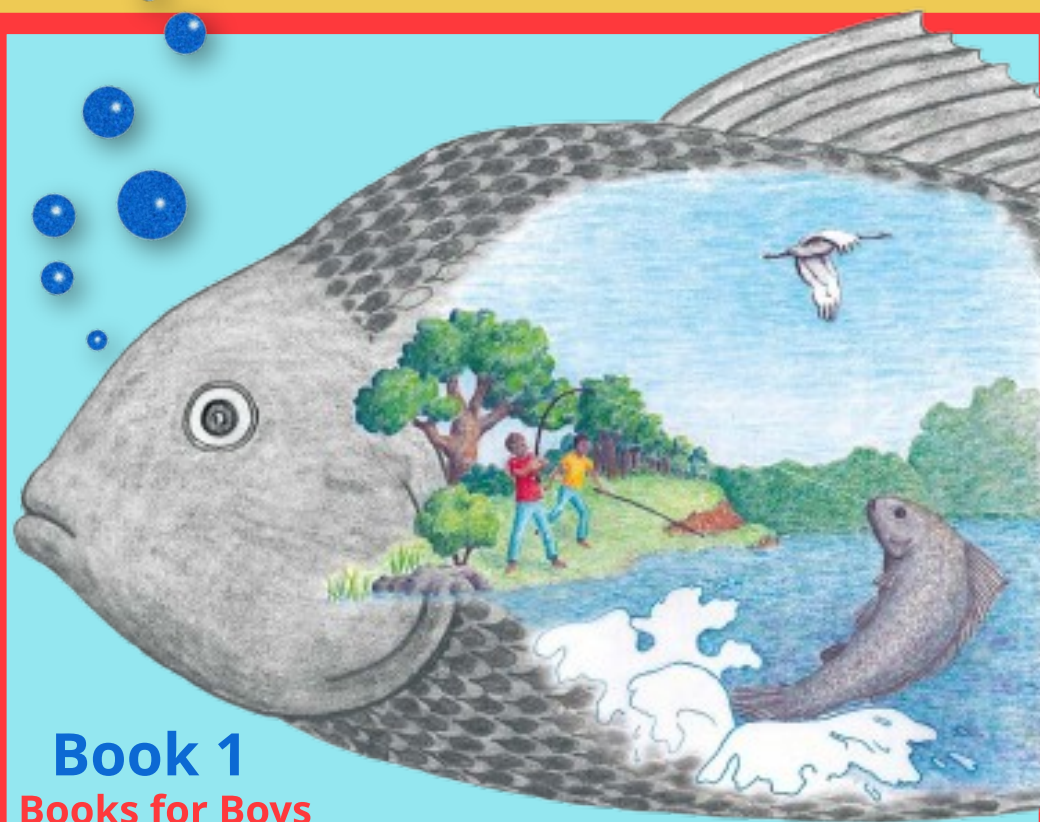


THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING FISH

The Danube River Valley Kids Series



Book 1

Books for Boys



GREEN SHUTTERS
PUBLISHING

by
Bob Hitching

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING FISH

By Bob Hitching

The Adventures
of the
Danube River Valley Kids



Book One

to
Hannah
&
Habibi
winter

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CHAPTER One

A Great Idea

1

The Roma village that Petar and Jovan lived in was not big, but it was not small either. There were about 100 homes spread out in no special order. There were small alley ways running in between the houses. The village was very close to the River Danube. They lived about 800 meters outside of the Serbian village. The River Danube was on one side of the Roma village and a small forest on the other side.

It was a perfect place for young boys to live. They could go fishing in the river and climb trees in the forest. Some of the older boys would hunt for rabbits there as well. Rabbit skinned and cooked on an open grill with paprika and garlic was thought of as a special treat.

Petar and Jovan were cousins. Their mothers were sisters. Both boys were 12 years old, but Petar was taller and, in some ways, fairer than Jovan who was shorter and darker skinned.

Petar and Jovan's village was a place where there lived a mixture of people. Some lived in tiny one room houses with no electricity or water. The women who lived in them had to walk to the one and only water tap in the village. It was almost on

the edge of the forest. The women would carry buckets and pans filled with water back to their houses to do their cooking and washing.

Other homes were much nicer than theirs. Those homes had electricity and some had indoor bathrooms and toilets. A few of the houses were like beautiful palaces. Or so it seemed, because no one in the village had ever seen a real palace before. These few houses were very large and had everything in them that a rich family would have. The people who lived in them needed nothing. The only problem was everyone knew that most of the men who lived in the big houses got their money from doing illegal things. Everybody knew it, but nobody talked about it.

Petar was sitting in his house. It had three rooms and an outside toilet. There was a very small garden in the back and Petar's mother grew small pink flowers in a cracked pot by the door. Petar had a pet cat. Every morning, Peter fed the family's seven hens and collected their eggs before going to school.

Petar could smell the big pot of Letcho his mother was cooking in the family's tiny kitchen. He sat on a wooden chair with a checkered blue and white cushion on it and leaned against the steamy window. Peeking through the white lace curtain, Petar watched the activity happening outside as it did every morning in his little Roma village.

