Unicum

A Drink with a Past

My first encounter with Unicum—a shot glass filled to the brim with dark, potent-smelling liquor—was not successful. On this, my first trip to Hungary, I sensed that my future father-in-law would be offended if I didn't take the glass he offered me. After all, he sometimes gave the stuff to his patients as a cure-all for upset stomachs. But unlike the Hungarians in the room, I couldn't gulp down the thick, bitter drink. Instead, I sipped it slowly until it finally, thankfully, disappeared.

Like other bitters, Unicum is an acquired taste. The trick to drinking it is to try it twice, claims Péter Zwack, heir to Zwack Unicum, the company that has been producing Unicum for more than two centuries. The drink becomes addictive after the second try, he assured me, even though "fifty percent of the people who try it hate it. We don't try to change their minds, because you either like it or you don't." This anticipated response is reflected in Unicum's American marketing campaign, which once used the slogan "Force Yourself."

I didn't develop a taste for Unicum on that first trip to Hungary. But I did acquire a fascination for the drink, if only because it is so important to Hungarians. The round green bottles featuring a golden cross on a red label are ubiquitous, and there's hardly a Hungarian home without a bottle stashed away to be ceremoniously pulled out when visitors arrive. Unicum has such a hold over Hungarian drinkers that they tend not to drink any other brands of bitters, unlike in Italy, another bitters-loving nation, where it's common to see up to half a dozen types of Italian bitters (plus Unicum) on bar shelves. In Hungary, Unicum sits alone.

So what is Unicum? And what makes it different from the world's other bitters? This thick, nearly black, concoction is made from over forty herbs, roots, and spices, more than are found in competitors' products. The precise formula is a carefully guarded family secret, which during the Communist era was stored in a safety deposit box in New York. The Zwacks won't reveal any details about the proportions of herbs and spices they use, or even the names of all the ingredients that go into a bottle. But they eagerly explain the rest of the process. The herbs, spices, and roots used in Unicum come from trusted suppliers around the globe, many of whom have been selling to the company for decades. "They have to send us samples first, and then we decide if we want to buy them," explains Péter Zwack. "The choice of suppliers is essential. Herbs have good vintages and bad ones." Unicum is also produced differently from other bitters, most of which are made by diffusion, a process that involves soaking the herbs in alcohol to extract their flavor. But for Unicum many of the herbs are distilled because, as Zwack explains, they respond only to the process of steam, not to diffusion.

Part of Unicum's mystique lies in the secrecy surrounding the original formula. Even the workers who make the drink work with premixed herbs, notes Péter Kerényi, Zwack Unicum's communications director; they know only the percentages of the mixtures they need to combine. Some of the herbs are macerated in water for thirty days; the rest are distilled. Then, in a process that has remained almost unchanged for over two hundred years, the two parts are blended and aged in oak casks for six months. Distillation gives Unicum its distinctive aroma and bitter bouquet, while the aging process contributes mellowness and body. "Ninety-nine percent of our competitors use only cement tanks, but we use oak barrels," says Zwack. "We also age the mixture, which helps it develop tannins and body, just like wine."

