

COUNT MORIC BENYOVSZKY: A HUNGARIAN CRUSOE IN ASIA

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A Grave at Macau

J. F. MARQUES PEREIRA WRITING IN THE REVIEW "TA-SAI-YANG-KUO" (Vol. III, series 2) recalls an interesting vignette about old Macau. It purportedly owes its existence to an illustrated Swedish work dealing with Macau and dating back to the early nineteenth century. This work was translated into Portuguese by Consigliere Pedroso. An excerpt, which is of special interest, runs thus:

Illustration 195 is a review of Macau. It shows the convent of Guia with the fortress and the bishop's palace all situated on rising ground. The town of Macau spreads itself below in a semi-circle following the configuration of the bay. In this town one comes across many churches and convents. Among the former one cannot view without emotion in the church of St. Paul the tomb of the young Russian girl who dauntlessly chose to throw in her lot with the adventurer Count Benyowsky when he escaped from the prisons of Petropawloski. She died of a broken heart after she learned that the Count for whose love she had sacrificed family and homeland had already been espoused to another.¹

And the Swedish author adds ruefully, "These unfortunate incidents of unrequited love are too well known to require much explanation."

The Soldier

Maurice Augustus Benyowsky (in Hungarian, Moric Benyovszky) was born in 1741 in Verborva (Verbo) in the count of Nyitra and died in Madagascar, 7 May 1786. He was the son of a cavalry general Count Samuel Benyovszky and Rosa Revay. When he was scarcely fifteen years old, the young Maurice—following the paternal footsteps—joined the army (1758) and saw service in the first battles of the Seven Years War.

We next find the young soldier in Poland where he had gone to claim an inheritance. It was at this juncture that misfortune struck him in the form of his father's death and the subsequent appropriation of the family estates by greedy relatives. Young Benyowsky returned to the family seat at Krusso in Hungary and armed the retainers in an attempt to recover his paternal estates. He was denounced to the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, then suzerain of Hungary. A decree from the chancellery at Vienna promptly and officially relieved the unfortunate young man of his inheritance. Embittered by the injustice of it all, Benyowsky left his native Hungary and went to live in Poland. From then on, the wanderlust and search of adventure dogged the steps of our hero. We next hear of him in Holland and England where he learned the arts of shipbuilding and navigation.

In 1766 Benyowsky was ready to make his way to India, somehow, when the Poles formed the Confederation of Bar to rid Poland of the Russian yoke.

¹ Museum Utigifoet of Mellinoh Thomson.

The Poles were supported by France and Turkey, while Catherine II of Russia had Austria-Hungary and Prussia on her side. Benyowsky threw himself with characteristic energy into the fray and fought valiantly for the Polish cause, but his capture by the Russians in 1769 checked his aggressive instincts, at least, for the time being.

The Prisoner

He was sent to Kasan in the Russian interior and was allowed a certain amount of liberty under watchful guards. As a result of an abortive plot against the Russian governor of the garrison, he was exiled to Siberia. After twelve months of travel under the most difficult conditions Benyowsky, with other prisoners, reached the icy wastes of Kamchatka at the extreme Asiatic end of Siberia. The date was 2 December 1770. The prisoners were confined in the capital town of the region variously called Bolforetzkoy and Bolchetsk. During the long and nightmarish journey to Kamchatka, Benyowsky tried unsuccessfully to escape. Though unsuccessful, he did not despair.

In Kamchatka, the prisoners were allowed access to some arms for their defense against wild beasts and for hunting game for food. Next we hear of Benyowsky in the unlikely role of a schoolmaster. He was even then plotting to escape but bided his time. So successful was the school that the Russian governor sent his son and three daughters to attend it. Benyowsky's academic venture proved a financial success. He soon won the confidence of the governor Niloff as well as the affection of his eldest daughter, Afanasia. Notwithstanding the knowledge that he had left behind (in Szepes, Poland) his lawful wife, Afanasia—the Russian girl—was infatuated enough to get engaged to Benyowsky.

When the time was ripe, Benyowsky and his companions rose in armed conflict against the governor and the garrison. In the ensuing fight, the governor was killed and Benyowsky wounded. The rebels, however, triumphed. They commandeered a naval vessel and made good their escape. But not before Afanasia had secretly gone aboard disguised as a man named Achilles.

