

“Towns in captivity”. Transformation of the Towns of Transylvania in the Interwar Period: the Hungarian Point of View

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Abstract

In this paper I look at the Hungarian representation of the way towns in Transylvania changed after these had become part of Romania after World War I. While, according to the census of 1910, Hungarians made up a third of the total population of Transylvania, their share was about 60% in urban contexts. Besides the place urban spaces occupied in Hungarian historical consciousness, this factor determined the way Hungarian commentators interpreted the “loss” of Transylvanian towns. The idea that the “loss of Hungarian towns” changed the formerly Hungarian character of the towns, and their “Balkanization” were central motifs of Hungarian discourse in the interwar period. Some of these elements are present even today. Although the texts I investigate are part of the Hungarian discourse of resentment, I argue that they offer some insight into the changes in the “identity of the city”: the urban world which belonged to Central-Europe shifted to another cultural context, to that of Southeastern Europe. Moreover, I will show that these texts also reveal the process of nationalisation of towns, which became an important goal for the national elites since the 19th century within the project of building the modern national state.

Keywords

Transylvania, historical consciousness, identity, nation building, Hungarian-Romanian relations

Introduction: the Birth of a Discourse

After the signing of the Trianon Treaty on 4 June 1920, the document that sanctioned the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the disintegration of historic Hungary, Hungarians kept paying attention to the lost territories. This interest was the outcome of the combination of several factors. It was partly due to the ties that hundreds of thousands of Hungarians that – voluntarily or involuntarily – migrated to Hungary maintained.¹ The effort of the Hungarian government to have the boundaries revised was the other key factor. In Hungary, emotions also had a profound impact on the attitudes towards the new regional establishment. Anger, resentment and bitterness characterized accounts and complaints that refugees, and their organizations submitted. The same may be said of government propaganda. With the passage of time, longing for the lost motherland, nostalgia and sadness added to this mix of emotions.

Beyond the feeling of loss, there was one more important element in the discourse on territories that formerly constituted Eastern Hungary. Hungarian elites had a share of the prestige of Austria-Hungary and in the position of power that Hungary used to hold in the region. In the 19th century, references to “civilizing acts” of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom in South-eastern Europe and the trope that Medieval Hungary protected this part of the continent from “barbarians” served to reinforce efforts to promote Hungarian identity at the expense of other ethnic identities.² This image could also build on inequality between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania. Hungarian elites were in a better political, economic, social and cultural position. Vis-à-vis Romania, a condescending attitude towards a “small state in the Balkans” was also part of the mix even as the fear of Romanian irredentism was also tangible.³

Dominant Hungarian elites internalized this point of view to an extent that the Hungarian delegation to the peace treaty negotiations still felt it evident

1 For more on this see: *Ablonczy Balázs*: Ismeretlen Trianon. Az összeomlás és a békeszerződés története, 1918–1921. Budapest 2020. 183–204.

2 For more on this see *Romsics Ignác*: A magyar birodalmi gondolat. In *Id.*: Múltról a máának. Tanulmányok, esszék a magyar történelemről. Budapest 2004. 121–148., and *Gyurgyák János*: Ezzé lett magyar hazátok. A magyar nemzeteszmé és nacionalizmus története. Budapest 2007., especially 90–130.

3 For more on Romanian irredentism, see *Jancsó Benedek*: A román irredentista mozgalmak története. Máriabesnyő–Gödöllő 2004.

that the supremacy of Hungarians and the civilizing role of the Hungarian state should be used as arguments for keeping the territorial integrity of Hungary.⁴ Hence, the fact that Romania received the sanction of the powers for occupying Transylvania and the Hungarian sense of mission triggered cognitive dissonance between the image of Romanians and the Hungarian sense of mission. This led to a discourse which centred on the paradox between the position for which Hungarians should be “entitled to” and the actual situation. The contradiction between the actual position and the “rightful place” of Hungarians in Transylvania became one of the key elements of the new discourse on Transylvania that emerged in the Hungarian public sphere and that flourished in the interwar period. Topoi that we would call elements of identity politics today, emphasizing that in a minority position all-national solidarity and holding on to the Hungarian national belonging were essential, were also important. Since this discourse, implicitly or explicitly, saw the remedy in revising the Trianon Treaty, it suited the context of contemporary revisionism.



The centre of Timișoara (Temesvár, Temeswar) with the Orthodox Cathedral (from the second half of the 1930s) and the replica of the Capitoline Wolf statue.

Photo by the author, 2008.

⁴ See *Gerő András* (összeáll.): *Sorsdöntések. A kiegyezés – 1867, A trianoni béke – 1920, A párizsi béke – 1947.* Budapest 1989. 156–157., 159.

Although, the intensity of attention that Hungarian public paid to Transylvania and to other lost territories was volatile, and – due to wear and the emergence of new issues – it became less enthusiastic as time passed by, the government and interested groups tried to maintain it. They believed that it would be possible to revise the unjust and unacceptable treaty when circumstances turned favourable and, thus, Hungary would be able to take back at least some of the lost territories. Although, following the ratification of the treaty, the revisionist discourse was contained for years, it gained space in public discourse when the international context changed in the late 1920s.⁵ This discourse integrated a broad range of contemporary works about Hungarians living on the other side of the border including those of propagandistic tone, nostalgic travel writings and academic texts.

The language and perspective of this discourse was biased in many ways. It encapsulated a number of stereotypes and prejudice about Romanians. This was in line with the views that Central and Western European travellers expressed about the Balkans and the Southeastern area of the continent.⁶ At the same time, this picture was not entirely fabricated as it contained several elements of truth. This latter feature explains its persistent nature of the discourse that survived the catastrophic outcome of revisionism and the decades of state socialism and that their various versions still appear in Hungary and in Romania.⁷

⁵ Bővebben lásd *Zeidler Miklós*: A revíziós gondolat. Pozsony, 2009.

⁶ For more on this see: *Maria Todorova*: Balcanii și balcanismul. Humanitas, București, 2000. This phenomena is multidirectional as one may identify several prejudices about Hungarians.