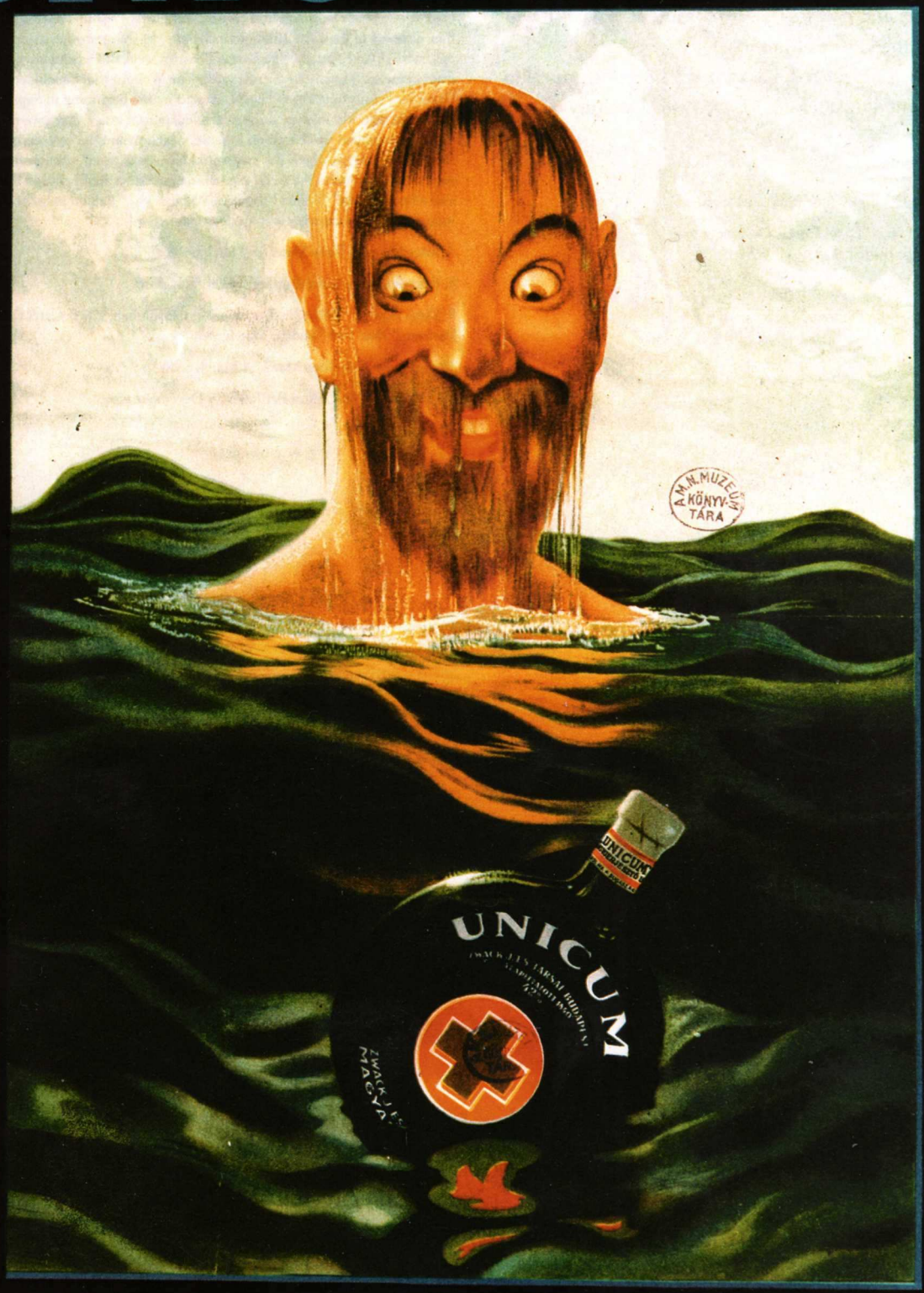
As a national symbol, Unicum has a long history that in many ways mirrors the history of modern Hungary itself. It all began with Dr. Zwack, a physician for the Habsburg imperial court, who, at the end of the eighteenth century, created the drink to alleviate the royal family's indigestion. "Das ist ein Unikum!" (This is unique!), Emperor Joseph II is said to have cried, giving the drink a name that has stuck. Only in 1840, when Dr. Zwack's descendant József Zwack opened a shop in Budapest, was Unicum sold to the general public. The company came to produce more than two hundred liqueurs and brandies. As one of the first commercial distilleries to use all-natural ingredients, Unicum was the sole

Drowning Man, circa 1914–1915. Courtesy of Zwack Unicum.

GASTRONOMICA: THE JOURNAL OF FOOD AND CULTURE, VOL. 6, NO. 4, PP. 79–82, ISSN 1529-3262. © 2006 BY THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PLEASE DIRECT ALL REQUESTS FOR PERMISSION TO PHOTOCOPY OR REPRODUCE ARTICLE CONTENT THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS'S RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS WEB SITE, AT WWW.UCPRESS.EDU/JOURNALS/RIGHTS.HTM.

