



## A Jew's Harp Travelogue: Kecskemét, Hungary, January 2004.

Report and Photographs by Gordon Frazier

**Szilágyi Zoltán is known to Jew's harp players the world over** as a preeminent dorumb maker (dorumb is the Hungarian name for the instrument). I own many of his instruments, and already felt I knew him from writing to him and especially from playing his dorumbs. The soul of the maker really does reside in the instrument. So when I had the opportunity to take an extended trip to Europe earlier this year, a visit to the Szilágyi home was high on my itinerary.

Zoltán's son Áron met me at the train station. I first met Áron at the 1998 congress in Molln, Austria, then got to know him better when he came to the North American Jew's Harp Festival in Richland, Oregon, in 1999. (We renewed our acquaintance at the 2002 congress in Rauland, Norway.) Áron stayed with me for a couple of days on his way home from the Oregon festival, so he was happy his family could reciprocate. They did so several times over.

When we arrived at the house, Áron's parents Zoltán and Gyorgyi were waiting with a glass of Hungarian spirits and a wonderful dinner. I retired early, exhausted but happy to be there.

I couldn't help but compare Kecskemét to Eugene, Oregon, where I used to live, because they are close to the same size and are both college towns. However: Eugene was founded in 1862; Kecskemét in the mid-1300s. The Kalapuya lived in the area around Eugene for several centuries before the arrival of European settlers; the area around Kecskemét was first settled by the Scythians 3,000 years ago. And in terms of architecture and the arts (sorry, Eugene): no contest.

I spent four days there; during that time Gyorgyi was my unofficial tour guide. She took me with her on several short outings, including a visit to the galvanizing plant where Zoltán's instruments are coated. Gyorgyi's English is excellent, and we had several conversations about Hungarian culture. She and Zoltan are a study in contrasts: Gyorgyi is interested in the theatre and likes to travel; Zoltán rarely leaves the house, choosing instead to travel via books and the Discovery channel. They are different, but share an obviously affectionate bond. And they are an effective business team as well; she travels to trade shows and works on the computer upstairs, while Zoltán cranks out dorumbs in the basement workshop.

**During my stay, I was able to watch Zoltán work.** He makes dozens of models of dorumb, all with fanciful names, most available in any key, from very high to extremely low. Once he gets his bending jig set up for a frame shape, he likes to make at least 500 of that particular model. There are exceptions; some of his experimental models are produced one at a time, in limited quantities.

One morning he handed me a cardboard box of finished harps, consisting of a variety of models, for me to try. Was that fun? You betcha. I spent a couple of hours playing with them. I ended up buying several for my friend Annette and a couple for myself, including one of the bizarre Apocalypsts.

The Apocalypst and the Daisy Cutter are two of Zoltán's more unusual models. Both have an extra tongue that sticks out from the base of the main tongue, at about a 45 degree angle away from the player. The extra tongue creates a doubling of the harmonic, or an interference of the two base tones, or, umm, oh heck, I have no idea what it does. Let's just say it creates an unusual sound. What I learned on this trip, though, is that each instrument is unique. The Apocalypsts I tried were wildly divergent in sound, length and angle of the extra arm, even frame shape. They are works of art, and it takes Zoltán a long time to produce one, as many of them don't work the way he wants them to, so he starts over. The especially successful ones are happy accidents. (Cont. on Pg.4)

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YOUR



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508 2nd St.  
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**Have ideas for articles,  
pictures, cartoons or other  
contributions to the  
Pluck-N-Post?**

**PLEASE CONTACT US**

1. Do you know of any Jew's harp players in Ireland? Or any Jew's harp related events?  
francois\_dubreuil@libertysurf.fr
2. I've just tried my hand at making a "kubing" or one of sorts - it has a straight tongue, not one with a smaller or narrower tip. Very interesting to make to see what has to occur to make it work. I will be applying what I've seen here [on the website] to the mbira of which I make. The free or pulsating reed idea is something I wish to learn Are there any papers on this subject?  
Andy Cox acox@limestone.edu
3. I'm trying to find out any information I can about the Jew's harp and China, historically and in present times. Could you direct me to a book or website or person ... any help would be much appreciated.  
paulabodeely@hotmail.com

**IJHS UPDATE:**

From Fred Crane:

I'm sure you know that the final issue of VIM (no. 11) is out, and that the first issue of the Journal of the IJHS should be out by the end of the year. Urge joining! The fifth international congress is set for Amsterdam in July 2006--no exact dates announced yet. It is at the invitation of a group called De Ijsbreker, who will have a new hall, "Het Muziekgebouw", with full facilities. The contact person is Annelies van Esveld [anneliesvanesveld@ysbreker.nl]

[Editor's note: The 2nd Journal of the IJHS has been completed and should be delivered by the end or March 2004 or so.]