The Adventurer

The fugitives left Kamchatka in May 1771 aboard the *St. Peter and St. Paul* which carried a complement of seventy-five persons including the crew, twelve passengers and nine women. The next time we hear of the ship and its complement is 22 September 1771 when they turned up at Macau. What happened during the intervening six months?

It seems that Benyowsky's original plan was to make for Canton and thence to follow the sea route to Europe. Storms and high seas which prevailed in the southern seas at that time of the year, however, made them decide otherwise. The vessel could sail only as far south as Japan where the ship was allowed to refuel and Benyowsky was even permitted to carry on some barter trade with the Japanese, who at the time, were forbidden (by imperial decrees) from dealing with foreigners.

From Japan, it would seem, the vessel sailed across the comparatively calm waters of the Northern Pacific. Fr. Benjamin Videira, writing under the caption, "Mauricio de Benyowsky," said of the Hungarian adventurer:

About five years before Captain James Cook, Benyowsky discovered the Behring passage connecting the N. Pacific with the N. Atlantic. It was a fortuitous passage necessitated by the tragic need of survival and the preservation of his faith. The English explorer and navigator traversed the Behring Strait on his third cruise of the N. Pacific in 1776 reaching latitude 70°44' north.²

It must, however, be noted here that Fr. Videira was mistaken in his conclusions. Benyowsky's voyage was in no way undertaken to safeguard his religion—in fact, his religion did not deter him from taking a lover and putting to death this lover's father. His predominant motive was to save himself. As for being Cook's predecessor in the exploration of the Behring passage, we can dismiss the claim. Benyowsky sailed across the northern Pacific and reached the coasts of California, probably by way of the Aleutians. He then retraced his steps, touched at various islands between Japan and Formosa and finally reached Macau. Cook's achievement was that he explored the Northern Pacific systematically in three separate voyages, discovered the Sandwich (Hawaiian) islands, coasted along the shores of Alaska and penetrated into the Behring passage. He went as far north as 70°44' latitude.

H. T. Sutton in an article which appeared in *The Straits Times*, makes mention of the diary which Benyowsky kept of his travels:

And so matters would have rested with the memory of the false Baron fading into the waste-paper basket of forgotten rogueries. But for the unexpected scholarship, seventeen years later, of one William Nicholson, a mathematician, chemist, etc. He translated the journal of Benyowsky into English and it was published in London in December 1789... The journal replete with records of latitude and longitude shows that their voyage started on a course to the south, for it was the Baron's intention to sail to Canton where he hoped to find a passage back to Europe for his party of exiles. It is clear that they met gales, which in the month of May when they embarked from Kamchatka are to be expected in the North Pacific. And the journal shows quite clearly that, having blown far to the east for several weeks, they decided to sail east to find land to avoid starvation at sea which their unexpectedly prolonged voyage threatened.³

A propos this voyage across the Pacific, history has placed on record the feat accomplished by Don Joao da Gama, Captain of Malacca (1581-1582), who in 1589 crossed the North Pacific and reached Mexico. This was recorded by C. R. Boxer, who informs us that a Portuguese carrack of 600 tons commanded by Don Joao da Gama who was formerly Captain-General of Malacca left Macau for Mexico. Because of typhoon damage, he was obliged to seek refuge at the island of Amakusa on the Japanese coast. After repairs, he continued on his voyage in October. He reached Mexico after having traversed the Pacific at a much higher latitude than the course ordinarily taken by the Spanish galleons travelling between Manila and Mexico. He touched at a place which has since been called Ezo (Yezo). His voyage was directly contrary to the Iberian Crown legislation prohibiting commercial transactions between the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. Ac-

² *Religio e Tatria*, Ano XLIII, No. 7 (Feb. 24, 1957), 155.

