

Die Karriere des deutschen Renegaten Hans Caspar in Ofen (1627–1660) im politischen und kulturellen Kontext. By János Szabados. Vienna: Publishing House of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2023. 408 pp.

The monograph under review is a revised German edition of the doctoral dissertation by János Szabados, defended at the University of Szeged in 2019. The volume offers a discussion of the career of Hans Caspar, a renegade who lived and worked in Buda in the first half of the seventeenth century. Szabados examines Caspar's career within the framework of new diplomatic history, an approach which has been gaining ground in recent years. In contrast to "classical" diplomatic history, research shaped by this approach is not limited to the individuals who determined policy (rulers and leading diplomats) but rather opens up to other potential lines of inquiry, such as social, cultural, and linguistic history, but also the history of communication and espionage. There is also some focus on the study of lower-ranking individuals or figures who were outside the official diplomatic sphere but still played significant roles in it, particularly those active in Eastern diplomacy.

In the early modern era, converts from Christianity to Islam were referred to as renegades. These individuals had different motivations for leaving the fold. Most of them, however, were able to move more easily in the intercultural space once they had settled into their new environment specifically because of their Christian background, which made them suitable as translators, interpreters, and, in some cases, people involved in intelligence work. Several such figures are known from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but Hans Caspar, who is the protagonist of this volume, stands out among them. Through Caspar's life and career, who was known in the contemporary sources by several names (such as Alexander Fischer and Hüseyin çavuş), Szabados introduces his reader to the activities of the so-called "secret correspondents" who were active in the far reaches of the Ottoman Empire during this period. This is important in part because it is difficult to define the members of this group precisely. Some of them merely passed on the messages that had been entrusted to them, while others were themselves intelligence gatherers or, in some cases, engaged solely in the latter practice. They received regular payments from Vienna in return for their work.

The introduction offers a clear overview of the book (including a discussion of the sources, themes, structure, and methodologies) and a summary of the history of the scholarship on the subject in and outside of Hungary, as well as a review of the most important recent secondary literature on the topic with

particular focus on diplomatic relations between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. The half century between 1606 and 1663 was a more peaceful period in the border region between the two empires compared to earlier centuries, a period of relative tranquility guaranteed, among other things, by the Treaty of Zsitvatorok, which brought the Long Turkish War (1591/93–1606) to an end, and by the repeated renewals of the treaty. In addition, the Habsburg embassy in Constantinople, which had been closed because of the war, was reopened after 1606, and a channel of communication between the capitals of the two empires was needed to ensure the transmission of messages.

The second part of the monograph presents the activities of the “secret correspondents” of the first half of the seventeenth century and then specifically the career of Hans Caspar between 1627 and 1660. After initial attempts, the system of “secret correspondents” was effectively established in the latter half of the 1620s. The idea was to have reliable people who had been recruited for service in the larger settlements along the route between Vienna and Constantinople to help forward letters.

Hans Caspar was born Alexander Fischer in Vienna, but there are no reliable records concerning his early life, so we do not know exactly when or how he converted to Islam. He is first mentioned in the sources in connection with the Treaty of Szőny (1627), when he was already being referred to as Hüseyin çavuş. In 1629, he accompanied the diplomat Johann Rudolf Schmid to his new post in Constantinople, and in the following years he made several journeys between Buda and Constantinople. In addition, he was in contact with certain imperial commanders on the border during this period and also with some members of the Hungarian nobility, such as Palatine Miklós Esterházy, to whom he regularly sent reports.

Caspar rose to prominence in the mid-1640s. In the first half of the decade, which was dominated by war, the system of “secret correspondents” broke down and needed to be reorganized. This task was entrusted to Johann Rudolf Schmid, who was thoroughly versed in Eastern diplomacy and who recruited Caspar, among others. In 1646, Caspar served as a “secret correspondent,” and he was paid for this work. It is thus hardly surprising that most of the surviving reports that he issued are from the period after 1647, since these reports were not only sent to the border commanders and some members of the Hungarian nobility but were also sent onward by them to Vienna.