⁷ In current public discourse see for example *Horváth-Kovács Szilárd*: Hogyan tapasztaltuk meg az autentikus „balkánt” Dobrudzsában. Transindex 2019. november 19. <https://multikult.transindex.ro/?cikk=27962> (last downloaded on 19 November 2020). The issue also appears in academic discourse, Gusztáv Molnár’s paper triggered much controversy. *Molnár Gusztáv*: Az erdélyi kérdés. Magyar Kisebbség 1997/3–4. and Magyar Kisebbség 1998/1.3–101. Regarding the development of Romanian nationhood see: *Borsi-Kálmán Béla*: Nemzetstratégiák. Politológiai és társadalom-lélektani esszék, tanulmányok a román–magyar (francia), a szlovák (cseh)–magyar, a francia–amerikai és a német–francia viszony történetéből. Budapest 2013.

The Texts

In this study, in order to illuminate this discourse, I take some texts produced about those towns in Transylvania that landed on the Romanian side after the Trianon Treaty but were still considered Hungarian. The position and function of towns in 19-20th century Transylvania is a large topic in itself.⁸ The key notion that influenced attitudes towards urban centres in Transylvania before and after Trianon was that these were pillars of modernization and that as hubs of Magyarization⁹, were also pillars of the Hungarian nation state.¹⁰ Thus, the transformation of the urban milieu harmed the Hungarian elites.¹¹ The authors of the texts I will look at are Hungarian intellectuals that continued to live in Transylvania or left the region. They saw the then current patterns of Transylvanian towns through such a lense.

I will discuss how these authors presented the new condition of urban centres and how this perception shaped the discourse on civilizing mission. In 1930, in its yearbook, the nationalist daily *Magyarság* [Hungarians] published a 16-page-long section, a series of richly illustrated sketches, about the towns that Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Southern Slavic state annexed.¹² The title “Hungarian towns in captivity” tells much about these short texts the authors of which evaluated the situation “through Hungarian eyes”. It is worth citing a longer section from the introduction because, as it was published in Hungary, it could freely express essential aspects of views that the Hungarian discourse on Transylvania contained.

8 *Pomogáts Béla*: Erdélyi magyar városok. In: *Id.:* Változó Erdély. Tanulmányok Erdélyről. Budapest 2001. 61–86.

9 *Varga E. Árpád*: Erdély magyar népessége 1870–1995 között. Magyar Kisebbség 1998/3–4. 366.

10 See, for example, *Bekszics Gusztáv*: Magyarosodás és magyarosítás. Különös tekintettel városainkra. Budapest 1883. 59–66., illetve A népszámlálás sulypontja. Budapesti Hirlap 22 January 1911, 31.

11 For the arguments that the Hungarian delegation put forward in 1920, see A magyar békedelegáció II. jegyzékének összefoglaló kivonata (Neuilly, 14 January 1920). In: Trianon. Szerk. *Zeidler Miklós*. Budapest 2003. 118.

12 Magyar városok idegen rabságban. A Magyarság jubileumi évkönyve 1920–1930. 67–82. (Hence: Magyar városok...)

*“Kolozsvár, Kassa, Pozsony, Arad, Szabadka, Nagyvárad, Marosvásárhely, Brassó and other historical towns of the old Hungary have been drifting away from Hungarians of the truncated country and continues to live only in the realm of memory. On the occasion of the jubilee of Hungarians, we feel obliged to bring back these towns closer to our readers. These towns contain the treasures and beauty of a thousand years of Hungarian history that Hungarian art carved into stone, wood, gold and silver. All the manifestations of the constructive spirit remained on the other side of the border, there is hardly anything in towns of the truncated country.”*¹³

Among the towns of Transylvania, the publication provided snapshots about Cluj/Kolozsvár, Oradea/Nagyvárad, Arad and Braşov/Brassó/Kronstadt. The names of authors were not disclosed except for the one who wrote about Arad (“Spectator” that is Miklós Krenner) but their knowledge and emotional style tells that state succession must have personally concerned them.

In 1935, *Magyarok Romániában* [Hungarians in Romania] one of László Németh’s [1901-1975, one of the outstanding figures of 20th century Hungarian literature] most influential essays appeared in issue number 3-4 of *Tanú*, the journal he edited.¹⁴ In the same year, Németh travelled to Romania and spent about two weeks there. He reached Transylvania via Giurgiu, a town along the Danube, and Bucharest.¹⁵ It is not only his engaging style that distinguishes Németh’s travelogue. He was committed to the idea of “Central European milk-brotherhood” and the so-called Danube-idea.¹⁶ (It is due to these unorthodox views that his essay triggered a serious controversy in Hungary and in Transylvania. So much so, that in Budapest some considered that formal criminal charges should be brought against him.)¹⁷

¹³ Magyar városok...67.

¹⁴ The edition I used contains the debate. *Németh László: Magyarok Romániában. Az útirajz és a vita.* Mentor Kiadó, Marosvásárhely, 2001. (Hence: Magyarok...)

¹⁵ *Nagy Pál: Előszó.* In *Magyarok...* 5–15.

¹⁶ Although László Németh was born in Nagybánya [Baia Mare] in 1901, he had spent his childhood and adulthood within the Trianon borders. [That peoples of Central Europe have fundamental common interests and peoples along the Danube should unite – translator’s note.]

¹⁷ *Magyarok...* 11. About the travelogue and its context see *Borsi-Kálmán Béla: Hasonló-*

In 1936, a publishing house in Budapest called Révai and another one of Kolozsvár called Erdélyi Szépmíves Céh published a collection of essays titled *Erdélyi városképek [Transylvanian townscapes]*.¹⁸ The volume included writings about five towns of Transylvania – Cluj, Aiud/Nagyenyed, Oradea, Târgu-Mureş/Marosvásárhely, Braşov. Some of these had already appeared in a journal published in Kolozsvár called Erdélyi Helikon during the 1930s.¹⁹ These texts are relatively lengthy, have a subjective tone and sometimes mix objective analysis with nostalgic style. They offer a detailed picture about the towns they look at. The authors were renowned writers, journalists or other public figures: Károly Kós, Géza Tabéry, Károly Molter és Ferenc Szemlér. Count István Bethlen, the former prime minister of Hungary, wrote the preface that he dedicated to Kolozsvár. He felt it important to emphasize that,

*“The most important duty of those involved in public life is to remind the young generations that their three and a half million Hungarian sisters and brothers fight for their survival and that they can only succeed if they feel that the other nine million are behind them in solidarity.”*²⁰

The volume titled *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae. Országgrészünk átalakulása 1918–1936 [Transformation of our region 1918-1936]* was published in 1937 and the texts it includes differ from the ones mentioned above.²¹ The title of the publication refers to the classic work of Péter Apor (1676-1752), the 18th century administrator and historian. The first part of the volume gives an overview of the changes that occurred in the political, public, social, cultural and economic life of the region after Trianon, while the second part talks of seven towns located in Transylvania and in the Banat (naming these only in Romanian - in accordance with contemporary regulation as Cluj, Oradea, Arad, Timişoara, Braşov, Târgumures, Satumare) and of minor

ságok és különbségek – és tanulságok I-II. Korunk 2008/1. 15–24. és 2008/2. 50–59.