Petar's father was sitting in an armchair fast asleep. He had been drinking heavily for about three days and he needed at least two days of quiet to feel better again. He was a big man but not what you would call fat. He had huge arms with a large homemade tattoo of somebody's name etched on one of them. Petar did not know whose name it was and when he asked his father, Petar's mother was not very happy and grew quiet. Petar decided he did not need to know that story and never asked again.

Now that late spring had come, there were two great joys in Petar's life. School would soon be finished, and the days would get longer and longer. That meant only one thing, and it was

Petar's favorite thing to do – fishing.

Petar looked over at his father sitting in his old armchair and then again sniffed his mom's Letcho cooking as the smell made its way from the kitchen past, his nose, and out the open window which faced the center of his village. Petar's mom was cutting up the onions, tomatoes and paprika's and then adding some special spices that only she knew how to blend. Her mother had taught her the family's Letcho secret, and her mother before her as well. Mother's Lecho was the best. She cooked everything slowly in a large pot with a big bone to give it extra flavor. The pot was cooked on the wood stove until you could no longer tell which vegetable was

which any more.

When Petar was younger, Petar's father would often tease and make a joke by telling Petar that the bone was cut from the leg of the half demon, half man called Drac that everyone knew wandered through the village at night looking for children to snatch away who had been naughty in the day. One of the great days in Petar's young life was when he discovered the truth about the bone and the truth that there was no half demon and no half man wandering through the village at night. He felt a little guilty as he remembered that even after he learned the truth he kept it to himself a little bit longer and frightened his younger cousins about Drac

coming for them if they did not give him some sweets. But now that he was a follower of Jesus, Petar knew that was a wrong thing to do and so he never told the Drac story ever again.

While she cooked, Peter could hear his mother singing the UNA KID'S CLUB song. Of course, she was too old to go to the UNA Club, but she heard the children singing it and it was, to be honest, one of those songs that you just could not get out of your head after you heard it for the first time. The words seemed to dance in the air as she sung.

"UNA, UNA we are the UNA Kids Club, come along with us, to the Club for everyone!" It was at the UNA Club some months before where both

Petar and his cousin Jovan had become followers of Jesus. Even though they were just young boys, their lives had become completely different.

Just then, the door opened and Jovan walked in. He too smelt the Lecho and then looked at Petar's father sleeping in the chair. He made a sign by nodding his head to Petar to come outside. Jovan spoke excitedly.

"I have just had a great idea. Let's go and see if we can catch a big fish for Easter dinner next week." Petar looked happy.

"That is a great idea! Maybe we could ask our mother's if we could have the Easter dinner all together." Jovan excitedly replied. "It could be a Easter Feast!" Petar eagerly shook his head.

“Yes, and maybe we could all go into the forest and make a grill and cook it over some smoking wood,” added Petar. They both could almost smell the fish and the smoking embers of the fire. It was the custom in the village to eat Fish at Easter and even though the Roma were not welcome in the local church in the Serbian village they still held onto many of their church rituals, customs, and special days in the church’s yearly calendar.

They both became very hopeful and excited at the idea and within a few minutes were on their bikes riding towards the river. They rode down the crooked dirt path that led to the end of their village. Just to their left and over the edge of

the riverbank covered with tall grass, sandy dirt, and small moss-covered stones, the boys could see the dark green river flowing swiftly by. If they had more time, they would stop their bikes and skip some of those stones across the river. But not today. As they quickly rode a few more minutes to get there, they became even more excited at the idea of catching a very big fish for their Easter Family Feast.

Suddenly, before they reached the river, four boys about their own age jumped out in front of them from behind the trees, nearly knocking them off their bikes. Before either Petar or Jovan could say anything, the four boys surrounded them. They were not Roma boys but

were four bullies who went to the same school. Borislav, the biggest one, pushed Jovan, who was smaller, in the chest.

“So, the Gypsies are going to the river,” growled Borislav. He had an ugly sneer on his face as he spoke.

“I know, you are going to have a bath in the river because you don't have water in your house,” another boy mocked. All the other boys started to laugh.

These types of things happened all the time to the Roma boys. Every day they had to endure mocking and cursing. Everyday mean boys reminded them that they were Roma and tried to make them feel different from everybody else –

Different in a bad way. In one way, they were used to it. But in another, more real way, it still upset them each and every time and they would never get used to it.

Laughing loudly, one of the other boys also started to insult them. In a mocking voice he shouted out, "Our Priest said that at Holy Epiphany, when the waters of the river are blessed, he has to say an extra prayer because Gypsies have defiled the water by washing and swimming in it." At this all four bully boys started to laugh again and say more crude and horrible things.

Petar wanted to punch the biggest bully in the face but stopped himself. Both he and Jovan

pushed their way through the group of boys without saying a word. Then they jumped onto their bikes and rode swiftly towards the river. The bullies stood in the middle of the street laughing and jeering at them

"Look at them run like babies," Borislav mocked. "Look at those Roma boys run away!"