UNICUM

GYOMORERŐSÍTŐ
LIKŐR



A M.N. MÚZEUM
KÖNYVTÁRA

KIOSZ
COLOROFFSET

ZWACK BUDAPEST

F.: KIPETERI MIKLÓS

purveyor of spirits to the Habsburg court. It also exported spirits to Russia, Italy, France, and the United States.

But things grew difficult for Zwack Unicum in the twentieth century. During the 1944 siege of Budapest, their factory was destroyed. It was rebuilt and modernized only to be confiscated and nationalized by the Communist government in 1948. Most of the Zwack family left Hungary for Italy and the United States. (István Szabó's 1999 film *Sunshine*, starring Ralph Fiennes, is widely thought to be based loosely on the Zwack family, though Péter Zwack denies the association.) Péter Zwack's father, János, took the family's secret recipe with him, leaving the Communists with a fake formula. Until Péter bought back the company in 1989, the Hungarian factory continued to produce an inauthentic version of Unicum, and during the transition period both the fake and the original versions were sold for about a year. "We had an easy time switching back to the original Unicum," Zwack told me. "But we were really worried that people wouldn't like the original after having become so used to the other kind. For forty years they didn't taste the real thing." The fake version of Unicum also suffered during the Communist era because there was no money to buy the proper herbs from abroad. "It wasn't a bad drink, but it wasn't the real thing," explained Péter Kerényi. "More than twenty herbs were missing, and it was much sweeter."

János Zwack spent his years in the United States battling the Hungarian government. In 1948 he filed a lawsuit claiming that the use of the name Zwack Unicum on the fake product was illegal. The precedent-setting litigation went on for ten years until the Zwacks eventually won, and the Socialists were forbidden to use the name "Zwack" when exporting to the West.

As for Péter Zwack, from the time he arrived in the United States as a young man, he worked in the wine and spirits business. He ran a successful wine import company, signed a licensing agreement with Jim Beam to produce Zwack gin and vodka, and imported Unicum in small quantities from Milan, where his uncle had begun producing the drink according to the original recipe. Péter sold Unicum in the United States mainly to protect the trademark, which had to be used in order to remain valid. He also tried to keep the Zwack family name visible. "We always had a very good market in America and a high profile as producers of some of the finest imported liqueurs," Zwack notes. "We carried a line of natural fruit liqueurs and imported some *pálinka* [Hungarian fruit brandy]. Unicum was of the least interest to Americans because they loved the liqueurs."

Zwack was convinced that the family name would be forgotten in Hungary, but it wasn't—thanks largely to a poster. Long before "branding" became a buzzword, the Zwack family understood the concept. In 1915 they came up with the "Drowning Man," one of several brilliant advertisements from the early twentieth century that remain among the most famous examples of Hungarian graphic design. "Drowning Man" depicts a bearded, crazed-looking man in the water, on the verge of drowning, who sees a bottle of Unicum floating before him. By implying that Unicum has saved him, the poster "became a protest against the regime. In the countryside people hung it in their houses as a kind of underground protest," Zwack explains.

In 1987 Péter Zwack was living in Italy, where he had moved in 1970 to manage the family company and do marketing for the Chianti Gallo Nero Consortium. He never intended to return to Hungary. "When I left Hungary, I was only seventeen and was convinced I would never come back. I never felt homesick for the country." But one day he got a call from Sándor Demján, one of Hungary's leading entrepreneurs, who urged him to return to Hungary. Although the country was still under Communist control, Demján convinced Zwack that things had changed. And so, in 1988 Zwack returned to Hungary with his British wife and two children, determined to rebuild the family business, which by then had been run into the ground. "People said I was crazy, that I'd lost my mind. Quite frankly, when the company was nationalized, I was a young man, life was ahead of me, and I didn't particularly care one way or the other. But when I came back, I saw all of this imitation Unicum, and I realized that when they took the company away from us something unforgivable had happened. That's the first time I realized as an adult man that I really wanted to get the business back."

