

The Odyssey of the Oom Paul: A Hungarian ... Really?  
Ben Rapaport

### **The Back Story**

Rummaging around the Internet in spring 2014, I discovered the OomPaul Society of Non Typicalals ([www.oompaul.com](http://www.oompaul.com)), and noticed that it had been an active organization for some six years. I scrolled through the online commentaries looking for a post or two either about the person (Oom Paul Kruger) to whom (allegedly) this unique pipe shape is attributed, or for something about a recent Internet online discussion as to whether the Oom Paul is more accurately called “Hungarian.” At times the Oom Paul has been known by another name, “Hungarian Bent” and, just as frequently, “Bent Unter.” Some briar aficionados say that the two terms are synonymous; other pipe mavens are noncommittal or don’t care a whit. If asked, I might say it’s a case of mistaken identity; if pressed to testify, I might say it’s speculation. Why am I of this opinion? In the spring 2008 issue of *Pipes & Tobaccos* magazine appeared my “War and Peace Pipes. Commemoration and Remembrance” in which I wrote about and illustrated many Boer War-era Oom Paul pipes. I did not encounter the term Hungarian in my research on those Boer War Oom Pauls. Previous to that, I had published much about the history and evolution of the Austro-Hungarian pipe industry and three unique wood pipe formats that her craftsmen produced (mentioned later).

I contacted the founder of the society, Olie Sylvester, who responded immediately to advise that neither its mission nor its purpose encompasses an investigative pursuit of information about Kruger or the Oom Paul pipe. I offered to craft a mini-monograph about both, he willingly accepted, and I enthusiastically complied. (As I mined deeper, however, this mini-monograph became a dissertation. Perhaps Olie expected that I would offer the Society the time of day, but I ended up building him a watch!) I offer this as background information to anyone interested in knowing something more about the Oom Paul format. For the ultra-curious and inquisitive aficionado, reminiscent of the 1966 Burt Bachrach and Hal David song, it’s my way to answer: “What’s it all About, Olie?” It’s a rather convoluted story.

Here’s what I knew and what I have since found in various references. As you take account of the balance of this article, consider, allegorically, Act II, Scene II of Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.” She asks: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet...” to which Romeo replies: “By a name, I know not how to tell thee who I am.” Or, for something more contemporary, consider René Magritte: “An object encounters its image, an object encounters its name. It may be that the image and the name of the object encounter each other” (*Les Mots et Les Images* [Words and Images], 1929). Both quotations play a significant role in what follows.

### **Something About South Africa and Kruger**

South Africa, a country of diamonds (Kimberley) and gold, was also an important player in tobacco pipe manufacture in the 19th century. The long and colorful recorded history of tobacco and smoking has always reprised the story of the Oom Paul—this famous pipe has a memorable place in South Africa's history—and Kruger, but she also made a significant contribution in a much more important event in pipe lore. This small nation was the epicenter and principal exporter of the calabash gourd and its eventual development into an appealing smoking pipe!

Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger (Oom Paul, Afrikaans for ‘Uncle Paul’) was a statesman, resistance leader against British rule, and the State President of the South African Republic (Transvaal), best remembered as the lion-hearted patriot for facing down the British during the Second Boer War ((1899–1902). “*Oom ‘uncle’ Paul Krüger*, the legendary old Boer War president, a notorious pipe smoker, was never far from his pipe. A full-bent pipe was custom designed for him, and this particular style continues to be manufactured in various European countries even today, still designated an ‘Oom Paul.’”<sup>1</sup> “His long *black* [my italics] pipe is always associated with him in the minds of those who have talked to him.”<sup>2</sup> “His [Kruger’s] dirty wooden pipe was visible, for it stuck out of his breast pocket.”<sup>3</sup> Given the commercial relationship between Great Britain and South Africa, this “full-bent, black, dirty, wooden pipe” was undoubtedly produced in a factory in London or elsewhere in the Isles. (Note that “briar” is not mentioned in any of these quotations. Perhaps it was understood.) One of the many illustrations of Kruger is an 1899 *Vanity Fair* caricature depicting him in his customary garb, a black frock coat and a top hat, smoking a deep-bent wood pipe, and it’s certainly not an Oom Paul but, after all, artists have a license to take liberties with their renditions!

In *The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (1975), John Dickson Carr claims that curved pipes were unknown in England until they were imported during the Boer War. If this is true, then Kruger might have had a degree of influence on the eventual popularity of this particular shape; some historians even claim that Kruger made this pipe famous around the world. As a gratuitous comment, the Boer War made its mark, however slight, on the tobacco industry: Kruger had a pipe shape named after him and, for several years, cigars were produced to honor (Field Marshal) Lord Frederick Sleigh Roberts (of Kandahar), British commander-in-chief in that war, and Robert Baden-Powell, a Boer War hero.