2

CHAPTER Two

Fishing

2

Finally, the two friends got off their bikes and laid them down on the grass by the narrow dirt pathway about 5 meters from the river. Some places along the river were very narrow, some were wide. At the place where the boys stopped their bikes, the Danube River was about 250 meters wide. It was a deep river, and the part of it which passed by their village flowed very fast. Petar's father had once told him that if you spit in

the river at breakfast it will arrive in Romania by lunch time. The boys knew very well that they should never ever try to swim in this river. Even though it looked peaceful at times, it was too dangerous. Petar and Jovan both looked behind them to make sure the bullies had not followed them. Then slowly they got their fishing rods and their small fishing tackle box and started to set themselves up to catch a big one.

Petar spoke first. "I wanted to punch those boys in their faces. They think they are tough, but I know if I punched Borislav the others would run away." Jovan laughed.

"I know, you are a better fighter than any of them. Maybe we could go to their houses when

nobody is home and put maggots in their beds." Petar threw his head up and laughed.

"Or maybe, we could put a dead cat in their oven." Jovan laughed even louder. "Or how about we..." He stopped and looked ashamed. "I am stupid. I really am. Jesus would not be happy with us if we did that." Petar looked out to the river.

"He might laugh if we did." He looked away and then spoke. "You are right. That is not how a follower of Jesus would act. We won't put the cat in the oven..... just maggots in their beds." Both boys laughed but they also knew that they would not really do such a thing.

The river was beautiful today. It was so quiet and peaceful here. The air was sweet with clinging

vines that bloomed up the side of the tall trees. Just as they were standing there, a large white crane flew overhead. The boys knew this was always a good sign that the fish were feeding and near the surface. They bent down to the river and took some stale bread they brought with them. They carefully made it wet and then squeezed it until it became a sticky paste. They both then took small pieces and put it on the fishhooks. Using their thumb and finger, they pressed carefully until the bread bait was firmly on the hook. They very carefully cast their fishing lines out and then sat quietly on the river's edge. Most boys their age became quickly impatient and found themselves tempted to continuously pull in

the line and casting again, pull in the line and cast again – over and over. Both these boys knew the secret...of waiting.

The fish needed to look at the bait, swim around it and even play with it without letting it go completely into their mouths. Patience is the greatest skill in fishing, and both boys had learned that skill very well.

After a while, Petar's line suddenly jerked with a tremendous jolt. He jumped up, grabbed his rod and pulled hard. The fish was so big that it almost pulled the rod right out of his hand and into the river. Petar shouted over to Jovan. "Quick get the net and see if you can scoop it up when I pull it in."

Petar backed slowly away from the river while all the time pulling the line steadily. At the same time, Jovan grabbed the large net the boys used for keeping the fish they caught alive in the water while they continued to fish for more. Holding it firmly, he got right down beside the water at the river's edge. He gasped. He could now see the fish. It was enormous. He put the net in the water and splashed around trying to get the net over the fish that was now completely hooked to the line. Petar, who was almost 4 meters away by now, was pulling as hard as he could, reeling the line in, and holding the rod tightly in both hands. Then Jovan shouted. "I have got him! I have got him!" He pulled the net in as

Petar came back down the bank. There in the net squirming and fighting for its freedom was a fish that was nearly 50 centimeters long. Unbelievable! Together they dragged the net up onto the bank and then sat down to catch their breath. Both boys were laughing, and it was Petar who spoke first.

“This is the biggest fish I have ever seen in this river. It is bigger than anything my dad has ever caught.” He put his hand into the net and took the hook out of the fish’s mouth. Carefully, he put the bottom part of the net into the water and the top part of the net he tied to a metal rod that he pushed into the ground.

Satisfied that the fish was secure, both boys

laid back and looked up at the sky. Jovan heard a noise behind him and sat up just as Sinisha rode up on his bike. Sinisha was one of the four bullies they had seen earlier. Sinisa looked at them both and then spoke. "I did not like the way that Borislav spoke to you back there." Petar shrugged his shoulders and looked away. Sinisa spoke again looking at Jovan. "Anyway, your Dad is on the other side of the river by the bridge and he told me to tell you to go over to him. I think his bike tire is flat."

Without speaking both boys stood up and quickly ran to the bridge that crossed over the Danube. They were both still almost giddy with excitement about catching the fish. They already had it all

planned out. They decided they would put the fish in the freezer at their other uncle's house which was in another village just ten minutes away by bike. Then they would take it on Easter day to the forest and cook it over a smoking wood fire.

They got to other side of the bridge, but no one was there. They looked around for a bit and called out, but Jovan's father was nowhere to be seen. Then they looked at each other and back towards the river. Without saying a word, they ran as fast as they could back to their fishing equipment and their net and their 50-centimeter fish. Their hearts were pounding hard as they ran. They had a bad feeling in the pit of their stomach as they ran toward the river's edge.

Petar reached their fishing spot first and Jovan could see him as he ran up after him. Petar sat down and put his head in his hands just as Jovan arrived. The net was sitting on the bank slit open with a knife. Both their rods were broken in half. Their fishing tackle box was empty, and their fish, it was....it was GONE!



