Sultan said with an angry laugh: "I would give you five times as much. Nor should you believe that you would be the only Christian in my camp. There are thousands of them who think themselves lucky to serve me. But I leave it to you whether you



will stay with me or return to that Emperor."

Orban did not reply to this. But he thought of what the Governor had said to him; he thought of the prophecy and of all the obstacles he had been faced with in the imperial city. He also thought of what the men arriving from his native place had told him.

The Sultan began again: "All the cannons I have used or seen up to now have not satisfied me, and I have despised those who cast them. Why is it not possible to cast cannons of such a size and such mighty effectiveness that no wall in the world can stand up against them? Is it because men are afraid of bold ideas?"

Orban replied: "For that reason, and also because most military leaders are not able to provide the necessary funds. For the cost and the difficulty of the casting, of moving it and working it, would be so tremendous that many a prince might have to forego all other artillery for the sake of this one cannon."

"That does not bother me," said the Sultan. "Whoever undertook to cast me such a gun would have everything he required, and even more, at his disposal. You are the first to speak like that. I have questioned many experts on ballistics, and they all hastened to prove to me by intricate calculations that it would never be possible to make such a cannon, or at least to discharge it without danger."

"It is possible," said Orban.

The Sultan examined his face, just as he had examined his knowledge and experience before. Then he asked: "Do you think you can do it?"

Orban trembled at the magnitude of the vision which arose before him. He remained silent for a while. Then he said hoarsely: "I will cast the cannon."

**M**OHAMMED had his foundry in Adrianople. When Orban arrived, endowed by the Sultan with unlimited powers, it was night. He had torches lit, inspected the foundry, and gave his instructions. Before daybreak eighty men were already working to tear down the walls, for the foundry was not large enough to hold a casting of such size. Then only did Orban retire to rest. And from then on he had no more thoughts for the girl or for his brother.

The new building was erected, the huge smelting oven was built and tested, the casting form lay in the ground, the dry wood was piled up. This was two months after Orban's arrival in Adrianople. He sent a messenger to the Sultan: the casting could begin.

Mohammed rode for fourteen hours on relays of horses. Then he entered the dark foundry, which received its light from the red fire holes of the oven. He knew that many experts had advised him against this enterprise, saying that it was impossible to cast such an enormous object in a single casting. A tiny error, a slight blocking of one of the windpipes, would be enough to blast the foundry and the whole town of Adrianople to high heaven.

Orban showed him all the details of the casting, while he and his helpers and servants, sprayed by red sparks, stirred the bubbling mass of molten ore. Mohammed seized a long stirring pole and joined in the work. Nor was it beneath his dignity to pull the huge bellows.

The melting metal hummed, sang, and roared. Floor and walls began to tremble softly. At last Orban said in a low voice: "It is time."

The Sultan cried: "There is no God but God and no one is his equal!"

With that he grasped with his two hands the heavy iron ramrod which was suspended by chains and drove the plug of the outlet opening into the oven. The glare shut every eye. The white, foaming molten stream roared into the stone trough above the form and hissed down through the casting holes. The air howled as it escaped through the windpipes.

It was quiet and dark. The vast weapon, matching the vast spirit of the conqueror, was cast.

The Sultan made a sign to one of his followers, who spread a prayer rug on the ground. Mohammed threw himself down and remained in this attitude for a while. Then he rose and quickly went out without saying a word. On the following day he sent rewards and presents.

**S**TANDING in the crowd of visitors and admirers, Orban remained taciturn and frowning. He had lived through these months as one possessed. Now that the casting for which he had worked, calculated,

and fevered was completed, he felt a desolate emptiness growing in his heart. And just as the white-hot metal had shot into the empty form and taken possession of it, so all passion, all anger and pain over the girl, his brother, and his own disrupted life suddenly flowed back into his vacant heart.

The cannon was without ornament and as somber as a rock. There was no sign, no embellishment, to indicate its creator, as was the custom, for in Orban's thoughts there had been no room for adornment. Now, however, in his mood of dejection it occurred to him to leave behind at least a monument to his unhappiness. Perhaps in this way he could transfer it from his soul to the metal. In those days, when every gun was still a beautifully executed single piece, the art of casting cannons was allied to that of casting sculpture, and Orban also had some knowledge of decorative casting. So he created a hoop several feet wide which he welded around the mouth of the cannon. On it the coat of arms of his family appeared twice, representing the two brothers; between the two escutcheons stood a female figure, separating them. The coat of arms was surmounted by a striking arm with a sword; over one of the escutcheons Orban turned it around, so that the two faced each other with swords drawn. He applied a number of similar symbols in relief. While doing this, he was seized by a passion for sculpture which no longer allowed him to think in terms of powder and shot.