**Join us at the  
North American Jew's Harp Festival  
Bay City, Oregon  
July 30 + 31 2004**

**We say goodbye to NATCH The Shadow Knows**

(1991-2004), AAD, JM, RM, SM RS-E, JS-E, GS-O, V-JE,V-RE

We had to say goodbye to "Shadow" in January 2004. Most of you will remember Shadow, Gordon Frazier's border collie who was our "official Festival Mascot" since the festival's beginning in 1991. Shadow loved the Jew's harp festival and we loved her! So many of my festival memories include Shadow and she will be missed. Gordon recently sent an email about Shadow ... here are a few excerpts from it: "Shadow knew what she liked. She liked sheep! To her delight, she had the opportunity to herd an entire flock just a few weeks before she passed away. She liked agility, too. It wasn't as good as herding, but it was an acceptable second choice. To watch her run a fast, tricky, Jumpers course, her feathers flying, a big shit-eating grin on her face ... oh, that was to watch life itself."

"She also like unsupervised outings. She occasionally escaped from the back yard so she could visit her secret place and roll in something with an exquisitely foul stench! She'd always come back home, sticking to high heaven! Snow and freezing rain stopped all traffic on Beacon Hill (in Seattle) during Shadow's final days, allowing her one last off-leash romp through the neighborhood. She had a nice run on a serene street devoid of cars; past (perhaps) her smelly nirvana; past snow-covered yards as fluffy as the back of a sheep; down a soft white course that seemed to stretch to infinity." From Janet Gohring

**Don't Forget to Renew Your JHG Membership**



## A WORD FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**Hello Harpers,**

**I hope this finds all of you with a case of "spring fever" ... I certainly am feeling the need to expose myself to some sunshine and run my hands through freshly tilled soil!**

### NAJHF:

We are gearing up for the 2004 North American Jew's Harp Festival. This year's dates are July 30, 31 and August 1. Saturday, the 31st, will be the "main" day. We already have several new performers signed up and the inquiries are starting to arrive daily!

If you have any ideas for a T Shirt design, please send them to me as soon as possible. I'll forward them on to the festival committee. We hope to have the 2004 design finalized by mid-April.

### GUILD MEMBER NEWS:

Gordon Frazier took a Jew's harp odyssey to Europe this winter. He met Jew's harp players and makers and did some recording. We hope to have a full report soon.

John Palmes, from Juneau, traveled "south" in February. Bill and I were happy to have him spend some time with us on his way back home. We heard a few cuts from his upcoming CD, very nice! John and Bill stayed up till 2:00 am playing music. He plans on attending the festival this year.

From Lindsay Porteous: "Just to let you fellow trumpers across the pond know that I'm doing fine and hope (with the help of housing benefit) to stay on at Tron House for a while yet. My other news is I now have a girlfriend, Margaret. This year I judged the trump competition at Auchtermuchty and it was won by my old friend Duncan Williamson. I was a guest at the Kirriemuir Festival ... since I was the only entrant, I got first place! The trophy I made was won again this year at Grandfather Mountain and I now hope it will continue. I have just finished a compilation CD from my recordings from 1984 to 2001 (includes two cuts with Mike Seeger). I hope the trump has a good year in America. All the best to all. Lindsay."

### 2004 MEMBERSHIP DUES:

Be reminded ... many of you have not yet renewed your Guild membership. If there is a renewal form enclosed with your newsletter, your membership is about to expire. Help keep the Guild and NAJHF alive with your membership (take advantage of the renewal specials including CD or 2003 Festival T Shirt).

