

# “The Issue of Minorities is an Issue of People.” Review of the Volume Transylvanian Stories: the Twentieth Century Told<sup>1</sup>

[„Problema minorităților este o problemă a oamenilor.” Recenzie despre volumul *Povești transilvănene: secolul al XX-lea povestit*]

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*A vision of future cannot be depicted without understanding the past*, explains the editor Emőd Veress in the foreword to the book, which he primarily recommends to law students.<sup>2</sup> How can the past be explored? What sources can be of assistance in understanding the past? How could law and history be interlinked? How can the past help, and can the past help us create a vision of the future? These questions (also) arise in the reader’s mind when he or she picks up this book of more than 500 pages, lavishly illustrated with contemporary photographs.

This work is not a mere history volume, as the editor already raises some questions in its first section: what happened to them? What could have been done better? What conclusions should be drawn for the future? The answers are left to those who remember (and to the reader).

The book builds upon a particularly rich *resource base* of memoirs, interviews, diaries, recollections and photographs. These resources are—as Emőd Veress himself points out—subjective sources. The question arises whether an objective image could be built from these references. These materials are complemented by legal-historical documents (Romania’s secret treaty of 1916 with the Entente powers, the Romanian Constitution of 1952) and excerpts from the contemporary press (Korunk, the Transylvanian Hungarian News Agency etc.).

The volume takes its starting point along four fault lines in the 20th century fate of Hungarians in Transylvania: the first is the period of integration into Romania between

1 Emőd Veress (2021): *Erdélyi történetek. Az elmesélt huszadik század*, Forum Iuris Publishing, Kolozsvár.

2 Veress (2021): p. 16.

1918 and 1944, when Transylvanian minorities were nominally protected by a Minority Treaty, a period, which was traumatic and openly discriminatory. The second period is the partition of Transylvania after the Second Vienna Award between 1940 and 1944, followed by the period of Soviet-type dictatorship between 1945 and 1989. Finally, the fourth period, characterised by feigned compromise, apathy and obscurity after 1990, which still determines the fate of the Hungarians in Transylvania.

What does it mean to be a minority? What are the consequences of state “headwinds”? As István Bibó put it,

*“[t]he state power—unless it is explicitly based on racial supremacy—embraces its citizens of other languages with constant enthusiastic declarations, but at the same time, if a member of the minority displays even a hint of attachment to his native language and people, he becomes a suspect and is treated as a suspect. This in turn makes the position of the minority population controversial and estranged, even if it is a historical minority, and even more so if it is a freshly adopted minority.”<sup>3</sup>*

In addition to the preface, the volume is divided into six major chapters according to chronology. Each period (Precedents, 1918–1940; 1940–1944; 1945–1965; 1965–1990; 1989–) is presented with the assistance of photographs, quotations, and contemporary documents, without any additional commentary.

In the chapter entitled “*Precedents*”, which consists of only a few pages, we read excerpts from the secret treaty of 1916 between Romania and the Entente powers, along with reflections by Károly Kós, Albert Apponyi and Endre Ady. As Ady expressed:

*“[...]I declare that Transylvania has two separate souls, and that the menacing, brutal, but nevertheless not impossible map changes would tear two twin children, the Hungarian and the Romanian, from two breasts of the same mother.”<sup>4</sup>*

In contrast to the poet’s desperate, sad lines, we can read the politician Albert Apponyi’s logical, fact-based argument against the harshness of the peace terms.