18 *Pomogáts Béla*: Bevezetés. Erdélyi városképek. Madách-Posonium–Magyarok Világszövetsége, Pozsony, 1994. 13. (Hence: Erdélyi városképek...)

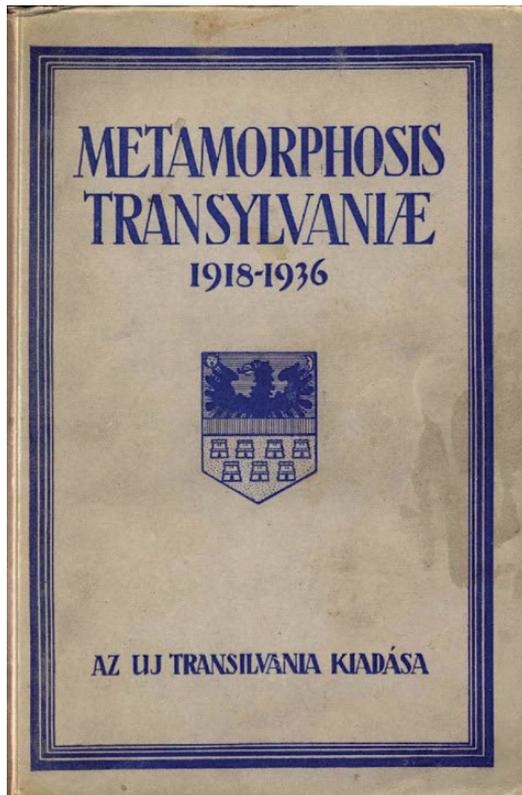
19 The edition I used did not contain the essay on Nagyenyed [Aiud].

20 Erdélyi városképek... 15–16.

21 *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae. Országgrészünk átalakulása 1918–1936*. Szerk. Győri Illés István. Cluj, 1937. (Hence: *Metamorphosis...*)

towns. The writers of these pieces are “native journalists”. The editor gives his reasons for choosing such a method²²:

“the contours of this great transformation are clearest in these towns. Villagers quickly put up with what cannot be changed and found their fulfilment in the fruits of the land they cultivated. As ethnic differences waned shortly due to the peace-loving attitude of the inhabitants and because the state focused Romanianization efforts on the towns and paid less attention to villagers, the transformation is most volatile in towns of Transylvania.”²³



The cover of the volume titled *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae 1918-1936*.

²² Metamorphosis...121.

²³ Metamorphosis...121.

Romanian censors approved of the book. Presumably, some of the texts were modified to this end and the work generally presented a much more complex picture than the yearbook of Magyarság. In the introduction, the editor said that

*“the only thought that animated the authors: that after such great errors in the past, a frank rapprochement should become possible between Hungarians and Romanians. Hence, readers shall not expect biased political arguments from us, rather, they should satisfy themselves with the objective presentation of facts and events. At any rate, knowledge is the shortest route to truth.”*²⁴

Sándor Püski’s publishing house called Magyar Élet [Hungarian Life] published Gyula Zathureczky’s work entitled *Erdély. Amióta másképp hívják*²⁵ [Transylvania. Since it has a different name] in Hungary in 1939. At that time, the treaties of Versailles were already trembling. The author hailed from the Banat but carried out his activities in Hungary. His objective was to present interwar Romania with special focus on Transylvania since – as he put it in the introduction:

*“The ignorance and lack of care accompanied by the sense of supremacy with which our neo-Baroque society treated the problem of Transylvania dumbfounded and saddened me as I crossed the border from Transylvania to Hungary more than a decade ago. Since then, the situation has changed for the better (...) Yet, I felt that people are only aware of bits and pieces of the issues that Hungarians face on the other side of the borders...”*²⁶

The volume did not intend to be an academic text. It summarized current conditions of Romania in 16 chapters, “placing the issue of Hungarians at

24 Metamorphosis... 5.

25 Zathureczky Gyula: *Erdély. Amióta másképp hívják*. Pomáz, 2004. (Hence: *Amióta...*)

26 Zathureczky Gyula: *Amióta...* 5.

centre stage”²⁷: it discusses the Hungarian schools in Transylvania, social organization, Romanian political scene, the Iron Guard movement, Jews, the area of the Old Kingdom and Bucharest and, of course, talks about the realm of Transylvanian villages and towns.

The volume called *Erdély* [Transylvania] was a monumental venture that sprang from the idea of Count Pál Teleki, prime minister and geographer. A historian, József Deér, led the editorial team and they completed their work by the summer of 1940. The book was eventually published after the second Vienna Award.²⁸ Although, due to its timing, it could not play part in justifying Hungarian claims on Transylvania, its content makes it a relevant set of texts. The studies on ethnography, history and culture in Transylvania and the impact of the Romanian rule that comprised it were the outcome of serious professional efforts. The fact that they intended to serve a cause does not eliminate its value even if this is a context that should be taken into consideration. As the preface says:

*“In the wake of a just rearrangement of Europe it is time to draw the arms of justice and support the rights that Hungarians gained by shedding blood and manifesting knowledge and their efforts that its history justified with spelling out natural and historical truth. This is the objective of the Hungarian Historical Society as it publishes this volume.”*²⁹

We have to add that the lines that follow make an equally strong statement:

*“Those academics that honoured this volume by submitting their studies know nothing of propaganda methods. They are not willing to bend or adorn their findings, not even in the service of great national goals and efforts.”*³⁰

²⁷ *Zathureczky Gyula*: Amióta... 6.

²⁸ *Barcsa Dániel*: Az Erdély sorsa – Erdély sorsa. Erdély. A Magyar Történelmi Társulat szerkesztése alapján. Pomáz, 2011. 443. (Hence: Erdély...)