3

CHAPTER THREE

A Hard Day

3

Mr. Ignac was sitting on his porch on a wooden chair that had a soft cushion on it. It was green with red stripes and one corner had a sewn patch on it. He was – or at least in the boy's minds anyway – very, very old. He wore a neat colored shirt with different patterns of squares. He was clean shaven and had one of those faces that made you think this man was very wise. There was a small wooden table next to where he was sitting. On the table was his Bible and a large glass filled with homemade lemon and water.

You could see the bits of lemon floating in the water and cold drips of water running down the side. Mr Ignac saw the boys coming up the path into the village and he could tell they were not at all happy.

The boys jumped off their bikes and sat quickly on the wooden steps just below Mr. Ignac's chair.

“Well boys I can see we have a problem. Wait here and I will get you some lemon water.”

Jovan and Petar stared out into the village. They could see Jovan's house and behind it an enormous pile of rusty scrap metal – all shapes and sizes, all kinds and sorts. The fathers of both boys worked hard by finding and collecting scrap metal. They stored it up in piles behind their houses. Then they waited and they waited until the price for buying scrap metal was just right. Then Petar and Jovan's

fathers would sell their scrap metal – all of it – to the big scrap metal yard. There would usually be a big party and for a long time afterward there was plenty of firewood, bread and mother's good Letcho bone soup. Sometimes Petar and Jovan would even get new shoes, but not this year.

Mr. Ignac returned. He handed both the boys a glass of his famous lemon water and then he sat back down on his wooden chair with the green and red stripped cushion. Mr. Ignac did not say anything but kept looking out at the village.

Jovan who had finally caught his breath so was the first to speak and told the whole story in detail as Mr. Ignac listened carefully. Mr. Ignac took a sip from his glass, looked at the boys and nodded as the story finished. All three of them sat silently.

Petar started to cry and then got angry and put his hands over his face. He was embarrassed. Jovan picked up a small stone and started to draw in the soft earth beneath his feet where he was sitting on the steps. Then after taking another drink Mr. Ignac spoke.

“Well boys, what do you think you should do?”

Petar replied quickly.

"I think we should...I think we should..." Jovan interrupted.

“Find them and put maggots in their beds?”

Petar then spoke up and exclaimed, “And put a dead cat in their oven...” But he broke off from speaking and looked down. Mr. Ignac eyes grew large.

“What do you think Jesus would do if it had happened to Him?”

Petar quickly replied. "Maybe turn them into frogs?" Mr. Ignac's eyes grew even larger. He picked up his Bible and turned to a place among the many pages. He did it so fast he seemed to know exactly what he was looking and where it was going to be in this very big book.

"Let me read this to you," Mr. Ignac said quietly. "This is Jesus speaking to his followers. 'I tell you to forgive your enemies.'" He flipped the pages of his old and worn Bible and said, "Let me read to you another place." He thumbed through the pages. "Here it is, 'Forgive people 70 times 7'." Jovan looked at Mr. Ignac with big eyes.

"Truly, did he really say that? I mean really, forgive people hundreds of times even if they keep doing bad things to you?," questioned Jovan. Mr.

Ignac smiled, shook his head, and then spoke softly.

“He did, he really did.” The boys slowly stood up and passed their empty glasses back to Mr. Ignac. Petar spoke to Jovan.

“I have some money let's go to the bakery and buy a kiflice.”

As they rode their bikes away from the Roma village and towards the Serbian village and their favorite bakery, they both were thinking hard inside their hearts. Jovan spoke first. “It is not easy to be a follower of Jesus, is it Petar?” Petar nodded and then replied.

“No, but I am not turning back just because it is hard. I have decided to follow Jesus even though I am just a kid. But I may not always find it easy.”

Then before Jovan could answer, Borislav,

Sinisha and the other two bully boys suddenly appeared in the street. Petar spoke first slowly getting off his bike and moving towards Borislav.

“You know, we could tell our fathers, and they would go to the police, and then you would get into real trouble.” Borislav took off his hat, spit on the ground and laughed as he spoke.

“No one could prove that we stole your fish. It could have been anybody.” Jovan then jumped into the conversation boldly.

“Well, who told you we had our fish stolen? If you did not do it, how did you know?” Borislav started to walk away giving the sign to the other boys to follow.

“Come on let's get away from these gypsies. I don't want to get lice in my hair.” Petar raised his

voice.

“OK, let me tell you this. God is angry with you for what you have done. He is going to prove he is angry because by Easter morning we will have caught two large fish and that will prove that God is for us and not against us.” Borislav turned and looked at him.

“God is against you because you are gypsies. He hates gypsies, our Priest said so.”

Petar replied, “Well then, let’s meet here on Easter Sunday morning and I will show you our two big miracle fish – much bigger than the one you stole.” Borislav looked straight at Petar.

“OK, eggplant head, see you on Sunday morning right here.” Jovan and Petar stood in the street holding their bikes and looking at each other

as the bullies walked away laughing.

“I am not sure this is a good idea,” said Jovan. Petar, who had a very angry look on his face, turned in the direction of the bullies and said in a low voice that got quieter and less sure the more he spoke. “Well, I am sure God is going to hear my prayer. Well, I think he will...well I hope he will... well what if ...”

Jovan put his arm on his cousin's shoulder and said, “Let's go to the bakery and get those kiflice, I'm hungry!”