In the extensive section on the *period between 1918 and 1940*, the reader is introduced to a wide range of perspectives. How was the period, and its events perceived, for example, by writers (Erő Ligeti, László Bányai, János Kemény, László Németh, Zsuzsa Thury); a zoologist-politician (István Apáthy); a publicist (Miklós Krenner); a housemaid (Amália Botos); an actor (Rózsa Ignác); an architect (Károly Kós), several lawyers (Árpád Paál, József Venczel); a bishop of the Reformed Protestant Church (Sándor Makkai) or a painter (Z. Emil Vásárhelyi)? The documents depict a diverse picture of Transylvanian society of the time and the situation of the Hungarian ethnicity within it. The descriptions of Andor Borbély and Endre Fall reveal that it was almost impossible for Hungarians to enter into legal professions in Transylvania in the mid-1930s:

3 Veress (2021): p. 8.

4 Veress (2021): p. 20.

*“[i]n the adjacent county of Torda-Aranyos, the proportion of Hungarian lawyers is less than 5 per cent, while the population of the villages of Aranyosszék is still purely Hungarian.”<sup>5</sup>*

Again, Andor Borbély and Endre Fall provide reports about a failed language exam in 1934, during which a Hungarian teacher had to provide an account of the difference between the constitutional rights of the majority and the minority.<sup>6</sup> The subjective documents, based on micro-history, also reveal the restrictive and discriminatory legislation of the period. The poet Sándor Reményik’s letter to Lajos Áprily allows us insight into the operation of censorship:

*“[y]esterday the censor informed us that he had no time to go through everything in detail, but if the words Transylvania or Transylvanian appeared in the newspaper even once, he would have us all court-martialled. How good it is that you wrote ‘A single Transylvanian heroic poem...’, a long time ago, without any compulsion. [...] We now use this traditional, patinaed, ancient word—even if it sounds awkward—until it becomes prohibited too.”<sup>7</sup>*

Imre Mikó, a lawyer, reports on a law passed in 1936 which stipulated that the Hungarian language could only be used in the minutes of village councils, but that these had to be translated into Romanian. The law was protested against not only in Parliament, but also before the League of Nations, which eventually led the government to amend the proposal.<sup>8</sup> Also Imre Mikó reported on the legislative decree that ordered the dissolution of political parties and associations. However, the members of the Hungarian Party continued to represent the Hungarian community as private individuals at Sepsiszentgyörgy, despite legal provisions.<sup>9</sup>

*“Those who could, wanted to live in Hungary.”<sup>10</sup>* Although the following period was short (1940–1944), it was all the more eventful and tragic for Hungarians in Transylvania.

*“It was then that the outcome of the Vienna Award was announced, [...] It was then that we learnt that we became separated from our child, as we, the people of Bethlen, could return to Hungary, while our daughter and her husband departed by car immediately after lunch for Mezőpagocsa, in southern Transylvania, a stone’s throw from the border, but still on the other side”,*

recalled Béla Bethlen, reflecting on the Vienna Award of 30 August 1940, which coincided with her daughter’s wedding.<sup>11</sup> Following the reintegration, the question of legalisation and unity of rights was to be resolved, and the question of nationality was put in a different perspective. The writings of Imre Mikó, the lawyer, give a detailed

5 Veress (2021): p. 55.

6 Veress (2021): p. 61.

7 Veress (2021): pp. 115–116.

8 Veress (2021): p. 124.

9 Veress (2021): p. 141.

10 Veress (2021): p. 160.

11 Veress (2021): p. 152.

account of the latter. Memoirs and reminiscences also illustrate the effects of the war, the bombings, the deportations and the rapes.

*“‘Why didn’t you flee?’, I asked him accusingly. ‘Because there was nowhere else to go,’ replied Benő Karácsony [...] Benő Karácsony turned into smoke, and smoke dissipates and disappears without a trace.”<sup>12</sup>*

The fate of the Transylvanian Jewry is described by Pál Réz, Eva Heyman, Áron Márton and László Salamon.