²⁹ Erdély... 7.

³⁰ Erdély...7.

Part 5 of the volume (Transylvania under Romanian rule) discusses the state succession, demography, economic, social and cultural life. Indeed, the authors were renowned experts: András Rónai, Alajos Kovács, Sándor Makkai and László Makkai.

In the sections that follow, I will make an attempt to grasp how the works mentioned above presented the current status of towns in Transylvania and how they enriched the Hungarian discourse on Transylvania, especially the narrative about the alleged civilizing role of Hungarians. Among the many possible lines of inquiry, I will focus on how they assessed the changes, what they believed social transformation entailed, how they thought of modernity and how they represented the West-East slope.



Street view from Cluj (Koložsvár) with the Orthodox Cathedral constructed during the 1920s and 1930s and the National Theatre. Source: Fortepan/László Lajtai, 1934.

Change and Continuity

Each text highlighted the links that particular towns had to Hungary and to Hungarians. This was also true of narratives that talked of towns that had a German majority or were mixed in terms of ethnicity.

Among the texts considered here, some of the essays in the volume bearing the title “Erdélyi vársoképek” feature overviews of the history and cultural history of the locations stress this aspect, while other texts contain such references scattered throughout them. The act of mentioning the struggle against Tartars (Mongols) and Turks references the role of Hungarians and of the Hungarian state in defending (Western) Christian civilization and also remind the reader that not long ago the East-West boundary ran along the Carpathians. Another feature of the texts is the emphasis on the Hungarian or German traditions of the centres, hence of their non-Romanian nature. This is to deny that Greater Romania is the nation state of the Romanians. This way, the texts demonstrated that the treaty of Trianon violated the principle of national self-determination, thus, that it was unjust.

It was Count István Bethlen, who was by the then a former prime minister of Hungary and also a person that left Transylvania, who wrote the introduction to the volume “Erdélyi városképek”. He put the key concerns mentioned above in the following way:

“The towns of Transylvania are Hungarian towns: they carry the legacy of a glorious past, they are made of stones that talk of the dream of the thousand year that is now past, of struggles, fights, glory and they are monuments of the fulfilment of the national tragedy.”³¹

When speaking of the years that had passed since 1918, the majority of authors mentioned significant changes in the towns that were not in line with their historical legacy. For example, in one of the texts that talks of Oradea we read that: *“The twelve years of occupation have left heavy marks on this busy, lively and beautiful town.”³²* Regarding Târgu-Mureş we hear that:

³¹ Erdélyi városképek...15.

³² Magyar városok...75.

“*Slow, but systemic change of the cityscape took place around that time.*”³³

Timișoara/Temesvár/Temeswar stood out with its rapid development³⁴ and the outlook of Satu Mare/Szatmárnémeti changed, too, “*not only in the inside but on the outside as well.*”³⁵

At the same time, in a number of texts, these phenomena appear only as the surface beyond which the Hungarian or German essence prevails. The author of the introduction to one of the volumes argues that even as “*the ten-year-long occupation coated many things with a foreign glaze*”, and that those that visit the city “*find a strange world*”, “*Hungarians are there below the outer glaze.*”³⁶

As Count Bethlen said: “*The light of a thousand-year Hungarian idea still looms in them. They are still Hungarian at the core because violence cannot destroy the spirit of centuries in a day.*”³⁷ Others confirmed this observation stating, for example, that even if Brașov “*underwent significant change [...] it kept its Saxon essence throughout its sweeping development.*”³⁸

We learn that Arad had hardly changed despite its new position on the Romanian side of the border.³⁹

“*Sepsiszentgyörgy and Udvarhely still stand unaltered and the northernmost citadels of Szeklers: Marosvásárhely, Szatmár, Nagykároly, Máramarossziget have hardly changed.*”⁴⁰

Gyula Zathureczky’s concluding thoughts are in line with Bethlen’s:

“*It is certain that people that live in towns have changed but it is also certain that towns themselves and the tradition that em-*

33 *Benczel Béla*: Targu-Mures metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...*172.

34 *Kalotai Gábor*: Timișoara metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...*144., 147–148., 150.

35 *Baradlai László*: Satumare metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...*183.

36 *Városok idegen...* 67.

37 *Erdélyi városképek...*15.

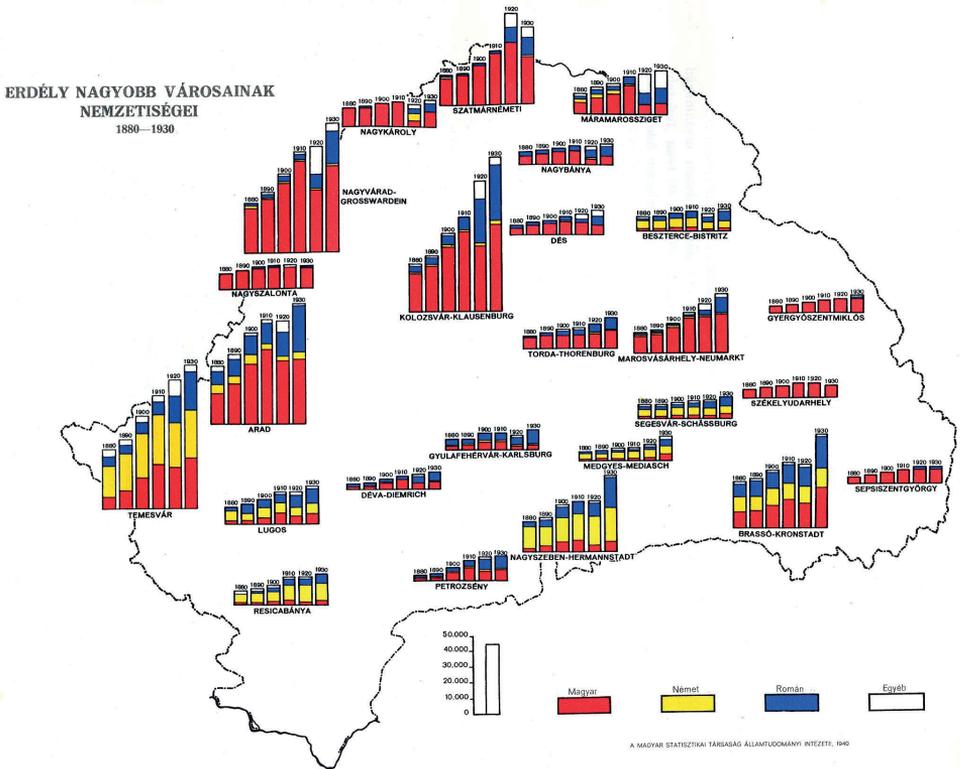
38 *Pogány Marcel*: Brasov metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...* 164, 167.