4

CHAPTER FOUR

Jovan Catches a Fish

4

Jovan and Petar were the village leaders of the UNA Club which met every month outside Mr. Ignac's house. Today's UNA Club had been so interesting for the boys. The story in the Bible coloring book was about Jesus performing an amazing miracle. The miracle was about the time when Jesus told Peter to put his fishing nets into the sea – and Peter got a really, really huge catch of fish. Both Jovan and Petar looked at each other

with their eyes wide open as the story was read. After the club the cousins sat on the step outside Mr. Ignac's house. They decided to tell their story to Mr. Ignac and ask him for advice.

“Well, Petar and Jovan this is interesting. Normally, I would say that we must be very careful making promises on God's behalf, especially when we do not know if it is God's will to make that promise.” Petar looked at Jovan and then at Mr. Ignac.

“But if we have faith then God will answer our prayers,” responded Petar slowly. Mr. Ignac smiled.

“Well, yes and no. What if you prayed that the bullies would wake up with bugs in their

beds?" He turned and started to walk away from the house beckoning the boys to follow him. Together, they walked down to the large pile of scrap metal behind Jovan's house. Mr. Ignac stopped and pointed at a piece of metal.

"Petar, can you pick that piece up? That piece right there." Petar bent down and picked up the old rusty iron washtub. "Good, now that piece." He pointed to a heavy iron spring from a large truck engine. Petar struggled and finally managed to pick it up. Mr. Ignac nodded looked around and the pointed at an old car with no wheels. "OK pick up that car." Petar and Jovan looked at each other and laughed. Both knew what the answer would be.

Mr. Ignac turned and walked back to his house and sat in his chair. Jovan and Petar followed him and once again sat on the steps ready to listen. Mr. Ignac smiled then spoke.

“Lifting those things is like faith.” Jovan and Petar looked at each other and waited for him to continue. He smiled again. “That is all I am going to say, you must think about it while you are looking for those big fish.”

Before they could answer they turned and saw Jovan's father calling them to come to the house. They got up and ran as quickly as they could, thinking about what Mr. Ignac had told them.

When the boys entered Jovan's house there

on the table were both their fishing rods mended by a steel rod tied with wire to the broken sections. Jovan's father smiled and then spoke.

"They are not perfect, but they will do for now until you can save up to buy new ones."

Within minutes they were on their bikes with just the mended rods and a pocket full of bread to make their sticky paste bait. Petar spoke excitedly.

"I think we will catch two big fish today and prove to those boys that God blesses people who do not steal things." Jovan was peddling as fast he could and spoke over his shoulder through his panting breath.

"But, we don't have a net so when we catch

the fish, we will have to pull them in by going up the bank and dragging them out of the river.”

Petar laughed.

“I was thinking the same thing just as you said it.”

The boys quickly arrived and jumped off their bikes, made the sticky bread paste, put it on the fish hooks, cast out their lines, and then sat down to wait for the Big Fish God would send.

After half an hour of sitting, Borislav and the bullies rode up on their bikes. Petar and Jovan sat silently ignoring them.

Suddenly, Jovan's fishing rod jerked. He jumped up and shouted, “I’ve got one! I’ve got one!” The bullies stood still and looked at each other. Petar

shouted with joy as Jovan pulled the fish in.

“Quick Jovan run up the bank and drag it out of the water.” Jovan carefully walked backwards trying not to trip over a rock that was in the way. All the time he kept reeling in the fish. He reached the top of the bank and was standing almost next to the bully boys as he pulled his fish out of the water.

Then...there was silence.

Jovan's fish was pulled up the bank. It was only about 5 centimeters long and looked like a small frog rather than a large fish. Borislav started laughing and the other boys fell off their bikes to the ground holding their side with laughter. Petar would not look at them but just looked out to the

other side of the river. Jovan sat down with a red face. He took the small baby fish off the hook and tossed it back into the river to grow another year. Borislav, still laughing, shouted to Petar.

“Don't worry it is only Thursday, you still have a couple of days to catch those big fish of yours.” The bullies got on their bikes and rode off laughing as loud as they could.

The two cousins got on their bikes and started back to the village feeling very, very disappointed and very, very confused. The sun was going down and it was getting dark. The village was busy. There was a party going on in someone's house. Someone had just gotten married. The music was so loud it could be heard

down at the river as the boys peddled home.

When Petar and Jovan arrived, they passed the wedding people who were drinking and dancing in the street just outside the party house. Grandmother Katica was in the small garden by her house feeding a large pig and four piglets. She turned and waved to the boys. Small children were running around playing games and their mothers were calling them from the doors of their houses, "Come home now!" A group of teenage boys were huddled together by a tree smoking and showing each other pictures on their mobile phones. Jovan put his hand on his cousin's shoulder and smiled.

"OK let's meet early in the morning and have

a long fishing day down at the river.” Petar just nodded and went slowly into his house. Before he could enter, he heard an old lady shouting loudly with almost laughter in her voice. She came over to Grandmother Katica, laughed even louder and started to tell the old lady with the pigs her funny story. Petar moved closer so he could hear.

“Well, you know my daughter and her children have come because her husband threw them out of the house. Well, they had nowhere to go.” Grandmother Katica nodded. The other lady continued.

