

A review article:

## **Hungarians Beyond the Borders: Diaspora Existence in Transylvania and Elsewhere**

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Balázs Balogh and Zoltán Illyés, eds. *Perspectives of Diaspora Existence. Hungarian Diasporas in the Carpathian Basin – Historical and Current Contexts of a Specific Diaspora Interpretation and Its Aspects of Ethnic Minority Protection*. Trans. Gábor Komáromy. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2006. 272 pages.

**The Institute of Ethnology**, and the Research Institute of Ethnic and National Minorities, both of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with the Kriza János Ethnic Studies Association of Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár in Romania, has organized a conference about the Hungarian diaspora in the Carpathian Basin. It was held on June 8–11 of 2006, in the school and orphanage of the Hungarian Reformed Church of Romania, in the western Transylvanian town of Zsobok (Romanians call this place Jebucu). The conference was interdisciplinary with a wide variety of disciplines being represented (ethnology, cultural anthropology, sociology, history, theology, pedagogy, linguistics, political science, etc.). The proceedings of the conference constitute a selection of the papers given. They were selected by the editors with an international audience in mind. The result was the volume at hand. It contains more studies of interest than can be reviewed in a review article such as this one.

It should be stated in advance that in the region between the Baltic and the Balkans, which includes the Carpathian Basin, the primary though not exclusive factor that determines national and ethnic identity is language. Because of this, observations about diaspora existence there are always

closely linked to theories about linguistics and cultural concerns. Several of the studies in this volume suggest that in this respect two paradigms face each other. The idea is perhaps best expressed by János Péntek, a professor of linguistics at Babes-Bolyai University and a native of the region (Kalotaszeg) where the conference was held: “The difference in recognising variability or diversities conspicuously clear in the paradigm, in theory and in minority politics: one regards linguistic and cultural diversity as a value while the other aims at uni-lingual reductionism...” (p. 75)

Professor Péntek analyses not only the themes pertinent to the conference but also the experience of his region, Kalotaszeg. Until 1918 this region of a particular local Magyar culture existed in the vicinity of the cultural centre Kolozsvár (now Cluj-Napoca) and as a result was the subject of many sociological studies. Knowledge about it and its place in Hungarian national consciousness reach far beyond the place's local geographic even Transylvanian boundaries. Professor Péntek, relying on his own linguistic researches, calls attention to valuable conclusions that are important not only from the academic point of view but also for the sake of the survival of diasporas.

The preface to the book as well as many of its papers emphasize that one weakness of Hungarian diaspora research, both in the past and in the present, is the lack of a solid theoretical basis. For this reason special praise must be paid to the four introductory theoretical studies that try to remedy this situation. The very first one, Gábor Biczó's “Transnational Dimensions of the Diaspora Issue and Hungarian Diaspora Research,” outlines various, mainly American (R.E. Park, Colin Green) diaspora theories, then deals with their impact, and then weighs the possibility of their universal application. Unfortunately however, despite the title of his study, he does not as much as outline briefly Hungarian research relevant to the subject.

The word “diaspora” (in Magyar *diaszpóra*) has no commonly accepted definition in Hungary. The participants of the 2006 conference understood it to be no more than a word that refers to something related to ethnicity. Hungarian definitions of the word have traditionally been heavily influenced by politics and historical consciousness. It is important to keep in mind that up to the end of the 19th century, in the Hungarian language this word was used in connection with migrant minorities (Jews, Armenians and Greeks) and the emerging Hungarian immigrant community in the United States. It was also at that time that Hungarian intellectuals began paying attention to Magyar minorities living in the historic Kingdom of Hungary among larger minority (i.e. non-Magyar) populations, minorities that, despite their being situated in Hungary, faced the possible loss of their Magyar language. The Hungarian word

*szórvány* was used to describe their case, which is officially at least a precise translation of the word diaspora, but its meaning in practice diverged. This term became more widely used after 1920 when as a result of the post-war peace settlement (the Treaty of Trianon), a third of Hungary's people with a Magyar identity and Magyar language ended up in neighbouring countries where many of their smaller communities definitely faced the prospect of assimilation.

All the conference's participants had taken a stand, overtly or covertly, directly or indirectly, regarding János Péntek's paradigm referred to above. The paper of Zoltán Ilyés is based on the Hungarian scholarly literature on the subject and the author's extensive expertise in anthropology and sociology. It suggests numerous approaches to diaspora studies. Among the models he examines are the various and greatly differing minorities that had come into existence as a result of the truncation of both Hungary and Germany in the post-World War I peace settlements. The examples he uses are constructed both through his knowledge of the historical circumstances and Ilyés's own experiences in the regions discussed. At the end of his study the author urges a change in diaspora studies to the effect that the conceiving of assimilation as a loss must be reassessed. This conclusion however, does not necessarily and logically flow from the arguments presented in the body of his paper.