39 *Károly Sándor*: Arad metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...* 153.

40 *Zathureczky Gyula*: Erdély. Amióta...53.

anates from their stones, which is the tradition of Transylvania, did not change."⁴¹

CENTRAL EUROPEAN HORIZONS, 2, NO. 1 (2021)



Ethnic composition of the largest towns of Transylvania 1880-1930. Source: Kovács, Lajos: Erdély népesedési viszonyai [Demographic patterns of Transylvania]

In: Erdély. Budapest 1940. ([digital edition](#))

Reshuffling of Roles

The way texts talked of the shift in ethnic proportions and of the reshuffling of social roles sheds light on the actual change that towns of Transylvania went through. Authors approached these two problems in different ways and tackled various phenomena but drew largely similar conclusions. For example, Sándor Makkai emphasized that

⁴¹ Zathureczky Gyula: Erdély. Amióta...54.

“Before the world war, towns of Transylvania had a dominantly Hungarian character. Out of the 49 towns in 32 Hungarians were in absolute majority, only 9 were a German character and in 8 of them there was Romanian majority. The towns that belonged to this latter group were small. After 1918, fundamental changes occurred in the character of towns. It was not only due to the departure of Hungarian officials but also because the new rule captured Hungarian state institutions and they began to serve this. County halls town halls, courtrooms, schools, theatres and museums, various office buildings, barracks etc. became venues vehicles and propagators of the life of Romanians. This immediately altered the outlook of towns. As the Romanian state settled and social life developed, banks, shops, factories and the mushrooming rows of private houses also adapted this character. [...] Today, 27 of the 49 towns have Hungarian majority in them, in four Germans are still the majority and 18 has Romanian majority.”⁴²

Some authors quoted exact figures but, in many cases, they only reported impressions about ethnic composition. Regarding Cluj, one author notes that *“as against speaking one language in the pre-war times the city has become bilingual.”*⁴³

At the same time, another author drew parallel with conditions in Switzerland and thus, the natural trilingualism.⁴⁴ Károly Kós made the following observation about the “population exchange” that took place in Cluj:

*“Since the time of state succession, it was the community of citizens of Kolozsvár that has undergone the most change. Immediately before the war it had 60 000 inhabitants while today there are 100 000. Eventually, all that happened is that the city grew larger.”*⁴⁵

42 Erdély...423–424.

43 Szász Endre: Cluj metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis...126.

44 Szemlér Ferenc: Brassó. In: Erdélyi városképek...197–198.

45 Kós Károly: Kolozsvár. In Erdélyi városképek...71.

From these texts, we can clearly see a situation where Hungarians lost political, economic and social status and career prospects compared to their previously held dominance. *“From one day to the other, from a member of majority, millennial Hungarian...we turned into minority persons without any intermediate stage”*. The author who wrote this that this situation carries the possibility of national-social renewal.⁴⁶

These texts paint a dark picture about the difficulties that Hungarians living in towns in Transylvania faced and argue that as a result of these, cultural and economic conditions of Hungarians began to deteriorate and stagnated at best. Of all possible situations, Hungarian intellectuals that lived in small towns fared the worst: they either retired or migrated. This, in turn, increased the greyness of local public life.⁴⁷ The authors concluded that without the support of the state, which was Romanian by then, the bases of survival of Hungarian culture (ethno-cultural reproduction of the community) in Transylvania was at risk.

*“Hungarians have lost wealth in Kolozsvár, just like everywhere else in Transylvania.”*⁴⁸

*“The decline in terms of economy and national cultural life has more weight than the numerical disadvantage compared to Romanians.”*⁴⁹

*“Hungarians that might have number 28 000 have become impoverished and live in an inward-looking life.”*⁵⁰

Some of the texts clearly stated that social advance of Romanians was not a spontaneous development but that there was a conscious state policy behind it.

“(Especially today) Romanians act in accordance with the slogan they have openly voiced: the city has to be Romanianized! First, they needed to numerically overcome Hungarians at the county

46 Zathureczky Gyula: Erdély. Amióta...15.

47 Gárdos Sándor: A kisvárosok metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis...194.

48 Maksay Albert: Kolozsvár. In: Erdélyi városképek... 53.

49 Tabéry Géza: Oradea metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis...133.

50 Kalotay Gábor: Timișoara metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis...148.

*level. [...] This was more difficult to carry out in the city. First, it required an artificially triggered large-scale immigration. Romanians from the region of Mezőség were recruited for each smaller or more important, vacant and vacated positions. [...] Official statistics does not include Hungarian-speaking Jews as Hungarians. It also helped to increase the proportion of Romanians to at least 20% that an outskirt called Remeteszeg became officially part of the city. Politicians say it is even more than 20% but I have not seen precise statistical data. When they unveiled the statue of Avram Jancu at the market square with great nationalist celebration we could see how successful Romanianization efforts have been...*⁵¹

Recurring waves of nationalism made it difficult to live together. Although the tolerant atmosphere of some places did not change, in many towns, interethnic relations became tense and distance between ethnic communities increased.⁵² Arad is a typical example of this with some nostalgia, Miklós Krenner recalled that interethnic relations were calm in pre-war times:

*“Understanding between different nationalities, with the exception of some stormy periods of the 19th century, have been firm in Arad. This was even if the power and efforts of outstanding members of the Serbian community were obvious and that the city was the Bethlehem of Romanian national movements. In terms of linkages among families and social interaction, there were cordial relations between Hungarians and Serbs and less cordial ones between Hungarians and Romanians. This was a reasonable equilibrium. This of course changed when the world war ended. Now, ten years on, we shall again believe that solidarity among nationalities will return. [...] The Hungarians are not the culprits in the fluctuation of human understanding.”*⁵³

51 Molter Károly: Marosvásárhely. In: Erdélyi városképek... 141.

52 Szemlér Ferenc: Brassó. In: Erdélyi városképek... 198–199., and Szász Endre: Cluj metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis...126., Kalotai Gábor: Timișoara metamorfózisa. Loc. cit., 148., 149.

