

'Exceptional Roses of an Exceptional Breeder:

The Story of the Hungarian Gergely Márk'

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Synopsis

The discussion of this topic begins with how the activities of rose breeder Gergely Márk are extraordinary and why Márk roses can be considered exceptional. The author, by outlining the distinctive particularities of the rose **breeding activities of Gergely Márk**, first points out how the activities of the 86 year old breeder were not and still are **not market-oriented**, even though he has bred roses **professionally** and with **outstanding results** his entire life. It is a further specificity of his breeding activities that they have taken place **under open ground** conditions **without cover or irrigation** and with **minimum of labor input**. As a result, **Márk varieties** are **fully adapted to the extreme conditions of the Hungarian climate**.

Here a few distinctive particularities of **breeding roses under open ground** conditions are mentioned, based on the **experience of breeder** Gergely Márk. One particularity is that the **selection of rose varieties** bred and cared for under open ground conditions takes **considerably longer** than the selection of rose varieties bred under glass. The **mortality rate of hybrids** that have newly sprouted is also **substantially higher** in the case of open ground breeding. Concerning the inflorescence of new varieties developing on open ground, these evolve **more slowly** as a result of climatic conditions; at first they are not stable, but **once they do become stable**, the blossoms **do not change as easily**. **All in all** roses bred on open ground are **more hardy and viable** than roses bred under glass, and the **life expectancy** of rose stocks of the former is also **longer**.

The author has undertaken the task of presenting an **overview of the life work** of Gergely Márk in June of this year, at the **2009 World Rose Convention**, Vancouver, Canada (see also the conference materials published). This was the first time anyone accumulated a data base comprising over 15,000 photographs taken of the Márk roses. Of the over 600 Márk varieties, 135 were selected for the database. The observed Márk roses were examined according to the **following criteria**: their above average frost resistance, their outstanding

foliage, their scent, their blooming intensity, the color play of their petals and the visibility of their stamen. **The results** speak highly of Gergely Márk's roses. The proportion of exceptionally frost resistant roses, those having long blooming periods, the frequency of color play on the petals, the striking proportion of roses having simple flowers and the frequency of visible stamen are remarkable. These characteristics are frequently combined with the roses being scented.

While the main focus of my presentation in Canada was on roses showing above average frost resistance, here I will **focus on the exceptional drought resistance** of these varieties. Owing to Hungary's climate, frequent droughts are a test of selection for Márk rose varieties, because – as mentioned above – the rosebushes are not irrigated at all and they have to withstand enduring heat waves of **35-40°C** (measured in the shade).

Although there are only few longer term observations regarding Márk roses bred on open ground available at this date, we may already note some interesting results. For instance, according to the **observations of rose expert Szilveszter Győry** living in Slovakia, **a set of Márk** varieties tolerate quite well a **pH value of 8.55**. Another valuable characteristic of Márk roses worthy of mention is that even **in a vase** many of them retain their freshness for a long period and their buds bloom well.

The discussion closes with the detailed presentation of an exceptionally good Márk variety, 'Árpád-házi Szent Erzsébet emléke' (synonyms: '**Saint Elisabeth of Hungary**' and 'Heilige Elisabeth'), and the story of how it is **spreading around the world**. In this context, the author will also touch upon the Márk varieties' **chances for survival**.

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As the focus of the California presentation is to discuss Márk rose varieties, it will not be possible within this framework to present in detail the work of Gergely Márk. The following **Annex, quoting from my presentation at the 2009 World Rose Convention**, describes the unusual circumstances of rose breeder Gergely Márk.



Gergely Márk with a souvenir from Vancouver depicting his rose 'Saint Elisabeth of Hungary'; photo by Éva Kigyóssy-Schmidt, Budapest, September 2009.



Gergely Márk and Éva Kigyóssy-Schmidt with a souvenir from Vancouver depicting his rose 'Saint Elisabeth of Hungary'; photo by Jürgen Schmidt, Budapest, September 2009.