### 2004 Jew's Harp Guild Board Members

Janet Gohring, Executive Director; Kathi Vinson, Secretary/Treasurer; Gordon Frazier, Board Member; Denise Harrington, Board Member; Larry Hanks, Board Member; Mike Stiles, Board Member; Gene Ralph, Board Member;

Until next time ... keep twangin! Janet Gohring - Executive Director, The Jew's Harp Guild

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### Zoli at work

**Szilágyi Zoltán at work in his basement workshop.**

Zoltán buys five different types of spring steel, from various countries, to use for the tongues of his instruments. The most expensive isn't cheap; he patted a roll of it (perhaps 4 inches wide, 30 inches high, a couple of inches thick) and gave me one of his penetrating looks. "A new car," he said, indicating the cost of the roll of steel.

He makes one particular model to sell wholesale in the larger Hungarian cities, but outside of Hungary his sales are almost exclusively to individuals. Zoltán also imports and resells rhythm instruments, especially to schools. This makes up a good chunk of his business income, but most of his time (and heart) is devoted to the dorumb.

Zoltán was critical of his English skills, but I understood him just fine. He talked of tinkering with experimental instruments before discovering the dorumb and deciding to try his hand at making them. Finding something you love to do, and being able to make a living doing it, is the secret to happiness, he said. "And Gordon," he said to me, pausing from his work and peering at me intently, "I am a happy man."

If I had to choose one word to describe Zoltán, it would be "intent." He is intently passionate about his work; intently happy with his home, family, and life; intently curious about everything from UFOs to natural history. He leans forward, fixes you with an earnest gaze, and you cannot help but care. He is also funny, and warm, and immensely likable.

Later that day, I was upstairs chatting with Gyorgyi. In the background we could hear the boing, pause, boing, pause, boing of Zoltán in the basement, using metal snips and an electronic tuner to tune an instrument. You must hear that a lot, I said. She rolled her eyes slightly and smiled.

On Thursday, Áron had arranged a concert at Nekem 8, a teahouse where his band Navrang has performed. It was billed as "transz-atlanti dorumbest" ("Trans-Atlantic Jew's Harping"). For this evening only, he put together a group consisting of his fellow dorumb player Oszi (from Navrang), and two members of the band 3ember. Ulrich Gábor plays both a traditional African drum and an electronic drum set, and Majoros Gyula plays a variety of flutes, dorumb, and, occasionally, bagpipes. I was the fifth member of the impromptu group.

"I have no idea what it will be like," Áron told me.

**Nekem 8 is the coolest teahouse I've ever seen.** It is alcohol-free but has an extensive tea and pastry menu. In the main space there are the usual tables and chairs, but through an archway in the back is a room with a couch and comfy chairs, and a side alcove features a couple of Japanese-style low tables and cushions. The main space has a lot of brick, including a vaulted brick ceiling, and a tiny stage. A cozy place to play some tunes.

Áron got up and introduced me, as I was to open for the group. I had decided to lead with Whiskey Before Breakfast. I was eager to make a good impression, so I played the heck out of it. Overplayed it, probably. Every lick I know, lots of effects, ending with a big shave-and-a-haircut, TWO BITS!!

The crowd responded with ever-so-polite applause.

Oh crap, I thought. They don't like old-timey. Okaay...how about the blues? I got out a low harp and did "Summertime," emoting like crazy. And got: polite applause. Um. Hmm. Maybe they'll like the Clackamore?

A couple of tunes later, after failing to get more of a crowd response, I decided to throw in the towel. I motioned to Áron that I was done. He gave me a funny look, but said okay.

He and Oszi got up on stage then, and played a duet I had heard them rehearsing the night before. It cooked! And when they were finished? Yup, polite applause.



Later I would learn that polite applause is the way Hungarian audiences "give it up." (Not like American audiences, who will use any excuse to yell woo-woo and stomp their feet.) So yes, the crowd at Nekem 8 did in fact like old-timey, and blues, and the Clackamore. Áron thought it was pretty funny when he learned of my cultural confusion.

The group jam was a highlight of my trip. It is great fun to improvise with other musicians, especially with musicians who play so well. Like most improvisers there were awkward bits ("That was an experiment," Áron told the crowd at one point) but also shining moments of clarity and, every once in a while, actual funkiness.

Áron told me a number of people approached him afterwards and told him how much they enjoyed the concert. See, this is how people in Hungary show their appreciation, he told me. A quiet word after.

A quiet but appreciative word. It's a good way to summarize my visit to Kecskemét. The Szilágyi family, the band, the people at the teahouse...everyone exuded graciousness, class, and style. To all of them, I would just like to say: woo-woo!