A very different approach to the problem is taken by political scientist Barna Bodó. His subject of interest is the Hungarian and German minorities of south-western Romania, the region known as the Banat (Bánság in Hungarian). The examples he refers to pertain to this area. He makes no secret of the fact that the efforts aimed at the sustenance of minority cultures in this region bring meagre results. His call for more effective action is not the act of scholarship; nevertheless he urges scholars to help in the formulation of a Hungarian strategy for diaspora studies.

The problem of minority assimilation was touched on not only by the above-described papers but almost without exception by the other papers in the volume. The vast territorial rearrangement of Central Europe after the First World War resulted in millions of people acquiring new citizenship without having left their homes. The accompanying regime changes also caused new tensions between peoples and countries. As a result the problem of linguistic and ethnic assimilation became a key question of diaspora existence — and not only for minority Hungarians.

The loss of language by children born from mixed marriages has always been seen as a demographic loss or gain for one or the other side of the ethnic rivalry, a loss or gain that had significant political, economic, social and cultural implications for both sides. During the time of the Austro-Hungarian

Dual Monarchy, Hungarian society looked upon the assimilation of non-Magyar minorities positively and their cultural persistence negatively. The minorities viewed these processes in the opposite manner. Much of Hungary's urban German and Jewish population constituted an exception to this generalization, as most members of these two groups approved and even encouraged assimilation to the Hungarian nation.

Only one paper in the volume, the study by Tamás Kiss, is devoted in its entirety to the phenomenon of assimilation. It deals with the demographics of Hungarians in Transylvania, more precisely, those Hungarians of the Carpathian Basin who live under Rumanian rule. This excellent study concludes that much of the assimilation of Hungarians results from ethnically mixed marriages.

Vilmos Keszeg in his study analyzes the careers and life-histories of minority Transylvanians. He had asked his informants not about diaspora existence but about discussions of it. The histories he reveals chronicle individual diaspora lives. The strategies his informants use for cultural survival are full with examples of continuous compromising of original values. Typically, these individuals at first oppose and repudiate mixed (both the ethnic and the religious kind) marriages, but in time they make peace with the idea and adopt to their new circumstances.

Folklorist Zoltán Magyar based his study on extensive field-work. The many examples he uses suggest that historical folklore is a fundamental constituent of the ethnic consciousness of people living in a diaspora situation, especially where there are no ethnic schools and ethnic churches to foster such consciousness. An oral tradition of stories about atrocities against an ethnic group, or about struggles waged to avert such atrocities, also play a role in the maintenance of ethnic consciousness.

We have mentioned the Kalotaszeg region where the place that hosted the conference is situated. The Hungarian population of this district was the subject of the study of Balázs Balogh and Ágnes Fülemile. From the point of methodology, this is the most accomplished work in the volume. It uses original sources as well as the results of anthropological, sociological, ethnographic, linguistic and historical researches. It also speaks of its authors' personal knowledge of the situation. We will discuss only those aspects of this study that pertain most to the main themes of the volume. The authors argue that the decline and disappearance of the peripheral Hungarian ethnic islands of this region and the transformation of solid Magyar settlements into diaspora ones had been taking place even during the time the region belonged to Hungary. At that time these processes were caused by two factors: one, the majority population was already Romanian, and two, by the conflicts between

the two ethnicities. In recent decades these processes accelerated. This was brought about by urbanization and the drastic political measures of the Romanian regime — such as the coerced collectivization of agriculture and the forced promotion of manufacturing. These processes impact not only the region's isolated Hungarian communities but also almost all parts of Kalotaszeg.

The village of Oltszakadát (now Sacadate) in south-Transylvania represents in some respects the opposite of what is happening in the Kalotaszeg region. Its Hungarian population lives in isolation as the nearest Hungarian community is dozens of kilometres from it. Its Hungarian population is under 200 and forms a minority in this mainly Romanian settlement. The evolution of this community through the twentieth century is examined by Edit Kádár through the eyes of the historical demographer and sociologist. Her study, illustrated by tables rich in demographic and sociological data, conclusively argues that the village's Hungarian minority has survived because of its strict adherence to the use of the Hungarian language and the region's unique Lutheran religion.