### **Much More About the Oom Paul ... Historically Speaking**

As the story goes, factory-finished briar pipes were sent from England to British soldiers and Colonial troops serving in that war. The supply flowed from manufacturers—GBD and BBB in particular—and from private citizens. In the *Wisbech Standard*, an English newspaper, in 1899, appeared the statement that each British soldier departing for Africa’s Boer War was given a pipe, a pound of tobacco, and a Bible ... paid for by

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Botes Krüger, *A Battlement of Spears* (Xliibis Corporation, 2006), 80.

<sup>2</sup> (J. W. Buel, *Conquering the Dark Continent* (Official Publishing Company, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, 1899), 456.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *The Last Empire* (HarperCollinsCanadaLtd., 1993), 119.

patriotic funds. More proof is a clipping from another English newspaper of summer 1900: “Mrs Woodhams of ‘Treelawn’, Woburn Sands, has been collecting clothing and presents to send to the troops in South Africa and has so far got 9 flannel shirts, 6 pairs of knitted socks, 13 wool mufflers, 35 cup covers, 6 knitted cholera belts, 3 helmets, 18 pipes, a pipe lighter and 4lb of tobacco to send to Mafeking.”<sup>4</sup> It was also reported that school-age children asked their parents for money to purchase tobacco and pipes to give to British soldiers as keepsakes as they departed for Africa. Here’s further confirmation of this noble gesture: “The battalion met with a great reception at Maritzburg, where a halt was made for nine hours. Here each man was presented by the ladies of that place with a pipe, half a pound of tobacco, and a pocket-handkerchief.”<sup>5</sup> And where did the tobacco come from? The largest supplier was a Dutch immigrant, Leonard Dingler, who sold it to soldiers throughout the Transvaal.

Many soldiers and prisoners in the Second Boer War often carved their pipes from scratch, rummaging around and using whatever hard wood was available; these pipes were often erroneously called Trench art. The preponderance of pipes attributed to this war in private collections and museums, however, were the aforementioned, factory-finished pipes, and the vast majority were Oom Pauls. Encamped and imprisoned soldiers carved their personal messages in English or Afrikaans, and etched or incised unit designations, heraldic crests, military engagements, names of leaders, dates, and other information related to the many campaigns and skirmishes between the British and the South African Dutch. What is sure is that the Oom Paul pipe symbolized the Boer War, and it was into *this* very pipe shape that these symbols were carved.

A historically interesting group consists of ‘Boer’-type pipes engraved by or for soldiers during the various wars in South Africa.... The troops, who used to refer to them as Kruger pipes, found their large size admirably suited to take engravings, or deeper carvings, of one or more of the following: name, rank, regiment, regimental crest, a list of battles or skirmishes participated in, dates of service in a particular theatre of war, and usually the name of the war. More rarely the head of the enemy leader Kruger also appeared.<sup>6</sup>

For those interested in seeing some of these pipes online, several museums retain examples: the Anglo-Boer War Museum, Bloemfontein and the Ladysmith Siege Museum, Ladysmith, South Africa; the Australian War Museum, Campbell, Australia; the Royal Welsh Fusiliers Regimental Museum, North Wales; and the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, Canada.

### **Today’s British Experts Chime In**

Now, something about the controversy between the Oom Paul and the Hungarian.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.woburnsands.co.uk/history/summer1900.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> M. Jackson, Colonel, *The Record of a Regiment of the Line Being a Regimental History of the 1st Battalion Devonshire Regiment During the Boer War 1899–1902* (London, Hutchinson & Co., 1908), 209.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Fresco-Corbu, “All Types of Wooden Pipes,” *Art & Antiques Weekly*, March 26, 1977, 27.

The recently deceased J. P. Cole, whose father, J. W. Cole, worked for GBD, was a known quantity in the UK pipe trade, and author of *The GBD St Claude Pipe Story* (1976), the history of Cadogan French pipe houses. He had much to say about Oom Pauls and Hungarians. In one of his later publications, *Briar Pipe Shapes and Styles* (Pipe Line Guide No. 1, 1990), he stated, in part:

Very few BENT POTS really exist. The point is that the Pot bowl really emerged from the straight sided Hungarian Bents, so we must look at these first. HUNGARIAN BENTS are really those that we now call OOM PAULS....These bents will normally have the ends of the stems roughly in line with the tops of the bowls. The stems will be thick and the pipes will be on the large side.

In 1995, in “Briar Pipe Shapes and Models Until 1914” (*The Pipe Year Book 1995*), Cole added: “There was a wealth of existing bents, and predominantly the Hungarian bents which were technically easier to turn than bents like the Ulmers. In applying their technical skills, the turners of Saint-Claude developed the ‘Billiard bent’ and also the ‘egg Bent.’” He expounded further about Bents in a feature article in “*PipeSmoke*” (Fall 1998, Volume II, Issue 2), but I include only his comments about the Oom Paul and the Hungarian: “A notable type of Bent which has been a favorite for over a hundred years is the Hungarian Bent, which has parallel sides (like a high pot) and is also known as the OOP [*sic*] Paul, named after Paul Charger, the South African leader of the Boer War, who preferred this shape.” (A bit confusing?)