³ "Mystery Baron Appeared in 1771 (in) Macao with Five 'Petticoats,'" *Straits Time*, December 6, 1961.

cordingly, he was arrested and his ship and cargo impounded when he arrived at Acapulco.⁴

On his journey across the Pacific, Benyowsky touched at various islands. He noted in his journal that on 14 August 1771, he anchored at the island of Usmai Ligon which he located at 29°N. and which lay between Japan and the Ryukyu islands. This island, according to Benyowsky, was independent of either Japan or China and its inhabitants were peaceful and well advanced in civilization. They seemed to have come under the missionary influence of a certain Portuguese, Jesuit Fr. Ignatio Salis,⁵ who arrived there in 1719. From this island, he went on to Formosa reaching there on 27 August. As his landing was opposed, he had to use force to subdue the natives. Through the good offices of a Spaniard, he succeeded in obtaining a safe passage to land. He then aided a local chief, King Huapo, in a war the latter was waging against the neighbors.

At Macau

After sojourning for ten days, Benyowsky set sail for Macau and cast anchor at the old city port on Thursday, 22 September. Six months of hardships—battling against the elements, unknown dangers, hostile natives—finally brought him to the safe haven of Macau. And what did Macau hold in store for the fugitives? Fortunately, the archives of Macau City Council (*Leal Senado*) leave us in no doubt of the facts.

On the day of his arrival, Count Benyowsky sought out the governor, Diogo Fernandes Salema de Saldanha, and begged hospitality for himself and his companions. . . . “having arrived at this city by necessity and in the final stages of human endurance.” The next day, Friday, 23 September, the governor convened a meeting of the City Council and laid the circumstances of the fugitives’ plight before the assembly. The Council, however, deliberated over the matter and delayed a reply for a month. Thus, on 23 October, the governor sent a letter to the Council upbraiding their “tardiness and indifference so little in keeping with the traditional Portuguese hospitality.” A reply was sent to the governor the same day stating that it was “manifestly unjust to deny the necessities of life to these Hungarians who claim to be dying of hunger,” and the Council recommended that the governor decide in what form aid could be extended. Of the original ninety-six persons who left Kamachatka, only sixty-five reached Macau and they were taken care of by the City Council until the end of the year or the beginning of 1772.

The consequent expenses incurred were deemed prohibitive when the report was sent to the Viceroy of India Don Joao de Melo who in a letter of 28 April 1772 censured the City Council for its excessive liberality. Though the Hungarians had arrived at Macau in the last extremity, “and the Council had done well to come to their aid, the City resources are not derived from heaven, so more moderation should be exercised for the future in similar cases.” We believe the Viceroy was justified in his stricture. We, Portuguese, tend to be too generous in our hospitality towards strangers. Nowhere were

⁴ C.R. Boxer, *The Great Ship from Amocón* (Lisbon, 1959), 52-53.

⁵ His name is Inacio Pires, not “Salis,” missionary in Kian-Nam from 1753 to 1777.

the Hungarians so well treated as in Macau. Moreover, the help given them was wholly disinterested. As for the recipient of this hospitality, they were well in a position to shift for themselves as subsequent events would show.

In his letter of 23 October 1771, Governor Saldanha wrote that the European factories at Canton had offered the Hungarian money and passage back to Europe, but at a price. Benyowsky had information and charts pertaining to his voyage which were sought after by the European powers. Thus he wrote in his journal:

A certain Mr. Gohr, Captain in the service of the English Company came to see me and made me offer of services on the part of the Directors and a free passage to Europe provided that I would bind myself to entrust my manuscripts to the Company, and engage to enter into their service and made no communication of the discoveries I had made. This proposition so evidently disgusted me; but I was contented to answer that I was very sensible [sic] of the obliging offer made but that as I had accepted those of the French Directors it was not in my power to change my determination.

Disappointed, Mr. Gohr "took his leave in an affected manner." Next, it was the turn of Mr. l'Heureux, Director of the Dutch Company. He, too, was profuse in promises and presents but did not succeed in winning over the wily Hungarian who held out for the highest bidder. He, however, availed himself of the liquor offered by the Dutchman having returned the rest of the presents.