Annex

Distinguishing features of the rose breeding career of Mr. Gergely Márk Non-market oriented breeding

86 year old Gergely Márk has created his life's work under special conditions. His career comprises **over 600 new rose varieties**. One of the most specific features of his work is that even though he has **over half a century of professional rose breeding activity** behind him, **market demand has not, or has only insignificantly influenced his work**. After acquiring his degree in agricultural engineering, he began his scientific research activities at the State-funded Budapest Horticultural Research Institute, where he continued to work until his retirement in 1981. Parallel to his breeding work, he wrote a **series of publications**. His first book, "A rózsa" ("The Rose"), Mezőgazdasági Kiadó, Budapest, later translated into German, was published exactly fifty years ago in 1959 and won the silver prize at the Paris International Book Fair in 1964 as the best foreign book. The **creation of a rosarium in Budatétény**, which was built between 1962-1964, is associated with his name. In its heyday, this rose collection of 40,000 rose bushes displayed 2740 rose varieties on an area of 6 hectares. **The name of a Hybrid Tea rose** bred by Mr. Gergely Márk, '**Budatétény**', commemorates the rosarium. '**Budatétény**' won the **gold prize** in 1963 at the IGA (International Gartenschau – International Horticultural Fair), held in Hamburg. The prestigious award was justified, among other things, by a rose color that was first introduced on this occasion (peachy-pink, with reddish-yellowish hues). Mr. Gergely Márk seldom had the opportunity to participate at international competitions. The gold prize won by his rose '**Árpád-házi Szent Erzsébet emléke**' (synonyms: 'Heilige Elisabeth' in German and 'Saint Elisabeth of Hungary' in English) in the category of climbers and shrub roses in Rome in 2000 could be considered as one of the most significant tributes to his work. Among his many **State and public** awards, let me mention here his gold Hungarian Cross of Merit (1999), his title of honorary citizen of Törökbálint (2006), his Knight's Cross of Merit of the Republic of Hungary (2007), a special session of the Hungarian Academy of Science in honor of his 85th birthday (2008), his Hungarian Heritage Award (2008) and his title of honorary citizen of Budapest (2008).

How could it be possible that a rose breeder of such high esteem cannot even cover the production costs of his activities from the sales of his roses on the market – is a question that is rightfully raised. In the words of Mr. Gergely Márk himself, the response to this question is that **the collapse of the communist system came too late for him**. At that time he had already been retired for ten years and he had been carrying on his rose breeding activities from his own resources, practically left to himself, in his rose garden named the "Garden of Hungarian Roses",

located on an area of two hectares in Törökbálint, near Budapest. The changes that took place in Central and Eastern Europe and the return to a market economy were characterized by several renowned analytic economists as a **transition to a market economy without a market**. This statement is doubly relevant to the situation of the Eastern European flower market and in particular the rose market. Not to mention the lengthy period that is a prerequisite for establishing business contacts – Mr. Gergely Márk was nearly 70 years old at the time of the change in regime and neither his financial situation, nor his physical strength made it possible for him to cover at least the costs of his work through the market sales of his rose varieties.

By the time I met Mr. Gergely Márk in November 2004 and I first visited him in his “Garden of Hungarian Roses”, he was already carrying out his work, with great perseverance, under circumstances that were particularly difficult financially. These circumstances have only worsened in recent years, to be exacerbated by his ability to work less and less. Moreover, Mr. Gergely Márk is sorely weighed down by the question as to **what will be the fate of his rose varieties in the future**. There is no prospect of anyone taking over and continuing the upkeep of his rose garden in Törökbálint later on. Thus the survival of his roses is very doubtful, even though what is at stake here is **the preservation of a national and universal treasure that is difficult to price based on market assessments**.

However, I can report with great joy that what seemed hopeless one or two years ago has recently evolved in **promising ways**. Within the framework of a collaboration to save varieties and with the participation of the Europe Rosarium of Sangerhausen, in 2008 **Mr. Erich Unmuth**, Vienna, has begun to plant every Márk rose variety in his noted rose collection called “**Badener Rosenkultivarium**”. Another promising development is that in order to save new Hungarian plant varieties threatened with extinction, a bid was entered at the initiative of **Mr. Zoltán Lukács**, Director of Garden Ltd., Budapest, at an invitation to tender of the European Union in 2008. Following a positive response, a program for creating a **Hungarian genetic database** was begun. The project will start by **saving each and every rose variety of Mr. Gergely Márk**.