When I asked John C. Adler, ex-chairman and managing director of Cadogan Investments, what he knew, he remarked: “I spent some time looking at old catalogues and found the shape in BBB & GBD catalogues circa 1907/8. However they are only referred to by shape number .... I also found the name ‘Hungarian’ in a Loewe catalogue, but the shape is not Oom Paul. It then struck my memory that it might be a St.-Claude description of the bowl. I spoke with Jacques Cole and he confirmed that Hongroise was the shape name (spelling could be incorrect). Thus the use of Hungarian as this shape is correct, although I suspect it has nothing to do with Hungary.” (In French, *Hongrois* [masculine] means Hungarian, and the feminine, *Hongroise*, was probably the adjective modifying the word pipe, i.e., *La Pipe Hongroise* or *Une Pipe Hongroise*.)

I decided to follow up by looking through a few British pipe catalogs in hand. The 1899 catalog of Salmon & Gluckstein, London, the largest retail tobacconist chain with more than 120 branch outlets in the United Kingdom, contains a host of smoker requisites, but its briar pipe product line contains no pipe reminiscent of an Oom Paul/Hungarian. The 1912 BBB Catalogue No. XX (Adolph Frankau & Co., Inc.) includes a few approximate Oom Paul shapes, but none of these are a true Oom Pauls, and none bear a model name. An early 1900s Barling catalog includes one of “Barling’s Celebrated Pipes,” the “Viking,” No. 235, but, again, close, but no cigar. Last, a search of the Loewe’s 1910 *Illustrated Price List and Catalogue No. 7* offers a discovery on Page 14 in living black and white: “The Boer,” Model No. 95 was an Oom Paul, without question, but identified by this other name.

## The Online Discussion

Jim (Sandpiper), the Peterson Pipe Connoisseur & Collector, has this to say on his website: “Many prefer the term Hungarian over Oom Paul, since the pipe’s history is more appealing than the history of the man, with it’s [*sic*] connotations of racism and association with apartheid.”

“It has always been an Oom Paul to me. Dunhill, GBD, and several others use the Hungarian designation for political reasons. Most makers stick to accepted convention on the popular shapes, but they can call them what they want. There are no ‘official’ shapes, as far as I know. The Hungarian designation is just petty silliness to me, but they made the pipe, and can stamp on there whatever they want”

(<http://pipechat.info/index.php?topic=5058.0>).

On the Brothers of Briar website: “Today while collecting information on the Hungarian pipe shape, it cane [*sic*] to my attention that two of the largest pipe manufactors [*sic*] in the world, do not use the name Oom Paul in their pipe charts, (Dunhill & Peterson).”

Perhaps this is true today, but as late as 1950, one of the Dunhill ODA 800 Series was Number 818, an Oom Paul, not a Hungarian!

Monbla 256 writes on [www.brothersofthebriar.com](http://www.brothersofthebriar.com):

Despite the continuing confusion between the Oom Paul and Hungarian nomenclatures, they are two very distinct shapes. The Oom Paul has a cylindrical bowl, and the Hungarian bowl is egg-shaped. At least, that’s the way I learned it. But nowadaze, it’s common to see ‘Hungarian’ and ‘Oom Paul’ used interchangeably, and both are applied to the Oom Paul shape. Meanwhile, the true Hungarian shape is apparently becoming an endangered species.

The genesis of the confusion between Oom Paul and Hungarian shapes isn’t clear, but reportedly, it was instigated by Dunhill. As the story goes, being ‘good Englishmen’, they weren’t about to concede anything to ‘Uncle’ Paul (Oom Paul) Kruger, who had been Britain’s principal antagonist in the Boer Wars, after whom the cylindrical Oom Paul shape was named. Hence, Dunhill ascribed the moniker ‘Hungarian’ to both shapes so as not to provide any politically incorrect recognition of Mr. Kruger.

Jim Lilley of the International Peterson Pipe Club opines: “To explain the ‘Oom Paul’ label, it was a designation given to a 19th century South African politician named Paul Kruger, their first President. He smoked a pipe shaped similar to what’s called the Oom Paul or Hungarian today” (<http://btheinternationalpetersonpipeclub.runboard.com/t1530>).

Last, Pipedia.org illustrates a pipe labeled “Oom Paul/Hungarian.”