“Well, how could I feed them? Well, I have no money, and her husband stole all their welfare money.” Grandmother Katica nodded again.

“Well, you know I was just going into the forest to get some wood for the stove. Well, I heard those children singing songs about God again. Well, I said to myself. I wonder if God would hear my prayer. So, I said, God I need food for my family. Well, I went into the forest and there laying on the ground was the biggest fish I had ever seen! Well, God must have made it jump out of the river and drop it right where I was going to walk.” The old lady stopped her story to catch her breath.

Petar stood still, stunned. The bullies had taken his fish and then thrown it away in the forest. The old lady must have found it! He was just going to go and tell the old lady and

Grandmother Katica the truth when something inside him decided not to. Instead, he just went home to think about this very, very unusual day.



5

CHAPTER FIVE

God Speaks to Petar

5

Petar walked into his house and sat down by the table. His father and mother and the small children were all outside. He could see them through the window cooking something on a wood fire. On the table was a note with his name on it. He reached out and picked it up, opened it and read the words:

Petar, Read Daniel Chapter Three slowly. Then let God lift up something that is too heavy for you to carry.

The note was signed, *Mr. Ignac*.

Petar folded the paper and immediately remembered the lesson that Mr. Ignac had showed them by getting them to try to lift the heavy iron things behind the house. He went to the room that he shared with his younger brother and two baby sisters. He reached under the bed and took out his special box. It was blue and yellow and had once held his first real pair of shoes. Now he kept his most special things inside it. Only Petar was allowed to open it.

Inside this box was his Bible, some pictures, a little red sailboat, his UNA KID'S CLUB badge and coloring books and some pencils and crayons. He took his Bible and opened up to the

front of the Bible in just the way he had learned how to do it at the UNA Club. There was a list of names with page numbers next to them. He looked for the name *Daniel*, he found the page number beside the name, turned the pages until he found *Daniel*. He then slowly and carefully read the chapter Mr. Ignac had told him to read.

Petar's Bible was not written in his own Bajash language. The one he spoke in his village and to his mother, father, brother and sisters. It was written in the Serbian language. Mr. Ignac had told the UNA Club members there was a kind lady who lived in Hungary. She was Hungarian but she could read and write his Bayash language. She was working with other people to write the

whole Bible into the Bajash language. But it would take a while. For now, Mr. Ignac had said, they would have to read the Bible in the Serbian language.

So, Petar read the *Daniel* Chapter Three Bible story very slowly and very thoughtfully. When he was finished, he closed his Bible. He placed it carefully back in his special blue and yellow box, and then slowly pushed the box under the bed.

Petar went outside to join his family. There was a small fire blazing. Laying on top of the fire was an old bicycle wheel. Tied on the metal spokes of the bicycle wheel were two skinned rabbits. Carefully his father turned the wheel with

a long stick to rotate the cooking meat over the fire. His mother reached over and poured melted butter with garlic and paprika mixed into it all over the cooking food. She smiled at Petar as she saw him coming over.

“Petar, did you hear about Auntie Matica. God sent her a big fish! Someone said they saw the fish drop out of the sky into the forest just as she was walking along.” Petar wanted to tell them the whole true story but decided for the moment it was best to be quiet and keep it to himself.

That night as he lay in bed he prayed in his heart.

“Lord Jesus, I am just a kid, but I want to follow you. I am sorry that I told those boys that you would give two big fish. Thank you for the story I

just read in the Bible. Thank you for letting Auntie Matica find my fish. I want you to carry the things in my life that are too heavy for me to carry. Amen.” As he said ‘Amen’, he closed his eyes, rolled over, and fell into a deep sleep.



6

CHAPTER SIX

The Fight

6

The four bullies stood at the corner of the Serbian village just by the large oak tree that was next to the small grocery shop where Jovan's older sister worked sometimes sweeping and mopping the floors. Borislav and the others looked towards the Roma village. Borislav held the note in his hand that had come from Petar earlier that day. It simply said come and fight and gave the place and the time. Sinisa looked very

nervous and shuffled his feet in the dirt.

“What if they bring others? What if more than just the two of them come? I don't want to fight if they have three or four gypsy guys with them.”

Borislav looked at him angrily. “I am not afraid of Gypsies!,” he barked. Then a voice came from behind them.

“Well, you should be.” Borislav and the other boys almost jumped out of their skins. They turned round and saw Petar standing behind them. He had a large piece of wood holding it in a position ready to strike. Borislav quickly shouted.

“Even with the stick you are just one and we are four.” Then from behind them in the other

direction another voice was heard.

“Not just one.” They turned and saw Jovan standing there with a big stick in his hands. The four bullies looked afraid and were silent. Petar was the first to speak.

“You know in the Bible there is a story of three young men who would not worship a false god. The King said that if they did not worship the false god they would be thrown into a large fire. One of the young men said to the King. ‘If God chooses to save us, then He will. If He chooses to let us die, then we will still not worship the false god.’” Borislav looked on confused. He did not know what to say and the others were stunned and frightened.

Petar threw the stick down on the ground. Immediately afterwards Jovan did the same. Petar spoke again.