Currently **Márk roses may be found at the following locations in Hungary**: In **Törökbálint**, near Budapest, in the rose garden of Mr. Gergely Márk, called the “Garden of Hungarian Roses”, where an exhibition garden may be visited by appointment, as circumstances allow. Currently this is the most complete collection of Márk roses. Also in the vicinity of Budapest, in the **Rosarium of Budatétény**, where some 200 Márk rose varieties can be seen on a remaining area of 2 hectares. In the **Budapest Botanical Garden**, where nearly 50 Márk varieties have been planted. Márk roses have also been planted in the public squares of other

towns. These include **Bócs** (Borsod county), **Iregszemcse** (Tolna county), **Nagykörű** (Szolnok county) and **Pécs-Cserkút** (Baranya county). The planting of additional **Márk roses is planned** in the following locations in Hungary: In **Budapest**, Főkert Nonprofit Zrt. is taking great pains to establish a “Szent István Park“ (“Saint Stephen Park”). Some 200 Márk rose varieties await in a container the funds necessary to carry out this project; in **Fertőd**, there are plans for the reconstruction of the rosarium of the Eszterházy palace, which will include planting varieties of Mr. Gergely Márk; in **Gödöllő**, where Márk roses are to be planted in the park of the Grassalkovich palace and in Keszthely, where the park of the Festetics palace is to be decorated with Márk rose varieties.

The **showcasing of Márk roses in public places has also begun** outside of Hungary, in particular, **in Germany**. At the initiative of **Mr. Wolfgang Gömer** and through his efforts a small Gergely Márk garden was created in **Lübstorf**, Nordwest-Mecklenburg province, which serves as an outdoor exhibition garden during the BUGA (Bundesdeutsche Gartenschau – German Federal Horticultural Exhibition) organized in 2009. Márk roses were planted in two German locations in order to observe them under particularly adverse, cold and rainy conditions: In **Saarland-Pfalz province and in Hessen province** under the care of **Mr. Richard Kuhn** and **Mrs. Astrid Röttel-Lipphardt**, respectively. As a result of an initiative by **Mr. Horst Zapf**, roses of Mr. Gergely Márk named after composers may be seen in the park of the **Hamburg-Bergedorf** palace. **Mr. Vladimir Jezovic** and his team are taking good care of some 30 Márk varieties in the **Rosarium Borova hora**, Zvolen, **Slovakia**.

In addition, an exceptionally frost resistant and excellent Márk rose, '**Árpád-házi-Szent Erzsébet emléke**' ('Heilige Elisabeth' or 'Saint Elisabeth of Hungary'), has been planted from 2007 on **in a series of famous rosariums, botanical gardens, arboretums and many other public places in Hungary, Germany, but also in other locations in Europe and even in Canada and Japan**. I will return to this story later on. I consider it important to mention here how widespread the Márk rose named '**Árpád-házi-Szent Erzsébet emléke**' ('Heilige Elisabeth' or 'Saint Elisabeth of Hungary') has become, because this reflects the solidarity, generosity and esteem of many rose-lovers worldwide. And in a way, it also means **a kind of moral recognition of Mr. Gergely Márk's breeding work, in the absence of market or financial indicators of sales**.

Márk roses showing better than average drought resistance. No. 1.

Class and year of introduction.



Rozália, Shrub/Cl, 1987.



Szent Imre emléke, FI, 1994.



Lórántffy Zsuzsánna emléke, FI, 1991.



Karát, FI, 1994.



Pöttöm, Min, 1994.



Lippay János emléke, FI, 1994.

Márk roses showing better than average drought resistance. No. 2.

Class and year of introduction.



Indira, FI, 1971.



Tamási Áron emléke, HT, 1991.



Törökbálint, HT, 1992.



Skóciai Szent Margit emléke, Shrub, 1998.



Marcsika, HT, 1991.



Márton Áron emléke, HT, 1989.

An outstanding Márk rose: 'Saint Elisabeth of Hungary', Shrub/Cl, introduced in 1988. (Synonyms: 'Árpád-házi Szent Erzsébet emléke' and 'Heilige Elisabeth'.)



Törökbálint, Hungary, 2006.



Törökbálint, Hungary, 2009.



Törökbálint, Hungary, 2007.



Balaton lake, Hungary, 2008.



Törökbálint, October 2008.



Ahrenshoop, Baltic See, December 2008