

# Budapest Bears

Jacqueline Ruyak pays a visit to teddy bear shop Maciművek in Budapest, Hungary.

**M**aciművek, the only teddy bear shop in Budapest, is located in a small courtyard off Szent István Street, near the center of the city. It is a block from the historic Nyugati train station, and about a five-minute walk from the Danube.

Teddy bear maker Kriszta Simon opened Maciművek ten years ago with her husband. (They are now separated

Maciművek owner Kriszta Simon cuddles one of her creations. Photos by Jacqueline Ruyak



but remain amicable business partners.) The story started, however, several years earlier when Simon, then a special-education teacher of children with speech impediments, found a book in a Budapest bookshop about old teddy bears. It was her first real exposure to vintage bears—so different from the ones she was accustomed to seeing in toyshops.

"I fell in love with them," says Simon, her eyes shining and voice bubbling with enthusiasm. "And I wondered what made old bears, which were often shabby and missing fur and eyes, so popular, so lovable. Why, for instance, did children cherish a bear handed down from a grandmother?" She decided to find the answer to the question "Why this toy?"

Simon started by collecting bears, then making them. She had long practiced patchwork and loved sewing by hand. In the late 1990s, she and her husband decided to open a gift shop featuring handmade items, including teddy bears. Customers soon demanded more bears, and in 1998 the couple abandoned the gift shop and opened Maciművek,

Simon helps a customer pick out a teddy bear kit.



which means teddy bear factory.

Though Simon makes bears to sell at the shop, little about Maciművek suggests a factory. A long sliver of a space, it is more like a warmly lit teddy bear cave, its walls lined with shelves that are piled deep with bears from all over the world. Among the various commercial bears sold at the shop are Russ (United States), Anna Club Plush (the Netherlands) and Sunkid (Germany), which Simon buys at wholesale markets in Hungary. Teddy bear accessories of all kinds are also perennial favorites.

## Heart and Soul

"My regular customers are very, very good people," Simon notes. "From the start, I noticed that there was a differ-





**Left:** Maciművek is located in a small courtyard off Szent István Street, near the center of Budapest. **Above:** Simon chats with holiday shoppers. **Right and below:** Maciművek offers all kinds of teddies and bearabilia.

like to make ones that look like true bears in the forest, with realistic ears and big feet. The latter are hard to make and there's little middle ground with them. When they're good, they're very good, but if they're bad, they're awful."

Customers provide Simon with much of her inspiration. "It's better to see a col-

lector's face," she says, "when he or she buys a bear. It's good to sit here in my shop because I get to see my collectors looking at the bears. That inspires me to make new ones. If I were just working at home, I think I may have stopped making bears years ago."

Sometimes, though, she finds herself unable to make any bears. "If I made bears only to sell them at the shop, they wouldn't be good bears. Rather, I prefer to make them when I am ready to make them, not because I must make them. So I must buy bears from other makers in order to have the freedom to make bears myself."

"Teddy bearology" fascinates Simon, who collects the many bear tales shared by her customers. "People open their hearts and tell me such stories," she says. "Some people who come to the shop think teddy bears are just childish things, but I think a person with a healthy soul and heart has the heart of a child. Having the heart of a child is important to having a healthy soul and heart. Many people have forgotten that, and that is what makes them unhappy. I see it all the time."

She recounts the story of a young woman who showed up one morning at



ence between them and customers at the gift shop. These people have good hearts and souls, and knowing that makes me feel full inside."

Most customers are adults, Simon says, and pretty evenly split between men and women. Some buy for children, some for other loved ones. But many are collectors who buy for themselves. The number of teddy bear collectors in Hungary has grown since the advent of democracy in 1990, in large part because of increased access to bears from all over the world. An annual collectors' exhibition is now held each February.

Collectors are most likely to buy the bears Simon makes. These bruins, which range in price from \$15 to \$80, are usually placed within reach of the counter at the rear of the shop. She makes two different kinds: "I like to make bears like the old bears from 100 years ago and I also



opening time. The woman had been released that morning from the hospital, where she had been for three weeks with severe depression. She said she had other Maciművek bears at home and always felt better when she was holding them. They were like a medicine to her and she wanted a new one. For Simon, who happened to be facing a crisis in her own life, it was "as if the woman had dropped from the sky. Her words changed everything for me too."

Simon also repairs bears and teaches bear-making workshops, which are usually held by request, in a small room above the shop. When she started doing the workshops, she assumed only women would take part, but she was pleased to find that was not the case. To date, nine men have also participated.

A popular item at the shop are the teddy bear kits, based on Simon's bears, which her husband makes. Available in Hungarian or English, the kits are sold under the Maciművek name at the shop and at handcraft shops in Budapest.

Running a small business in Hungary's current economic climate is a struggle, and Simon is justly proud of her success. When the shop opened, there were two



Simon created these tiny teddies.

other teddy bear stores in Budapest, but now Maciművek is the only one.

"There have been rough times along the way," Simon shares, "and my customers sometimes worry that I will go under. But I always tell them, don't worry, don't worry! It's a little business making a little money. But this is actually a good location, near the center of

the city. Those who find me once often come back. And they tell others about it. That's the reason I'm still here." 🐻

### Irresistible Appeal

Why are old bears popular? Kriszta Simon has come to several conclusions. First, they recall a more peaceful time, before the two World Wars. Even more, perhaps, they remind us of our own childhood. Teddy bears make us feel safe and secure, but they are also special because their eyes have life. Because they seem to be alive, you absolutely must give them a name. Sit a teddy bear in an armchair, she says, and you will feel that someone is waiting for you when you come home.

Teddy bears also go from being new to old, just as people grow from young to old. When new, a bear has a smooth coat, shiny eyes and a good shape, but as it ages it becomes like an old man, with patchy hair, dulled eyes and a crooked body. "But an old bear is not a bad thing," Simon says. "It's like an antique, much like an old piece of porcelain belonging to your grandmother, something made precious through use." She adds, "An old bear should be treated with honor and respect."

This window on Szent István Street displays some of Maciművek's offerings.