53 Krenner Miklós: Arad. In Erdélyi városképek...253–254.

The author expresses his optimism, too: “*It is the calling of Arad the set the standards for understanding among nationalities.*”⁵⁴



The banks of River Mureș in Arad (Arad) with the Palace of Culture and the rowing club in the background. Source: Fortepan/Judit Hegedűs, 1935.

Talking of Cluj, one author posits that “*due to improvements in public life, public administration and economy*” Romanians living in the town had advanced in terms of cultural activities: there was serious work at the university (taken from Hungarians), and public life and public education were lively. The press has gained vitality, and this is true of literary life and theatre, too.⁵⁵ The national mission of the Romanian Churches contributed to these developments. In Brașov, Hungarians “*were swept away from county administration by the changes*” and Hungarians “*remained without a head*” just like the monument to Millennial Hungary on Mount Cenk.⁵⁶ Yet, the main discourse about Brașov revolved around the way Saxons kept losing ground.

54 Krenner Miklós: Arad. In Erdélyi városképek...253–254.

55 Maksay Albert: Kolozsvár. In: Erdélyi városképek...51.

56 Szemlér Ferenc: Brassó. In: Erdélyi városképek 202.

“Saxons that used to feel they ruled the entire Barcaság⁵⁷ is losing ground incessantly. [...] At the same time, the number of Romanians has been increasing at an accelerating pace. County Braşov [...] is slowly but surely becoming Romanian [...] The towns itself is a bit different but the number of Saxons is falling there, too. Today, they make up 24% of the 60 000-strong crowd that calls itself citizen of Braşov However, this is not actually decrease but stagnation that brings about relative decline compared to the other two communities.”⁵⁸

However, László Németh saw the future of the “German ghetto” a bit differently:

„The character of Braşov is Saxon and this will continue to be the case even if the proportion of rich Saxons that follow a single-child policy drops from one third to one tenth. Travelers will always stop in the city regardless of villas and the flats of the proletariat in the outskirts. And the city centre is Saxon.”⁵⁹

Symbolic acts expressed the swapping of hierarchies within urban societies in a spectacular way: Romanians of Bolgárszeg (Schei in Romanian, Belgerei in Schwabian dialect) marched to the main square on horsebacks every year since 1919. This was to say that Romanians occupied the city.⁶⁰ The Hungarian theatre was forced out of the ornate building in the city centre and had to move into the building of Színkör that used to be a scene of light summertime entertainment.⁶¹ At Târgu-Mureş, “since Romanian and Jews also fry meat, the importance of public fried meat fell.”⁶² and in Satu Mare/Szatmárnémeti/Sathmar/ סאטמאר smuggling became a new industry that partially compensated for the economic consequences of state succession.⁶³

57 The region around Braşov, called Burzenland in German and Țara Bârsei in Romanian.

58 *Szemlér Ferenc*: Brassó. In: Erdélyi városképek...215-216.

59 *Magyarok Romániában*...61.

60 *Magyarok Romániában*... 61.

61 *Szemlér Ferenc*: Brassó. In: Erdélyi városképek...193.

62 *Molter Károly*: Marosvásárhely. In: Metamorphosis...157.

63 *Baradlay László*: Satumare metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis...184.

Ambivalence of Modernization

Hungarian authors are similarly ambivalent about the changes in economic development and the built environment. They juxtapose the condition of their times and the situation within a relatively stable and developing Austria-Hungary. In their writings, this and the decline of Hungarians becomes intertwined with emotions that the transformation of the old and familiar realm and the sense of dwindling familiarity triggered. Moreover, we also see that authors evaluate the development of Greater Romania, which was rich in periods of crisis. Thus, compared to the representation that prevails about the period in Romanian public opinion, Hungarian contemporaries painted a negative or at least contradictory picture regarding the modernization of towns in Transylvania.⁶⁴

Besides the decline of small towns and Arad and the “methodical wasting” of Tîrgu-Mureş, there are counterexamples in the texts, such as Oradea and Satu Mare profiting from transit trade and improvements in commerce in Cluj and the industry of Braşov and Timisoara. Authors also take notice of the latter becoming a university town.

“Economic life, industry and commerce are miserable. In these areas the town lags behind to an alarming extent. And in this case, it is the minority that suffers because this decline causes their capital to wane.”⁶⁵

Oradea was struggling, too.⁶⁶

“Târgumures has had to account for enormous losses in terms of economy since state succession. This Szekler town used to flourish but now is at the stage of such a systemic decline where only the flexibility of actors that prevents total collapse.”⁶⁷

64 For example, see: *Ioan Scurtu*: Cuvânt Înainte. In: *Ioan Scurtu* (coord.): *Istoria Românilor*. Vol. VIII. România întregită (1918 1940). Bucureşti 2003. IX–X.

65 *Károly Sándor*: Arad. In: *Metamorphosis...* 158. and *Gárdos Sándor*: A kisvárosok metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...* 193–194.

66 *Tabéry Géza*: Oradea metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...* 136.

67 *Benczel Béla*: Targu-Mures metamorfózisa. In: *Metamorphosis...* 177.

*“In economic terms, Timisoara, which is called the capital of Banat, is leading among towns of the region. [...] Timisoara is the largest industrial town of the whole of Romania.”*⁶⁸

One author compared the potential of Greater Romania and actual economic activities concluded that

*“there is something fundamentally wrong in terms of economic structure and organization. Seeing these, we should not be surprised that internal turmoil and unrest has bothered this country for twenty years ...we often witness transition from one day to the next”*⁶⁹

Most of the authors of the texts discussed here are critical about the rapid growth of the cities. They highlight the difference between the construction frenzy of the outskirts and the slow development of city centres.⁷⁰ Many authors take notice of the symbolic acts of spatial politics that included Romanians taking over buildings and monuments.

The authors often assessed the spatial gains of Romanians – some used a rather passionate tone while other remained more distanced. For example, Géza Tabéry talked of the transformation of Oradea in the following way:

*“The small flats that grow among the public buildings of various styles that Baroque style construction projects of the Church and the rapid development of pre-war decades left behind, on the other hand, there were the overly decorated Old Romanian style houses with their arches and arcades.”*⁷¹ *“Touched on the architectural characteristics of the so-called Old Romanian.”*⁷²

68 Kalotai Gábor: Timișoara metamorfózisa. In Metamorphosis... 150.

69 Erdély...419–420.

70 Szász Endre: Cluj metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis... 125.

71 Tabéry Géza: Nagyvárad. In Erdélyi városképek... 115–116.

72 The name of this architectural style is actually “Neoroman” or “new-Brâncoveanu-type” (“stilul neoromânesc/neobrâncovenesc”).