Zwack decided not to ask for the company to be returned gratis, which he knew was unrealistic. Instead, he resolved to buy it back from the government. "The whole situation looked hopeless in the beginning," he recalled. "But it's quite a unique story because I was the first Hungarian industrialist who came back to live here. There was nobody else—even George Soros continued to live in America."

Zwack successfully reacquired the company in 1989, and since then it has experienced a string of successes. His equal partner in the company is Emil Underberg, heir to the Swiss family-run bitters company. They have added new liqueurs and spirits to the company's portfolio, including Vilmos pear brandy, Zwack vodka, apricot *pálinka*, St. Hubertus liqueur, Sissi apricot cream liqueur, and Lánchíd

Right: *Young Péter Zwack and his mother, Budapest 1931.*
COURTESY OF ZWACK UNICUM



brandy. In 1993 Zwack Unicum's shares were floated for the first time on the Budapest Stock Exchange, and International Distillers & Vintners (IDV, which also distributes a number of internationally known spirits such as Smirnoff, J&B, and Bailey's) became a partner in the company. Wine is also an increasingly important part of the Zwack production; in 1992 Zwack and Piero Antinori of the famous Italian wine dynasty launched a line of wines under the label Möcsény.

Because the United States isn't a bitters-drinking country, Unicum remains a hard sell. But it is served at an increasing number of fine New York restaurants, such as the Four Seasons, Le Cirque, Café des Artistes, San Domenico, La Goulue, and 'Cesca. Americans still have to learn how to drink it. In Hungary, Unicum is most commonly enjoyed as a shot at room temperature, drunk with a certain bravado. Zwack insists that chilling the drink kills the flavor. He prefers to sip his Unicum in a snifter, swirling it like cognac. And although Hungarians rarely drink cocktails, Zwack suggests mixing Unicum with Coke (whose sweetness cuts the bitterness) or with tonic (because both are bitter).

Despite the Zwack family's peregrinations and the company's evolution, the recipe for Unicum hasn't changed. "We have always experimented but never succeeded in making a better Unicum," says Zwack. "The recipe is like a house of cards. If you change one element, the whole thing collapses." And the recipe remains closely kept. Even Péter Zwack's children do not have it, though they know how to get it. Only one person outside the immediate family has access to the original formula—the bishop of Esztergom, who has strict instructions to release it only if everyone in the family has died. The company has, however, created new drinks based on the original. One that didn't succeed was called Unicum Nite, which was, as Zwack admits, "a flop." Sold in individual-sized bottles, in the style of Bacardi Breezers, it contained less alcohol than Unicum. The company's most recent innovation promises to be more successful. Created by Sándor and Izabella, Péter Zwack's two youngest children, Unicum Next has a lower alcohol content and a lighter, smoother taste, with hints of citrus. The distinctive Unicum flavor is still evident, but the herbs are mixed in different proportions. It is meant to appeal to young people, who the company hopes will constitute the next generation of Unicum drinkers.

Since 1892 the company has been headquartered on Soroksáriút in Budapest's ninth district. Even before you arrive at the factory, you can smell the distinctive Unicum aroma, licoricey and herbal. Not long ago the district was a slum, but just as Zwack Unicum has become one of Hungary's most successful companies, so the neighborhood has become a model of successful urban renewal. The complex now contains a museum that tells the story of both the company and the Zwack family. It also contains what is claimed to be the largest collection of mini bottles in Europe—fifteen thousand of them. The display is organized chronologically, with music corresponding to the different eras in Unicum's past. During Péter Zwack's years in America, you hear Frank Sinatra. When the Berlin Wall falls and Communism ends, you hear Pink Floyd. There are family photos, documents, and mementos, which because of the turbulence of the times have become important parts of Hungarian history as well. Classic Unicum ads, old Unicum bottles, company souvenirs, and news clippings round out the exposition. Most important, every visit to the museum ends on a perfect note—a tasting of Unicum, Unicum Next, and Zwack *barack pálinka* (apricot brandy). These days I no longer have to say to myself, "Go on, force yourself. It's good for you." Like a true Hungarian, I now drink it right down.