## Recent Internet Sales of “Hungarians”

As a sidebar to this discussion, I want to mention a few online sales of Hungarians. Gauntleys, a Nottingham, England, shop dating back to the 1880s advertises for sale a

“London Briar” No. 22-Hungarian (Brown Sandblast)” described as “Large and heavy full bent, Hungarian shaped pipe. Brown glossy sandblast finish.” There’s the “Shire Carved Hungarian Calabash Rosewood Tobacco Pipe w/Saddle Stem & Filter” offered by AFG Distribution, and the very same pipe offered on Amazon as the “Fess Hungarian Calabash Carved/Textured Rosewood Tobacco Pipe w/Filter.” From the posted color images, all three offers pretty much resemble the Calabash pipe.

### **It’s My Turn**

I am not a briar pipe expert, but as a pipe historian, I choose to join the conversation. Many books have been published recounting the history, evolution, manufacture, and export/import of various pipes, e.g., clay, porcelain, wood (including briar), and meerschaum. The best-illustrated coverage of the Austro-Hungarian pipe industry is Ferenc Levárdy, *Our Pipe-Smoking Forebears* (1994). In it is a detailed account of what Hungarian historians, pipe experts and collectors claim are three distinctive pipe shapes originating in their homeland early in its industry, and these three were produced in wood, less so in meerschaum; through time, each underwent slight factory variations in their configuration. These three uniquely Hungarian Bents are (1) Kalmasch, (2) Debrecen, and (3) Rákóczy. Of the three, the Rákóczy comes close, but not that close in design silhouette to an Oom Paul—perhaps a one-off Oom Paul—because its bowl is the shortest of the three in height, and its curved shank bends closest to and in parallel with the bowl. However, on further inspection, I would venture that the Oom Paul more closely resembles the German *Thüringer Aufsatzpfeife*, but introducing this German shape into this discussion makes everything yet more confusing.

### **The Synthesis**

At this juncture, would the following syllogism seem reasonably sound? The three aforementioned (Austro)-Hungarian pipe configurations were Bents produced in assorted woods (not briar) long before St.-Claude became the epicenter of briar pipe manufacture, c. mid-1850s. If Carr’s claim that curved pipes were unknown in England until they were imported during the Boer War, then the chances are that those carved (i.e., Bent) pipes were probably briars exported from St.-Claude factories that were in operation much before Great Britain entered the briar business. And where might those French craftsmen have received their inspiration for the curved shapes they produced? Which was the only country, until the 1850s, making and exporting all sorts of wood smoking pipes? Hungary! Most likely French craftsmen took notice of one or more of the Hungarian models. The *Hongroise* was just one of many Bents produced in St.-Claude long before anyone in France became familiar with the name Uncle Paul or the Second Boer War.

The *Hongroise* entered the market before any English pipe maker produced the Oom Paul shape. What is also plausible is that the *Hongroise* was an arbitrarily chosen word coined by some pipe artisan in a nondescript mid-19th century St.-Claude atelier to describe and identify a certain Bent briar shape, just as later factories in England would assign unique names to their own pipe shapes: Golf, Woodstock, Melbourne, Rover, Rotunda, etc. What

was the precise shape of the French-made *Hongroise* other than it having some type of bent or curved silhouette? I can find no catalog image, no exacting description, and no other information in a primary or secondary source that makes reference to a Hungarian. And I emphasize that the *Hongroise* has no direct antecedent—although it might have a gauzy, or gossamer-thin one—to any of the three Bents developed in late Eighteenth-early Nineteenth-century Austro-Hungary.

Was the *Hongroise* an Oom Paul, the Oom Paul a *Hongroise*? While I dare not challenge the two British pipe authorities that I know and respect, I find that their statements about the interchangeability of the terms Oom Paul and Hungarian lack conviction and suggest doubt; they offer no specific description as to what the Hungarian shape looked like. Furthermore, no one seems to know who was responsible for assigning synonymy to the two names, or why there are two terms for the same shape. I am convinced that the true Oom Paul is a distinctive British pipe design and that the *Hongroise* might have been a look-alike, a fair facsimile, or a case of mistaken identity with the Oom Paul.

Finally, from my brief research, I found nothing on record indicating that, at a time, the Oom Paul was deemed politically incorrect, and that Hungarian became the generally accepted term to replace it. Chronologically, if the English pipe industry or the proper pipe-smoking Englishman found everything “Boer” or Uncle Paul off-putting or offensive, that would have been the milieu during or following the Second Boer War. No British catalog of the period (late 1890s through 1912) I looked through contained a shape listed as Hungarian.

## **Conclusion**

What to make of this jumble? To anyone bent (no pun intended) on getting to ground truth, good luck! Whether it’s called an Oom Paul, a Hungarian, or something else again, I am convinced that it’s not worth any additional effort to dispute or disclaim it, or to dissect it further. It’s just a proverbial rose by another name. For me, the words of the 1970 Beatles hit still ring true: “Let it be!”