*“Crises became a perpetual issue.”<sup>13</sup>* This is how the farmer Julianna Simonné Deák wrote about the period between 1945 and 1965. 1945 started with the hope of a new beginning, but sadly the official regulations defined the characteristics of the new era soon enough (the Nationality Statute of 1945; the Romanian Constitution of 1952). Collectivisation was quickly initiated, which, according to the memoirs, resulted in countless deportations, tragedies, imprisonments, and the interruption of careers and lives. Dr. József Zsigmond, a medical doctor, was given a choice by his former teacher: he either recruited his father into the collective or his hospital practice would be immediately suspended. We also read several shocking recollections of imprisonments: this is how the university professor, mathematician and communist activist Imre Tóth recalled the imprisonment of Sándor Jakab, deputy Minister of Finance:

*“[f]or 12 years he was imprisoned alone in his cell. He didn’t know that Stalin was dead, they continued to play with him. [...] Later on he got mixed up with others in his cell, including his own prosecutor, by the way. Otherwise, it was a common procedure: convict and prosecutor in the same cell. It was then that he started to feel a bit better. Around 1965 he was released on amnesty.”<sup>14</sup>*

The lines of the writer István Lakatos reveal the story of the imprisonment and torture of Bishop Áron Márton and several Hungarian leaders (including Dr. Pál Szász, Gyárfás Kurkó, Dr. József Venczel, Count Ádám Teleki).

*“Now, the commander says, let’s set it on fire, but I hope you know your poems by heart, because it’s very nice. In the meantime, the poem was consumed by flames.”<sup>15</sup>*

The book also includes accounts about the period by Ádám Bodor, Sándor Kányádi, László Király, János Demeter, the Reformed Protestant bishop Kálmán Csiha, Baron István Bánffy, the teacher József Kun and the sociologist Endre Roth.

12 Veress (2021): p. 191.

13 Veress (2021): p. 265.

14 Veress (2021): p. 279.

15 Veress (2021): p. 345.

The second half of the 1960s saw the beginnings of a certain relief from the misery of the earlier years, however, the period between 1965 and 1990, the last period covered in the volume, was plagued by new hardships. As sociologist Endre Roth explains,

*“[...] the last two decades of the regime were a period of stagnation, then of gradual decline, of perpetual crisis, without a period of improvement or reprieve.”<sup>16</sup>*

One of the defining legal restrictions of the period was the absolute prohibition of abortion. The poet Zsófia Balla describes the practical “implementation” of this provision through her own fate:

*“[m]y doctor also threatened me with prosecution if I were to have a miscarriage due to my clumsiness. At the time of my premature delivery, my uterus was already half ruptured by the time I was operated on. They were unable to save the seven-month-old baby. I was never able to carry a child to term again.”<sup>17</sup>*

The interrogations and wiretaps, the allegations, the operation of the Securitate are recalled by Sándor Kányádi, Sándor Csoóri, Cs. Éva Gyimesi among others. As the recollections point out, food shortages, the preplanned rolling blackouts and lack of heating in the 1980s, and the system of pervasive rationing, including for basic foods and petrol were decisive issues.

*“Ceausescu ignored the needs of his own people for a normal life. He managed to build a society of general misery.”<sup>18</sup>*

The final part of the book revisits the period after 1989. The last month of the year was decisive: “[...] *the implosion and collapse of the state party*”<sup>19</sup> took place. This is followed by descriptions of protest demonstrations, riots, strikes and the anti-Hungarian pogrom at Marosvásárhely. The book concludes with pessimistic thoughts by the writer Ádám Bodor:

*“[t]oday, this would sound like a mere illusion: that this region, as we dreamed of it, might one day really become a land of relative tolerance and peace...”<sup>20</sup>*

16 Veress (2021): p. 396.

17 Veress (2021): p. 404.

18 Roth Endre *apud*. Veress (2021): p. 482.

19 Roth Endre *apud*. Veress (2021): p. 512.

20 Veress (2021): p. 526.

In the spring of 2022, I had the opportunity to participate in a theatre reading based on the book at the „Sapientia” Hungarian University of Transylvania (Cluj-Napoca), where law students recalled human destinies in the light of the legislation. It was a very special experience and a proof that fates, law and history are very closely connected. We can agree with the idea of Emőd Veress that subjective experiences, memories and recollections ultimately form an objective whole. The reader is thus presented with a complete, detailed and data-rich image of 20th Century Transylvania in a readable, enjoyable style, with sophisticated, contemporary illustrations, documents and legal-historical sources. For all these reasons, I heartily recommend *Transylvanian Stories* to the attention of everyone.