“Maybe God will let us catch those big fish. Maybe I was stupid for saying it without praying about it first. But nothing is going to change our minds. We are followers of Jesus. Our lives are different now. We could bust your heads open with these sticks. But Jesus tells us to forgive and so we forgive you for what you did to us the other day.” The bullies looked confused. They had never heard anything like this talk before.

Sinisa was the first to speak. “It was not my idea; It was Borislav's.”

Jovan stepped forward. “It does not matter;

It is finished," he said. "We are not going to hold it against you." Petar and Jovan then turned their backs on the bullies and walked away in the direction of the village. Petar stopped and turned and faced the four boys one last time.

"Also, when you threw the fish in the forest an old lady from our village found it and she fed her hungry family with it. What you meant for bad God turned to good." He turned once more and walked away leaving the four boys even more stunned.

As the boys walked away slowly, Petar whispered, "I meant what I said but it was good to see them scared out of their lives."

Jovan laughed and whispered back, "This

was so much better than maggots in their beds..."

"...Or cats in their ovens," Petar finished his cousin's thought. The boys walked home very happy.



7

CHAPTER Seven

The Crane Flies Again

7

Saturday came very quickly. The boys had been fishing every day and had caught nothing other than the small fish that Jovan had pulled out in of the river in front of the bully boys. They realized that to make all kinds of claims God was going to do something was not the way to follow Jesus. However, they had learned many lessons through all of it.

Petar and Jovan decided to walk down to the river instead of going on their bikes. The sun was

shining, and it was quite warm for this time of the year. The leaves had been on the trees for a while now, but it seemed that today everything looked and felt so much fresher. They felt happy.

The two cousins cast out their fishing lines and then sat down on the riverbank watching the moving water and listening to the birds and the rustling of the new leaves in the trees. Jovan broke the silence.

“What you said to Borislav about God maybe, or maybe not, giving us the fish was really good.”

Petar shrugged his shoulders. “It was the hardest thing I have ever done,” he said.

Jovan turned and looked at his cousin. “What

do you mean?"

Petar thought for a minute and then replied.

"When we were at the UNA Club and we both decided to become followers of Jesus, I did not think about what it really meant to be a follower of Jesus. Now I know. Even though we are kids, we have to do God's will not our own." Jovan nodded.

"What would your will have been rather than to forgive them?" Petar smiled as he looked at the river.

"You know." Jovan smiled. "Maggots in the bed and a cat in the oven?" Before Petar could respond they heard a voice just behind them. They turned and saw Mr. Ignac standing there.

"You know after talking the other day about

carrying heavy things. Well, I thought I better come and help you carry the heavy fish back to the village.”

Before either of the boys could answer they heard another voice. It was Borislav who was standing with the other three bullies.

“They are not going to catch any other fish. We came down to make sure they did not cheat,” boasted Borislav.

Mr. Ignac was a very patient man, and so he did not answer them. The four bullies sat down on the riverbank. Everyone was just looking at the river.

Suddenly, flying above them was a large white crane. Jovan and Petar looked at each other

and then found themselves standing up. No sooner had they stood up when both their fishing rods jerked with tremendous force. They quickly grabbed their rods which were now bending from the strain of the fish fighting to swim away. Jovan started walking backwards reeling in his line. Petar almost fell over as he dragged the line back. It seemed like hours as they wrestled with the fish. In fact, it was not even two minutes.

Finally, twisting and turning, yet securely hooked to their lines were two enormous great fish. Borislav stood with his mouth open in utter disbelief. Mr. Ignac looked at the scene and smiled. He reached into his pocket and brought out a tape measure.

"I thought it would be a good idea to measure the fish. What was the length that you had to beat? It was fifty centimeters if I remember rightly," said Me. Ignac. All the boys gathered around as he bent down and measure the fish. Borislav had a painful look on his face.

"Well, this one is..." Mr. Ignac spoke slowly to make the announcement as dramatic as possible. "It is....., he paused again. It is fifty-eight centimeters."

Jovan shouted "Yes!" and punched the air.

Mr. Ignac bent down again to measure Petar's fish. He looked down at the river after he measured it. He said nothing. Petar could stand the wait no more.

“Is it bad news?” Borislav kept saying over and over. “Let it be less than fifty, St. Sava please let it be less than fifty centimeters!”

Mr. Ignac stood up and put the tape measure back in his pocket. His face then broke into a big smile.

“It is sixty-two centimeters.” Petar raised his voice into a scream and started jumping up and down. When he calmed down and looked around. He realized that Borislav and the bullies had left and were silently walking away with their heads down.

Shortly afterwards the two boys and Mr. Ignac walked into the village. Within just a few more minutes the whole village, or so it seemed,

were gathered all together around the two cousins and their two huge fish. By now almost everyone in the village had heard the story about the first fish and how it had 'dropped out of the sky', and how Auntie Matica had found the fish, cooked the fish, and fed her hungry family with it. But the boys, who knew the truth about how the fish got there had kept it a secret so she could enjoy finding it just when she really needed food and had prayed to God for His help. Everyone in the village had also heard of the challenge by Petar that God would provide the two fish as proof that God loves and cares for the Roma and is not against them and has not cursed them.

