ROMANIANS IN HISTORIC HUNGARY

AMBRUS MISKOLCZY

Translated from the Hungarian by
JOSEPH HELD
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It is a truism that the coexistence of Hungarians and Romanians is fraught with hardship; it is a fact that they have been both geographically and socially—and continue—living to live next to each other. With no neighboring peoples have Hungarian historical memories played such a crucial role. One can observe the continuing existence of many anachronistic perceptions and ancient “cults” in these relations; they often act as substitutes for religion. These phenomena, as well as Hungarian beliefs in conspiracy theories, is continuously being reinforced by those Western pseudo-historians and political scientists who assert that the “Daco-Romanian theory of continuity” is denied only by the Hungarians. People suffering from the disease of active atavism reject the book of Gottfried Schramm who disputes such a continuity, by exclaiming loudly; “his grandfather was Hungarian.” This, of course, is an example of the manipulation of history, the creation of an atmosphere of incitement; it should also be an inducement to the tension resolution, a way toward intellectual cooperation. Modern national politics have been shaped by short-term interests and ostensibly eternal values; sometimes there are also talks of eternal antagonisms, joint struggles, and even almost miraculous coexistence. It happens many times that the personal history of an individual contradicts surveys of history. There are, of course, as many private histories as there are readers, although, in general, personal histories reflects motifs readily received from general histories, which are then adjusted to individual experiences, temperament, education, and inspirations.

Let us look at examples provided by two Hungarian twentieth-century poets. One is József Erdélyi, who fought in World War I, and refused to live in the new Romania, in spite of the fact that he considered himself part Romanian. He believed that the tensions between his
Romanian father and Hungarian mother continued to exist in him. He resolved the tension by turning to a virulent form of anti-Semitism, expressed in simplistic imitation of the great nineteenth century poet Sándor Petőfi, tough in spirit radically different from him.

On the other hand, one of the foremost poets of the twentieth century, Attila József, wrote in his “By the Danube”:

Mother was a Kún, Father was Székely, partly, and half, or maybe pure Romanian.

His poetry shows that a true genius can rise above social and national prejudices and can grasp possibilities of presenting lived history, as opposed to a narrow partisan version of it. At the same time, he had accepted a view of life based on harmonious coexistence with his own self as well as others:

I am the world—the ancient, endless story:
clan fighting clan for creed or crazy greed.
I march among the conquerors in glory,
I suffer with the conquered in defeat.
Árpád and Zalán, Werbőczi and Dózsa:
Slavs, Mongols, Turks and other variants;
in me, we shall redeem the long foreclosure
with gentle future—new Hungarians!

...I want to work. It’s hard for human nature
to make a true confession of the past:
The Danube, which is past, present and future
entwines its waves in tender friendly clasps.
Out of the blood our fathers shed in battles
flows peace, through our remembrance and regard,
creating order in our common matters,
this is our task, we know it will be hard.2

Let us admit that Hungarians by now have worn this premise rather thin, while the task itself remains formidable; to be sure, circumstances change, different necessities must be taken into consideration—yet
individual efforts, however small, make the task timely still. In his *Can-
tata profana*, the renowned composer Béla Bartók had the great chal-
lenge of life explained through the words of the hunter’s sons turned
into stags; “only from a clear spring!...”

The sources of history, however, are not so clear. Providence dis-
appeared. Our history is not about salvation, there is no historical
inevitability and no inexorable developments. As people and as indi-
viduals we are sadly alone, although we do row “in one boat.” This is
one reason that compels us to see things clearly; since that which we
may call reality, if explored and reconstructed by scientific means,
becomes immeasurably fairer, better and more interesting than the
quasi-religious schemes for “earthly salvation.” It is possible that if we
manage to reject these schemes, we would hardly recognize our myths,
our deeply ingrained dogmas. Self-knowledge also includes the recog-
nition of the facts of coexistence, and this is probably going to be a long
and even painful process. Radu Popa, the outstanding Romanian arche-
ologist and historian, emphasized in one of his interviews given on the
occasion of a joint Hungarian-Romanian historical conference:

Contacts between the Hungarian and Romanian ethnic groups had
not happened at once, but on various levels, at different times and
under different circumstances. For this reason it is most important
that these circumstances are examined by scholars of good will,
free of all ideological and political prejudices. This is the only way
we could spare public opinion, as well as historians themselves, the
error of “historical truths.”

These “truths” have become mostly nationalist dogmas. Their sup-
porters believe that the history of the other side is simply a conspiracy
against them, and what is even sadder is that even professional histori-
ans often compose narratives of events which more properly belong in
a Grimm fairy tale.

Among Romanian nationalist dogmas are stories according to
which Hungarians burned Romanians alive in 1848, and during the
Reformation, impaled Romanians. Some Romanian nationalists con-
duct a war of numbers, throwing around arbitrarily inflated numbers of
victims; in effect, spreading propaganda lies, attempting to prove a
“Holocaust” of the Romanian people. These ideologues cannot and do not want to let go their narratives of national catastrophe. They attempt to construct a purely national history.

The fact is that “there is no purely national history, and this is all the more true in the case of the Romanians,” emphasized the great Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga. He wrote this in 1915, when the establishment of a unified Romanian nation first appeared to be a possibility, and he took this into consideration when writing his history of the Romanians living in historic Hungary. Since then, no one has written anything quite like it. His book has remained a unique piece of work, similar to László Makkai’s Hungarian-Romanian Common Past, published in 1948. This latter monograph shows the intertwining history of the two peoples in such a truthful way that it resulted in his “excommunication” by the supporters of nationalist exclusivity as well as by those favoring communist totalitarianism. Their reason was that this work had been born in the spirit of the transparency of national frontiers; that it illuminated painful questions of history, demanding honest discussions, which were undesirable at that time. In fact, the borders did not become transparent; on the contrary; they were completely closed for more than a decade.

The near miraculous emergence of criticism of historical myths in current Romanian historiography promises more than the phrase-mongering of the past, and this process might have a positive effect on Hungarian historians. While there is a relative calm on the contemporary historical scene, it would not hurt to watch our steps in order to avoid pitfalls. We must remember that the history of a people, or of a region, is the story of coexistence with other peoples, and it is also coexistence with each people’s own particular history. We are warned by Sándor Weöres, whose knowledge of our region was enhanced by bitter historical experience, that a

Nation that wants to be superior to others becomes an executioner or a buffoon. Those who emphasize the real or imaginary virtues of their nation and refuse to hear unsparing criticisms, lead their nation into swamps. The greatest calamity for a nation is the destruction of its sense of judgment. Under such conditions people become demoralized so when an adventurer makes a grab for
power, they will easily become his pray. There is no comparable external danger, no devastation, or thousand-year long oppression that would match the damage.8

There is no national history that is not about the history of another nation as well.

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