Most of the volume's studies, for obvious geographic, historical and demographic reasons, deal with the situation of Hungarians in lands belonging to Romania. We have to bemoan the paucity of studies regarding diaspora situations in other parts of the Carpathian Basin. For this reason we applaud the one study in the collection that deals not with a Romania-related theme. This is the paper of cultural anthropologists Virág Hajnal and Richard Papp who did their research in a village of the historical region of Szemérség, now a part of Serbia. Most of the Hungarians of the area had settled there some eight or nine centuries ago, but those of the village of Dobradó got there only some 120-130 years ago — into a village of mixed ethnicity and mixed religion, but with a majority of Slav population. Till 1918 it belonged to the Lands of the Holy Crown of Hungary, in particular to the autonomous Kingdom of Croatia. The linguistic situation of these people was determined by these circumstances. The authors of the study did their research here after the break-up of Yugoslavia, just when the question of ethnic identity, and relationship to the “mother country” (Hungary), became a more relevant one for the village's Magyar residents. This was also the time when Hungary “discovered” the Hungarian diaspora even though making contact with this particular Magyar ethnic island was not successful for various reasons.

Pál Péter Tóth offers thought-provoking data related to ethnic identity in the diaspora. From working with questionnaires among immigrants to Hungary, he concludes that most of these people come not from Magyar diaspora communities but from large, predominantly Hungarian ethnic

islands. This is not surprising in view of the fact that most Magyars in the neighbouring countries live in such ethnic islands. The author remarks however, that the emigration of many people from these tends to turn them into diaspora communities, ones in which Hungarians become minorities. This phenomenon gives rise to the question: why is it that Hungarians tend to leave their ethnic islands while their co-ethnics in diaspora existence tend to stay? We have no answer to this question.

The last paper in the volume is by Balázs Borsos. It uses the data provided by the volumes of the *Magyar Néprajzi Atlasz* (Budapest, 1989-1991) to provide a picture of the situation of the Hungarian diaspora communities of the Carpathian Basin primarily during the beginning of the 20th century. It does so mainly through the use of maps.

The author of this review had attended the conference and can say that the presentations were often followed by comments and discussions that unfortunately are not presented in the proceedings. It is also regrettable that the conference paid little attention to the Hungarian diaspora living in towns and cities as well as industrial districts. The role of the churches has also not received enough attention during the conference.

There can be no doubt that the disputes that emerged as a result of the differing interpretations presented at the conference will continue. In the matter of assimilation vs cultural survival we have to agree with those who consider the assimilation of Hungarians into other ethnic groups as a loss to this ethnic group. The warning given in the conclusions of János Péntek's study should be heeded, that is policies aimed at the equality of opportunity among nationalities for culture maintenance should be respected (pp. 76-78).

In the 20th century the Magyar ethnic group has produced so many examples of diaspora existence that their study could be the theme of not one but a series of scholarly conferences. The international scholarship could benefit from the examination of these examples. As has been mentioned above, a comprehensive survey of Hungarian inquiries into these situations during the early part of the 20th century is missing from the volume. This is regrettable as there had been initiatives during the interwar year whose achievements, regrettably, have been largely forgotten. I refer to the journals *Magyar Kisebbség* [Hungarian minority] and *Látóhatár* [Horizon], the minority studies institute of the University of Pécs, the Hungarian Institute of Sociography, as well as Transylvanian initiatives mentioned at the beginning of Vilmos Keszeg's paper. The next era of Hungarian history, the post-World War II communist dictatorship, produced nothing as during much of this time not even plans could be made for the scholarly study of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries. It is not a consolation that the situation in this

respect hardly differed in the other Soviet satellites. In the Soviet Union however, in particular in the Maklai Mikluho Institute in Moscow, numerous researchers studied the question of assimilation — in reality the processes of the birth of the communist “melting pot”.

We write this to emphasize that Hungarian diaspora studies took root really only after 1990. This explains the unevenness (and other problems that we did not touch on) that we pointed out in our evaluation of this volume. Whether we call this a beginning or a renewal, scholarship only explains but does not excuse the problems, theoretical shortcomings, the obscurity of ideas, as well as the contradictions of diaspora research. Nevertheless the thought of organizing the 2006 conference and the publication of the proceedings in Hungarian as well as in an abridged English edition must be seen as welcome developments. It should also be mentioned that the life-spans of the participants covered almost six decades, even though the majority belonged to the younger generation (those between 30 and 40) of middle-aged researchers. This bodes well for the future.