

### Trail #1 - Danubian Europe: the discovery of a “liquid space” between West and East

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The story begins in Linz, Austria, and we shall tell it as far as Timișoara in Romania. On the way are Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia, as well as two more European capitals of culture: Pécs and Novi Sad. At the heart of the Danube journey is Hungary with all the expansions, divisions, and upheavals seen by this region and caused by religions, ideologies, or claims to power that have repeatedly divided Europe and brought it together again. Whereas Europe along the Rhine can be experienced as a continuum, the experience here is more one of disruption, which has resulted in enormous richness in art, culture, religion, tradition and language. Danubian Europe has – quite literally – become a funnel of influences and therefore a region that has suffered a lot from wars, expulsions, and annexations, but it has also become a melting pot of cultural processes that we are proud of today since they underly its fascination. It wasn't only the crusades in the Middle Ages and the constant conflict between Ottoman and Christian rulers that cost a lot of blood and suffering. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region suffered particular turmoil, caused, for example, by the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the First and Second World Wars, with all their consequences. The Eastern European countries suffered greatly from the resulting division into communist and democratic worlds.

It is precisely in this space that Jewish life managed to flourish again and again in a formative, inspiring and innovative way, despite the most difficult conditions.

Only against this background is it possible to keep pace with current debates, often focusing on Hungary, on self-determination, the dominance of Europe, and the flow of refugees. Coming to terms with history in a systematic way has often been neglected. The transitions were too sudden, too unexpected, and sometimes too unpredictable. The fall of the Iron Curtain on the Austro-Hungarian border, for example, surprised most people.

Travelling along the Danube can help us make up for lost time. New connections emerge, not so much in the political arena as in the fields of business, science, art, culture, and creativity – areas that have always been a source of vitality. For it is always the people that shape a region. No region has had to accommodate a greater number of diverse nationalities and cultures, which often only found common ground after long phases of exclusion, combat and intolerance. This process of finding common ground still poses major challenges today. The roots of the conflict in the Balkans stretch back centuries, and they still feed this explosive region today.

Change, a constant theme in many cities and countries in the Danube region, can now be experienced in a particularly fascinating way. The European Capitals of Culture in this area are dynamic and impressive examples of this.