The heyday of Caspar’s activities can clearly be dated to the early 1650s, when Kara Murad served as pasha of Buda. The pasha often turned a blind eye

to Caspar's activities, so again it is not surprising that about half the surviving reports he wrote were from this period. His other duties included forwarding reports from the permanent resident in Constantinople (Simon Reniger) to Vienna and letters from Vienna to Constantinople. He was also appointed interpreter in Buda at this time, which can clearly be seen as the apex of his career. Vienna, however, could hardly afford to overlook Caspar's close relationship with the pasha of Buda, or the security risks this relationship involved. The transfer of Murad pasha from Buda in 1654, however, put an end to this "golden age," as the new pasha, Sari Kenan, unlike his predecessor, was less tolerant of Caspar's activities. Furthermore, the increasingly frequent incursions along the frontier caused disruptions in communication between Vienna and Constantinople and in the activities of the "secret correspondents." This period (1654–55) was clearly the low point of Caspar's career, when he wrote and was able to send comparatively few reports to Vienna. It is worth noting, furthermore, that in the late 1640s and the first half of the 1650s, in addition to writing reports for the Habsburgs, Caspar was also passing on information to the Principality of Transylvania.

Hans Caspar continued to work as a spy for the Habsburgs and Transylvania in the second half of the 1650s, but with less intensity than in the first half of the decade. Given the wartime circumstances, however, which particularly affected Transylvania, his potential as a renegade spy became increasingly important to Vienna. In 1658, however, he was transferred to Temesvár (Timișoara, today in Romania), and there are fewer records of him in the following years, but he presumably remained there. After 1660, he disappeared from the sources altogether, and Szabados suggests that this was probably when Caspar, who by then was no longer a young man, passed away.

The third part of the monograph offers a close look at the details of the world in which Caspar worked. It describes the important role Buda played in the seventeenth-century in the maintenance of the relationship between the two empires and also looks at the careers of other renegades who worked alongside Caspar (such as Habib ağa, and Ali çavuş). We also learn, with regards to Hans Caspar's private life, that he had a wife and children, as well as his own house. The sources reveal that he spoke three languages (German, Hungarian, and Turkish), but no Latin, which can probably be explained by his lower level of education. This may well suggest something about his background as a member of the Christian fold, or more precisely, it would indicate that he probably came under Ottoman rule at an early age. Nevertheless, in his reports to Vienna, Hans Caspar repeatedly noted his German-speaking and Christian roots, which he probably found easier

to maintain because of the proximity of the imperial capital. In general, however, the Viennese leadership had constant doubts about the reliability of the renegades, including Hans Caspar.

In the fourth part of the volume, Szabados points out that the “secret correspondents” were one of the cornerstones of Habsburg-Ottoman diplomacy. One of the tasks of the network was to facilitate communications between Vienna and Constantinople, while the other was to gather information and spy. Caspar proved well suited to these tasks, as he was in regular contact with the Viennese leadership and had substantial information about the Ottoman elite in Buda. Although he was in continuous contact with both sides, Szabados does not consider him a “transimperial subject,” since in Vienna he was no longer considered a Christian but simply a Turk or a renegade. Caspar’s work can be regarded as outstanding in the period, as he had a successful career in intelligence spanning several decades on the border between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, it is worth saying a few words about the collection of sources at the end of the volume, which contains a critical edition of 79 reports written by Caspar between 1647 and 1659. With a few exceptions, almost all the sources are in German, and most of them are dated from Buda. The transcriptions of the sources are accompanied by short German-language summaries and detailed annotations. The recipients of the reports included leaders of eastern diplomacy in Vienna, the commanders of border posts, and some members of the Hungarian nobility.

This monograph, which is based on diligent research, close study of archival sources, and a thorough survey of the secondary literature, clearly fills a lacuna in the scholarship. It offers a detailed examination of the career of Hans Caspar, who worked between the courts of the two great empires of Central Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century, placing it against the backdrop of the roles of the “secret correspondents” of the period. Of particular importance is the fact that Szabados has rather generously provided not just a thorough discussion of his subject but also the written sources on which his research is based. The volume constitutes a significant contribution to the scholarship on the period.

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