The fact was that Benyowsky had to side with the French who, at that time, were the allies of Austria-Hungary against Russia, England and Holland. There was also some business deals with the governor through an intermediary, a certain Spanish Dominican named Fr. Diego Zurita.⁶ In this way, Benyowsky disposed of four hundred and eighty beaver skins, five hundred sables, and one hundred and eighty dozen ermines. In addition, the ship was also sold. When Benyowsky was ready to leave Macau, he was richer by 28,440 piastres which he received for the pelts and 1,070 taels of silver for the ship.

The "Annual Register" published in London for the year 1772 contained a letter from a Far East correspondent which caused quite a stir in city circles. It was entitled "Account of an Extraordinary Adventure in a letter from Canton." It described the arrival at Macau of Benyowsky's ship after a seemingly impossible journey from Kamchatka across the N. Pacific to the coasts of California then back again and finally ending at Macau. "Since I wrote the above" continued the correspondent, "the following strange account has reached me from Macao. One of the persons dressed like a woman, died a few days since. The lady was sent ashore with the following very extraordinary request to the governor: that the corpse should be interred where none had lain before and in an honorable spot; that the baron might have liberty to attend the funeral to pay particular honors to the deceased. This remarkable request producing that never-failing curiosity peculiar to the Romish priest-

⁶ Fr. Zurita was born at Jaen, Spain, circa 1777; he did missionary work in the Philippines from 1763 to 1768. In 1769, he sailed for Spain via Macau, where he met Benyowsky.

hood, two worthies of the Franciscan Order, taking advantage of the night, peeped into the coffin and discovered the body of a man." Thus the letter from Canton,

The fact of the matter was that Afanasia, Benyowsky's lover who escaped from Kamchatka disguised as a man, had fallen ill and died. In his journal, the Count had mentioned the death of twenty-three of his companions since the voyage out from Kamchatka, among them, two women. Of the death of Afanasia, he writes thus: "On 25th Miss Afanasia paid the tribute of Nature. Her premature death has affected me profoundly." It would seem from this piece of information that the Count did not marry the girl since he called her by her maiden name, Miss Afanasia. The author of the Swedish book cited earlier in the article takes this view; Marques Pereira, after mentioning the death of the Count, adds:

Thus ended the adventurous life of the lover of that poor reckless girl who died 15 years earlier at Macau and whose grave in the Church of St. Paul when discovered by the Swedish writer 60 years after, so moved him with compassion. We have transcribed his account of what he saw and wrote. That was certainly before the fire which destroyed St. Paul's on 26 January 1835.

The count wrote in his journal that when he was in Macau, the bishop—Monsignor Le Bon—interceded (on behalf of the Hungarians) with the King, Don Jose, and with the all-powerful Marquis de Pombal. Fr. Videira judged that the bishop in question could not have been Le Bon but he was mistaken. Fr. Videira writes thus:

A document says that the bishop of Macau, Don Bartolomeu Manuel Mendes dos Reis who had been at the court of Lisbon in 1766 and the Administrator of the See, Fr. Francisco Vaz, interceded for the Hungarians with the Marquis de Pombal and the King Don Jose I. The Count in his journal calls the bishop 'Msgr. Le Bon.' Could it have been prevarication on the part of Benyowsky?

This seeming contradiction may be resolved if we note the following facts: that there was a certain French bishop at Macau at the time; it is not beyond credence that Benyowsky, whose sympathies were with the French, had approached the French bishop to use his good offices on his behalf. The French bishop could then have referred the matter to the Diocesan of Macau while, at the same time, writing personally on behalf of his client. The Monsignor followed both procedures.

The French bishop was Olivier Simon Le Bon who was born at St. Malo, France, on 17 March 1710. He left for Siam on 18 May 1745. In 1754, he was named Procurator of the Missions Etrangeres De Paris at Macau and on 22 August 1764 he was named titular bishop of Metellopolis and co-adjutor of Siam and was consecrated in Rome on 28 December 1766. In 1771, he was at the French procurator at Macau waiting for a suitable opportunity to go to Siam. He was expelled from Siam in 1779 and died at Goa on 27 October 1780. From the Macau parochial archives, we learn that Simon Le Bon, Vicar Apostolic of Siam, baptized Olivario who was a Chinese adult, during his stay in Macau. Again, the diocesan records state that Fr. Joaquin Jose Carneiro received minor orders on 30 December 1764 from the hands of the bishop of Macau, Don Manuel Mendes dos Reis, and subdiaconate in