This is how Orban filled that empty period before preparations for the transporting of the cannon were completed, a period which, although requiring his co-operation, did not need his full attention. This period lasted for some time, regardless of how Mohammed tried to hasten the work; for the Sultan believed that the mere sight of the cannon must instill his army and its leaders with the utmost confidence in victory. The fact was that the confidence of his men had diminished, since up to then all bombardments and attacks had gained nothing but a few unimportant outer fortifications. The men often talked of how in eight hundred years this city had been besieged by the believers in the Prophet twelve times without being subdued once. Indeed, during the third of these sieges, which had lasted for seven years, Ejub himself, the standard-bearer of the Prophet, had fallen unvictorious before the walls of the Emperors. Others, again, especially the dervishes, spoke elo-

quently of that ancient prophecy: "Ejub will return from the Occident, he will be torn asunder by flames, but they will not keep him. He will rise again, and the city will be ours." Thus, just as among the Christians, there circulated among the Turks too a prediction concerning the fate of the city.

At last the procession started off. It is two days' march from Adrianople to Constantinople; to cover this distance with the cannon took two months. Seventy pairs of oxen drew it, and two hundred men walked on each side to keep it balanced with the aid of taut ropes. Five hundred men had worked to reinforce the bridges and the roads. The diameter of the barrel was twelve spans, and each of the balls, which were quarried from the black rock of the coastal mountains, weighed twelve hundred-weight.



This cannon was placed in front of the city of Constantinople, opposite the Gate of St. Romanos, to this day still known as the "Gate of the Cannon." On the eve of the first shot a Venetian spy was discovered hiding in the barrel. The Sultan ordered him to be bound at dawn in front of the mouth of the gun. It took two hours to load the cannon, so that the work was started while it was still dark. The time for the shot to be fired had been announced to the whole army, in order to prevent men losing the power of speech and pregnant baggage women their unborn children because of the thunder. Mohammed was present with his highest dignitaries. The red sun rose above the city. The Turks said their prayers; Orban crossed himself and bowed his head.

The Sultan cried out loud: "There is no God but God and no one is his equal!" Orban released the shot. The earth trembled.

The men all thought they had gone deaf. The first thing they heard was the dismayed cry of a gunner: "The cannon has cracked!"



Then they heard the groans and whimpering of injured men.

"Orban has been torn to pieces!" came a cry. "No, it is the Venetian!" called others. "No, Orban, Orban, he can still be recognized!"



All these cries were uttered in confusion and terror, and no one knew whence they came. For no eye could penetrate the immense cloud of smoke, and all felt as if they were staggering through the night. Mohammed silently groped his way through darkness and disorder. His spirit was so rent that he felt unable to bear the sight of a human face. He refused all attempts to accompany him, got to his horse, and slowly rode into the desolate plain, incapable of raising his eyes to the shimmering city with its unshaken walls.

In the fields he was met by a column of horsemen. Mohammed was about to wave them off angrily; but the sight of one of them gave him such a shock that he drew up his horse with a sudden backward movement. One of his subordinate officers, who had conducted the stranger from the outposts, reported to the Sultan: an embassy had arrived from the Governor of Hungary to sever the peace treaty. The stranger, on whom Mohammed's eyes were still resting in bewilderment, had dismounted and handed him a letter containing his credentials.

"Your name is Orban?" asked Mohammed when he had finished reading. "Have you a brother?" Then he told him, bluntly and without sparing him, what had happened. "Come along, I'll take you there."

They rode. Orban had covered his face, no longer able to master his expression and his tears.

One of Mohammed's generals came galloping up to them. "Lord! Lord!" he shouted from afar. "Lord! The cannon is undamaged!"

Only one of the welded-on ornamental hoops had burst. The pieces had injured a few men and killed the gunsmith. But the cannon was unharmed, and the ball had blasted away a piece of the gate wall. Nevertheless, the event had had its effect as a bad omen; there was no mistaking the terror and despondency.