According to Ferenc Szemlér a palace built in a new style, or, even worse, without any style, Byzantine or Baroque style bank buildings and condominiums that already looked old pushed their way

“among the old houses of the main square” and “they looked down upon the buzzing market square with pride typical of upstarts.”⁷³

Several texts made a comparison between the pre- and post-Trianon periods. Endre Szász described the new “Romanian” centre of Cluj/Kolozsvár as sterile compared to traditional main square:

“The city council can only boast about is that they tidied the main square and that the square in front of the Greek Catholic Church shed its Cinderella costume and turned into a well-dressed noble lady from. However, this lady is distant and cold as it has no admirer. This is the least populated quarter of the city centre.”⁷⁴

Another author who returned to Cluj talked of similar impressions:

“...when we reached the theatre and the Greek Catholic cathedral that had been in the making for long, my former classmate (a Romanian military officer) said to me: <You see, that church has been under construction for years and only God can tell when it will be completed. I often wonder if it will not be you to finish it. [...] during the construction many millions of lei have been wasted. This is the case with everything we start. Money is misappropriated, there is no other outcome. We have not created anything except for the statue of Romulus and Remus with the wolf. Even that is so far from the statue of King Matthias!>”⁷⁵

⁷³ Szemlér Ferenc: Brassó. In Erdélyi városképek... 188.

⁷⁴ Szász Endre: Cluj metamorfózisa. In Metamorphosis... 125.

⁷⁵ Magyar városok... ibid., 74.



The old City Hall in the main square of Braşov (Brassó, Kronstadt) in 1920. Source: Fortepan/Balázs Boda

Talking of Târgu-Mureș, “the capital of Szeklers”, László Németh says that

“the town is a proof that we can build towns without the Saxons. [...] although Romanians rule the city there too, life carries on without major break. I would not be surprised if some of the Romanians were assimilated. Although they put their own stereotypical prayer box below the noble church that was built during the time of the Árpád-dynasty and that had walls around it (an old woman cried about losing the small well as a consequence) but they only ridiculed themselves by doing so.”⁷⁶

In his piece about Târgu-Mureș, Károly Molter, also compared Romanian rule to the period when György Bernády was the mayor in the early 20th century:

“That is why the Romanians too embarked on construction projects: with building the Orthodox and Greek Catholic cathedrals, the statue of Avram Iancu and that of the “Unknown Soldier” that replaced the relief of Petőfi⁷⁷ [...] This construction project suffers from lack of resources as the city and the state have little money but most of all because of the lack public enthusiasm. Romanian political parties are unhappy about the efforts of the other.”⁷⁸

On the other hand, Béla Benczel recognized the achievements of the first significant Romanian mayor of Târgu-Mureș, Emil Dandea:

“the city is in order, the streets are clean and finally the two Romanian churches have their roofs. Even if it harms the [budget] of the city, the new Romanian hostel for apprentices is under

⁷⁶ Magyarok Romániában... ibid., 71.

⁷⁷ Sándor Petőfi: one of the major poets of 19th century Hungarian literature and a national hero.

⁷⁸ Molter Károly: Marosvásárhely. In Erdélyi városképek... 163.

*construction and so is the new hospital and the county hall. The headquarters of the social security institution will be ready by the spring.*⁷⁹

László Baradlai talked of development regarding Satu Mare too:

“In the inner part of the Piata Unirii, in place of the neglected marketplace, there is now a beautiful park. The city hall will move to a new building that required enormous expenses. Behind the theatre, the boulevard named after minister Valér Pop⁸⁰ is in the making. The Regina Maria Street is also being turned into a park. [...] The open-air bath is one of the notable sights of the city. [...] the new sports ground is now completed.”⁸¹

Sándor Károly recognized the removal of statues that referred to the Hungarian national canon and signs written in Hungarian reluctantly⁸², while another author put a lot more emotions into describing such changes of public spaces:

“The destruction that the new “masters” carried out among Hungarians is beyond measure. One would have difficulty pointing out any new creation that tells their glory. [...] The St. László Square is dead since it had been prettified. [...] the old castle is falling apart. [...] rubbish is accumulating on the banks of River Körös and dangerous nests of rats appear below the balconies. [...] The surface of roads is torn: not because it is under reconstruction but simply because time had consumed it.”⁸³

79 Benczel Béla: Targu-Mures metamorfózisa. In: Metamorphosis... 176.

80 Valer (Valeriu) Pop: Romanian minister in several liberal governments in 1930s

81 Baradlai László: Satumare metamorfózisa. In Metamorphosis... 183–184.

82 Károly Sándor: Arad metamorfózisa. 153–154.

83 Magyar városok...75–76.

We find a similar style in the description about Braşov:

“The row of villas at the foot of the hill is called “thiefs’ alley” in popular parlance. Romanians engaged in corruption live there. [...] The statue of O. Josif, the poet⁸⁴, is the only work of art that Romanians have made. [...] Romanians blew up the Millennial Monument on [Hill] Cenk in 1916.”⁸⁵

Expanding Orient

The texts above present a heterogenous picture but it is evident that dark shades dominate. Hungarian authors associate the position of cities with the circumstances of Hungarian inhabitants (or even the fate of the Hungarian society in Transylvania) and it mostly becomes the story of decline. Apart from factual references we may identify an orientalist mode of speaking. We encounter the idea of the West-East slope: a relatively developed Central European Hungarian (Hungarian/Jewish/German) urban realm that followed Western examples, started to slide down towards the Balkans during the rule of Romanians. Due to censorship, this view could only surface in a subtle way in texts published in Romania but was rather explicit in publications that appeared in Hungary. The Hungarian universe associated with the orderly outlook of civilized West becomes juxtaposed with the ambivalent, often disorganized Eastern type Romanian realm. Within this frame, neglect becomes one of the features of Romanian culture in a matter of course manner. In this discourse, under the rule of Bucharest Transylvania is becoming more and more distanced and alienated from the West.