December 1771 at the hands of the bishop of Metellopolis and Vicar Apostolic of Siam. Monsignor Le Bon wrote on behalf of Benyowsky but in those days, it took twelve months to get a letter to Europe. By that time, Benyowsky was already on his way to France on board a French ship. In fact, the Count had accepted the French offer to transport the fugitives to France. So, on 6 December 1771, accompanied by Fr. Zuritta, Benyowsky left Macau and headed for the Ile de France (Mauritius) which he reached on 16 March 1772. Then, after touching at Madagascar, the ship carrying the fugitives reached France in June 1772. It was a little more than a year since they had fled the icy wastes of Kamchatka.

King of Madagascar

Once in France, Benyowsky offered his services to the French government to found a colony in Madagascar. This was accepted and, in the following year, and with soldiers placed under his command, he set sail for Madagascar. On the way, he tried to enlist the support of the native chiefs in Mauritius, but the French officials—sensing in him a rival—turned them away from him so that Benyowsky had to carry on single-handed. He arrived in Madagascar on February 1774. There, he established himself in the vicinity of the bay of Antongill near the mouth of the river Fingballe. He demanded from the French governor a sum of 50,000 pounds as payment for expenses. The former, alarmed at the request, started a commission of inquiry and sent a report to France. This caused the French to doubt his integrity.

How this upstart adventurer succeeded in making himself King of Madagascar makes interesting reading. One of the tribes which formed an independent entity on the island was the Sambarivas. Rimini, their king, had a daughter who was captured and sold into captivity to a neighboring tribe. Making use of this knowledge, the shrewd Count caused the rumor to be spread that he was the son of this lost princess, and to confirm this he had the testimony of a negro woman whom he had brought with him from Mauritius. This latter declared that she had accompanied the princess into captivity and that the Count Benyowsky was indeed what he claimed to be—the princess's son. Accordingly, he was proclaimed King and his wife, Queen. He got together some tribes and subjugated the rest of the island.

In November 1776, he returned to France with the purpose of obtaining funds for the development of the island. The *Pallas Great Lexicon* (Budapest, 1893, vol. III) thus describes his stay in France:

In the meantime, he was so much slandered to the new French government that they gave no credit to his reports. . . . Seeing the aversion of the French, Benyowsky returned to his native land after he had asked for and obtained pardon from the Empress Maria Theresa. During his stay at home, war again broke out with Prussia and the Count characteristically found himself embroiled in it. He and his soldiers distinguished themselves at the successful battle of Halschwert. When peace was restored, he hoped that Joseph II would be ready to further his 'Madagascarian' plan. But the Emperor was not interested. The Count seemed meanwhile to have turned his attention to promoting trade with Fiume. When he saw that there was nothing doing in his own country he tried England, but here again he was turned down. His proposals dated 25 December 1783, were

as follows: Defensive and offensive alliance with Britain provided he be recognized King of Madagascar. Although the British government did not take him seriously he was apparently trusted by some private individuals from whom he collected L4000. Benyowsky then went to the United States. There, a Maryland firm was persuaded to place a ship at his disposal. Leaving his family in Baltimore, Benyowsky returned to Madagascar alone. He landed at the bay of Antangara about 10 leagues or sixty miles southwest of Cape St. Sebastian on 7th July 1785. The ship was beached on the island of Joana in Oiboon, the African mainland and sold. He had now to contend with hostile natives. Benyowsky and his small group of Europeans and loyal natives occupied the French outpost of Angoutzi where he built a township in the native style. He next sent a group of 100 men to occupy a French factory at Foul Point but the latter were turned back by the presence of a French frigate sent out from Vila Diogo. Hearing of these doings, the French governor of Mauritius, M. de Soullac, sent a ship with 70 soldiers on board and on 23 May 1786, attacked the Count's positions. The Count had only two cannons, two Europeans and twenty-three natives. The natives fled at the approach of the soldiers and the Count was wounded in the chest and fell on the scene of fighting.

Thus ended the checkered and colorful life of the remarkable adventurer Count Benyowsky.