There was an atmosphere of a party all

around as the boys took their fish home and their mothers began the process of cleaning and preparing them for the Easter dinner the next day.



8

CHAPTER THREE

Easter Dinner

8

There was a lovely and special place in the forest that came close to the river. In one direction, you could see the movement of the river as it ran for so far and so long. In the other direction, there was the forest itself. It was thick with trees and all the wildlife that lives in such places. Standing there, you could feel the peace and quiet. You could smell the earth and the moss on the bark of the trees. You could see the

beams of the sun as they streamed down from the sky inbetween the branches and leaves onto the cool moist forest floor. And you could hear the birds as they sang to each other while quickly flying from one tree to another. Jovan and Patar loved being in this place.

The men had made a large fire which was allowed to slowly burn down until it became a mass of red and smoking embers. Over the top of this was placed a grill that Jovan's father had made from the scrap metal pile at the back of his house. On the grill were the two large and beautiful fish that represented so much more than just food to eat.

On top of the fish, there was a layer of

butter, garlic and other spices that was slowly melting and becoming part of their dinner. Along with the two fish, there was also a pot that was now boiling with carrots, beans and potatoes all mixed together.

Petar's father held in his hands the old family concertina. He sang along while he played one favorite song after another; Sometimes the people joined in; Sometimes they just sat and listened.

The two boys had climbed almost to the top of the highest tree and sat above all that was going on beneath them. The smell of the grilled fish, the sound of the music and the sight of the river slowly making its way, made them both feel

that the day was perfect. Petar spoke as he looked out to the river.

“To be a follower of Jesus is really good.” Jovan looked at his cousin who was more like a brother.

“Yes, it is. Yes, it is,” he said in a soft and thoughtful voice.

As they looked down from the tree, they could see Mr. Ignac coming into their special place. They quickly climbed down the tree just as they heard their parents inviting Mr. Ignac to join them for dinner. Everyone sat on colorful folded blankets on the ground. Each had a plate of food and a fork.

Jovan's father turned to Mr. Ignac. “Can you

say a little prayer for us?"

Mr. Ignac smiled. "Of course, I am happy to, he replied." He closed his eyes and folded his hands, and the others did the same following his example.

"Lord Jesus, bless this family, bless this food, and thank you that you are for us and not against us and this dinner is the proof of it. Amen."

Everyone said "Amen" in a loud voice and then started to eat what all said afterwards was the best dinner they had ever eaten in their whole lives.

The End



We hope you enjoyed The Mystery of the Missing Fish and we invite you to read the next Book for Boys in the Danube River Valley Kids Series which is waiting for you now!

The Boxing Glove Mystery

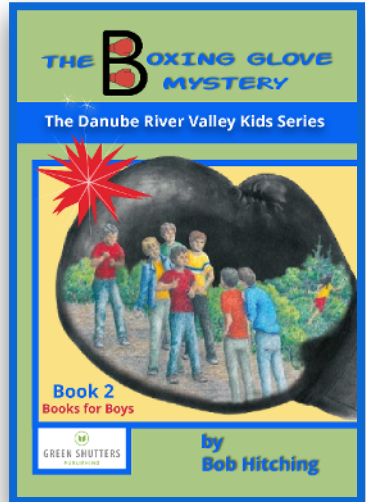
Two Roma cousins Peter and Jovan have just met Branko – the new kid in town. And, he is not very friendly! Branko is big, loud, pushy...and scary. To make matters worse, he is the 13-year-old's Boxing Champion in all of Belgrad, Serbia! Or so he says.

All the kids in Petar and Jovan's village are wondering how they will ever survive the new school year and village life with this new addition to Borislav's bully boy gang – and no one more than Maria Orshus. Will a Boxing Match even the score?

With the wise counsel of Mr. Ignac, the boys' UNA KIDS' CLUB leader, Petar and Jovan find out a secret not even Borislav knows. In this Books for Boys story, the two cousins are able to continue walking as Followers of Jesus while bringing 'Boxer' Branko and his gang of fighters to see the 'better way' and do what is right.

The whole village is charged with hope once the secret is revealed and the truth comes out. You will be surprised as well! To read The Boxing Glove Mystery go to:

<https://www.firststepreading.club/books-for-boys/>





THE YSTERY OF THE MISSING FISH

The Danube River Valley Kids Series

by
Bob Hitching

Two Roma cousins, Petar and Jovan live in a village close to the banks of the Danube River. Fishing is their favorite thing to do, and the two boys come up with a great idea – catch and roast a big fish for the family's Easter dinner. But Borislav and his bully-boy gang come along and once again and steal more than just the boy's joy as they try to bless their families.

Disappointed and tempted to show off how 'God is for them and not against them, the two boys brag they will catch two even bigger fish to 'show those bully boys'. The cousins devise a plan. But will it work, or will they fail and be humiliated instead. How will they be able to do and say the right thing as Followers of Jesus. Mr. Ignac, their UNA KID'S CLUB leader helps along the way and the whole village learns a powerful lesson in *The Mystery of the Missing Fish* – the first in The Danube River Valley Kids Series – *Books for Boys* written by Bob Hitching.




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