## NEW CDs - by JHG members

Archive recordings of all "Jew's harp Mosaics" will be published now by Antropodium on cd

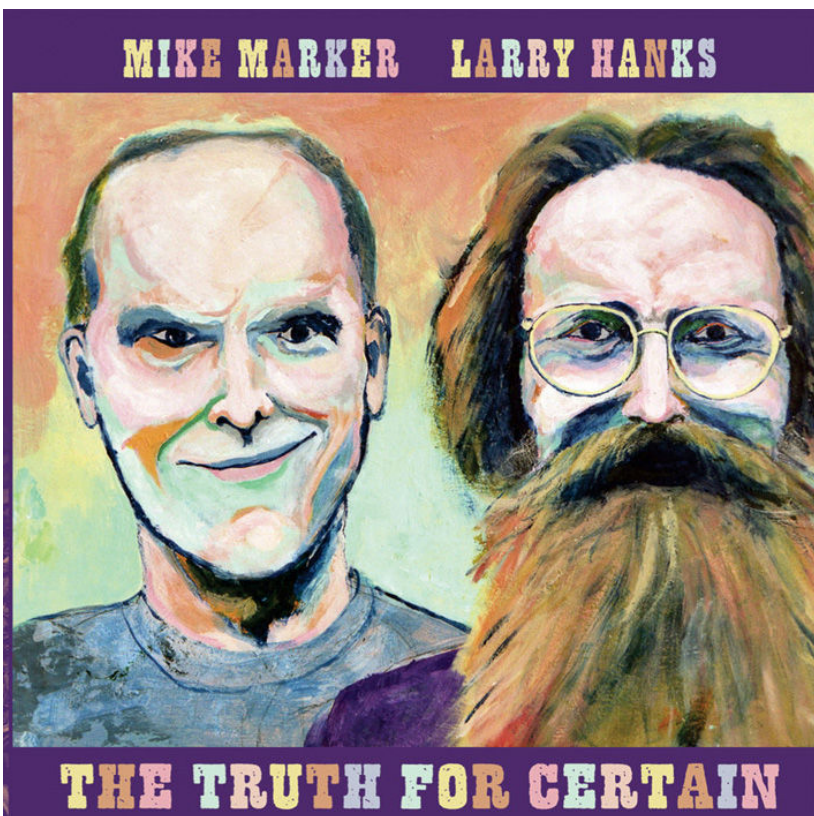
### Jew's Harp Mosaics

**Experimental Recordings - Sessions on Jew's Harps,**  
Played and composed by Phons Bakx in 1986 and 1987

Before the Jew's harp book 'De Gedachtenverdrijver' [*Thoughts Dispeller*] was written and published..., before the Middelburg Mondharp Ensemble, the Casu Marzu Ensemble, the Phons Bakx Ensemble, Gamelan Gengénggongan, Orang Génggong or the Kwintes Ensemble were founded..., before the Holland the ball was set rolling with playing on Jew's harps,

#### Phons Bakx laid the foundation of his experiments on Jew's harp in 1986 and in 1987

The Jew's harp Mosaics reflect the very beginning of Phons Bakx as Jew's harp player. This sequence of music recordings were realized by the use of a multi-recording system which made possible that Phons Bakx dubbed his playing four or five times. In the period of 1986 and 1987 about thirty-five Jew's harp Mosaics came into existence, of which a quarter part of it could be selected as the best. In spite of its stereophony (*listen through your headphones!*) the technical quality of the analogous recordings belongs to the past. Then, on the other hand, with his Jew's harp Mosaics he convinced many a person, that Jew's harps were not longer trifling knick-knacks, but musical instruments that could produce minute sounds of elegance. He also did show that trumping on a Jew's harp was not so homely as most people always think about it.



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**Mike Marker**—vocals, banjo, 6&12 string guitars

I'll be at the  
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Festival in San Diego on  
May 1 & 2, and at the  
Wild Iris Festival in  
Boonville, CA on June 5 & 6.  
Hope to see you soon.  
Best regards, Larry

# PLUCK-N-POST

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF  
JEW'S HARP GUILD

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Janet Gohring - Executive Director JHG

Kathi Vinson - Secretary JHG

Mark D. Poss - Editor, Pluck-N-Post & Webmaster

Frederick Crane - Contributor

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**NOTE: See recent newsletters for info concerning Mr. Porteous**

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