Although this is not the central theme of the texts I looked at, we can see this aspect in nearly all of them. Apart from signs of economic decline and laments over how Transylvania used to be the last bastion of the West, we can see many other examples when authors stare at the “other” or at “signs of the exotic East” that Romanians embody:

84 Ştefan Octavian Iosif (1875-1913). The statue is in Parcul Nicolae Titulescu.

85 Magyar városok...79. (In fact, the monument was already in ruins by the time Romanian troops reached the town in 1916. An attempt to demolish it and a winter storm destroyed it in 1913 - translator’s note)



The building of the prefect's office in Satu Mare (Szatmárnémeti) completed in 1936. Today it hosts the County Museum of Satu Mare. In the background we see the Orthodox Cathedral built in 1937-1938. Photo by the author, 2009.



Inauguration ceremony of the “monument of Latinity” (replica of the Capitoline Wolf statue in Rome) in Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely), 1924. Source: wikipedia.ro

*“A darker patch appears among Romanians of the plains with increasing frequency: an oriental face with eyes black like coal and oil-brown coloured skin and wavy hair resembling the Levant. Then, gypsy and Albanian. Sometimes we see a round Slavic head. We feel that we are at the gate of the Orient.”*⁸⁶

Gyula Zathureczky summarized his impressions as follows:

*“Suntem in Romania Mare” – we are in Greater Romania – as they say to foreigners and they might believe it since the county is red-yellow-blue from Oradea to Tighinaiig, and from Chernowitz to–Turnu Severin and Sulina to Timesoara, signs are uniform and the waves that have been flowing from Bucharest for two decades permeate everything. This is a particular mix of perfume and dirt, loud voice, disorder, the latest fashion and misery wrapped into rugs that in they in the distant West say is the Balkans and Byzantinism.”*⁸⁷

Although talking of Bucharest Zathureczky noted the controversial Westernness, parvenu elegance and classiness with surprise,⁸⁸ when he talked of the Old Kingdom he took up the Orientalist narrative:

*“the urban inhabitants are mostly Greeks, Jews or other strangers. These cities have an Oriental face. They have large churches and some dirty public buildings, and small Turkish-looking or Greek-style houses surround their small park. There is an infinite number of shops...”*⁸⁹

The author that talks of Oradea also interprets developments as the expansion of the Balkans in Transylvania:

⁸⁶ Krenner Miklós: Arad. In Erdélyi városképek...254–255.

⁸⁷ Zathureczky Gyula: Erdély. Amióta...11.

⁸⁸ Zathureczky Gyula: Erdély. 55 – 61.

⁸⁹ Zathureczky Gyula: Erdély. 63–64.

“...on the Rákóczi Street one takes their eyes away from the red-dish skinned policeman that wears brown uniform, a fur cap and carries a baton. He represents the Orient in the busy streets. [...] the uniform of the Romanian army and the Balkanized women that float on the arms of the face-powdered officers and carry a heavy scent after themselves are dominant motives in the colourful promenade [...] Eyes cannot take pleasure in the shop windows since each of them display poverty, lifelessness, moreover, they are a collection bad taste. They need to serve those that rule Oradea today and the taste of these rulers are so-so far away from those old and real gentlemen.”⁹⁰

The idea that Romanians are Orientals while Hungarians are Western also appeared in the way authors talked about Jews and Romanians.

“[Among Jews of Tîrgu-Mureş] while among the fathers’ generation gratitude linked them to Hungarians, sons only cling on to the more Western European culture.”⁹¹

We may see the way this view surfaced regarding cleavage between Romanians of Transylvania and Romanians of the Old Kingdom in the following passage:

“Even the most inattentive observer would see that Romanians of Transylvania compare positively to those of the Old Kingdom. While the first stands on an ancient land of culture, the latter is on the road of the great migration of peoples. There they have Byzant, here there is Western Christianity, and there Turks while here Hungarian and Saxons used to teach them.”⁹²

90 Magyar városok...75–76.

91 Molter Károly: Marosvásárhely. In Erdélyi városképek...167.

92 Magyarok Romániában... 62.

Also:

“...those of the Old Kingdom ridicule the Ardeleans telling them that they are under Hungarian influence. In fact, few things apply: climatic difference, difference of caste, a Western style propensity to keep their word and less Oriental ways of living. In terms of chauvinism there is no difference.”⁹³

Conclusion

The real question behind discourses and representations detailed above regards the mid- and long-term consequences of the annexation of Transylvania (and its inhabitants) to Romania. What is it that Transylvania and its multi-ethnic population gained and lost as a consequence of state succession? Putting it differently: “what have the Romanians ever done for Transylvania?” (Of course, one might also ask: what have the Hungarians and Austrians ever done for Transylvania?)

This is not a question that one might answer based on the texts I studied. Only comparative research into economic history will take us closer to conclusions.⁹⁴ The texts themselves reveal that the situation was more complex than what emerges from the discourse on levels of civilization, which tends to totalize the arguments. We may juxtapose decline identified in the case of some towns and regions, such as Satu Mare, with actual development of Braşov or Timişoara that Romanian policies and the continuity of elites explain, among other factors.⁹⁵ The ethno-centric point of view and emotions that the forced retreat of Hungarian realm triggered often clouded actual achievements in terms of modernization. In cases where development was absent or unnoticed, tensions arising from Romanian dominance reinforced

⁹³ *Molter Károly*: Marosvásárhely. In *Erdélyi városképek...* 171.

⁹⁴ See for example: *Anders E. B. Blomqvist*: *Economic Nationalizing in the Ethnic Borderlands of Hungary and Romania Inclusion, Exclusion and Annihilation in Szatmár/Satu Mare 1867–1944*. Stockholm, 2014., and the work of the research group that Gábor Egry leads: NEPOSTRANS ERC-project: <https://1918local.eu/>

⁹⁵ The conference *Beyond Trianon? Exit from the War in Danubian Europe 1918–1924*, held between 29 and 31 October 2020 in Budapest discussed, this aspect in detail <http://trianon100.hu/cikk/trianonon-tul-nemzetkozi-konferencia>

Orientalist views and discourse. This proved durable: neither had the efforts to achieve uniformity in the second half of the 20th century nor the globalization erased it.

Translated by Róbert Balogh



The building of the Cercul Militar (Club of Army Officers) in Braşov constructed cc. 1930s and 1940s. Photo by the author, 2009

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