**A**LL that was left of Orban had been collected and covered with a horse blanket. His older brother stood looking down

for a long time. The people also brought him parts of the hoop; he tried to piece them together and looked at the sculpture. There was a Latin cross, a Greek cross, a crescent; there was the zodiacal sign of the Gemini,

burst asunder and threatened by Venus; there were the hostile coats of arms and the figure separating them. Large parts remained destroyed, other parts were roughly worked. Yet even a stranger might have been singularly moved by these fragments, for they were the attempts of a human being to express his entire destiny.

Orban the older, however, in the clairvoyance of his self-hating grief, saw in these fragments the course of events from the first misunderstanding between the two brothers, and in all of this he saw only his own guilt. He suddenly also recalled certain things the girl had said, things which he had not understood at the time but whose meaning was now made clear to him: namely, that the irrevocable situation brought about by the departure of the younger brother had suddenly made her own decision appear to the girl in the light of torturing doubt. He recalled minute indications, facial expressions, a turning away of the eyes, a tightening of the corners of the mouth, an inclination of the head, an anxious pressing of his hand. Yes, he was certain now that she had loved his brother and was secretly lamenting the fact that she had understood her true feelings too late.

Meanwhile, the Sultan had ordered his artillery experts to assemble. They would not speak openly and avoided any mention of their predictions. Nevertheless, their former views could still be discerned, namely that a cannon of that kind was an impossibility; at the first shot the hoop had come off, at the second the whole barrel was bound to burst and kill hundreds of men.

Orban approached the group and begged the Sultan for a hearing. "My brother and I shared everything in life; thus I am familiar with his professional work, just as he was familiar with mine. What happened at the first shot was a chance misfortune. I beg you to let me take charge of the next shot. I shall prove that the work of my brother can stand the test."

"Your master has sent you to sever the peace treaty," the Sultan said doubtfully. "You propose to fire the cannon at the city of your brethren in faith?"

"Yes," replied Orban and let his glance travel coldly over all these men whom, together with himself, he had chosen as a retinue to follow his mangled brother in death.

Orban ordered and supervised the loading, and it was with two and a half times the regular powder charge that he intended to blast this corner of the earth to pieces. When the preparations were completed, the Sultan stepped up close to the cannon and, with a lordly gesture, commanded his courtiers and artillery experts to his side. "Begin!" he called impatiently. Orban cast off his cap and his cloak; those next to him were startled at the sight of his face.

The thunder of the shot made even those tremble who were prepared for it. It took

several seconds for them to realize that they were still alive.

The smoky darkness thinned out. A desolate stump of wall indicated the spot where the Gate of St. Romanos had been. The murmuring turned into shouting, people came running from all sides, and thousands of voices roared over the plain: "Ejub lives! Ejub has returned, the fire has rent him but it did not keep him! Thus it was prophesied. We shall take the city!"

Orban looked wildly around him. Men called out to him and pressed about him, some flung themselves on the ground before him, one man shyly touched his feet. Suddenly he, too, shouted fiercely: "We shall take the city!"

"We shall take the city," said the Sultan, slowly and in a low voice.



## TO OUR READERS

**T**HE present issue opens the fourth year of this magazine's publication. When on October 1, 1941, *The XXth Century* made its appearance, East Asia had not yet been drawn into the vortex of the second World War, and we formulated our editorial policy in the leading article "Aloha" as follows:

The walls of political, ideological, and economic differences between the nations have grown to terrifying height. It becomes daily more urgent that an increasing number of people should be bold enough to penetrate these walls of hatred and suspicion, wise enough to know that our world is formed by divergent forces and not by one-sided decisions of any single group, and keen enough to see not only the urgent today but also the great yesterday and the still greater tomorrow. For one day this war will end, and what will follow must be based on knowledge which the war has obscured and on thoughts which in the present over-emphasis on action have not yet been voiced. It is to such knowledge and thought that *The XXth Century* will be dedicated.

Although two months later the flame of the second World War covered the Pacific;

although Shanghai ceased to be neutral ground and, of the twelve nationalities represented by authors in our first three issues, some could no longer collaborate, we have endeavored not to alter our magazine's political trend.

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When we published our first three issues we were thinking of readers in East Asia as well as in other parts of the world, and we intended to devote the magazine about equally to Eastern and to other questions. But after December 8, 1941, the magazine's readers were all to be found in East Asia, mainly among people who had been used to reading magazines from Europe and America.

It was not an easy task to step into the gap brought about by the cessation of intellectual exchange with countries abroad and, side by side with press and radio, to provide a window onto the outside world. But we were aided in the study and interpretation of the available material by the