

TRAVEL IN SPACE AND TIME

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Look at the map of East/Central Europe where the Balkans are not very far, at least ethnically, culturally, spiritually. Focus on Transylvania, now a Rumanian province but over which Hungarian consciousness has been bleeding since 1920, the Versailles Treaty. Now zero in on the hardly visible border, separating Hungary and Rumania, in reality Transylvania. Along that line not only two enemies face each other — like, farther south, the Serbs and the Croats — also two religions, the Catholic (and Protestant) and the Greco-Orthodox. You see now what the term «two cultures» mean, since Hungary has been Roman (Latin, Western) orientated, Rumania Byzantine-Greek and Russian. It is a question of hearts, habits, the shape of the script (Latin for one, Cyrillic for the other), but also of political alliances and culture policies. In short, these neighbors could become, tomorrow, a new open wound. The respective governments, in Bucharest and Budapest, may sign all the friendship treaties, they may become members of a «united» Europe and of NATO, they may trade according to the purest free-market dogma: they will not be friends, allies, cousins. Each is sniffing out the other's abuses (against minorities, church buildings, the language of schools), ready to pour its despair in poetry, legend, armed readiness and the clash of symbols. Only in the American media and presidential speeches can all this be overlooked, and «remedies» offered. Reality is as far away from such empty discourse as the experience of history. The human condition speaks an altogether different language in Transylvania and Washington.

I was just past five years of age when plunged in this Transylvanian world. About 180 miles from Budapest where I was born, yet a different world. Even

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the name of the town would be confusing, since Transylvania itself has four of them: in Latin, in Magyar, in German (large Saxon settlement since the Middle Ages, then organized by Maria-Terezia), and in Rumanian. The towns follow the pattern, down to their sports clubs's names: in Rumanian or Magyar. The town of N. (or O., or G., or V., according to which language we speak) happened to be the largest along the border, it was therefore jealously garded by the Rumanian government which stationed an outsize garrison there. Just a warning to Budapest in case it plans a *reconquista*. On the Rumanian «national unity» day, May 10, an avalanche of armed divisions marched through town, led by spectacularly uniformed officers — carefully cosmeticized to look pretty, according to hostile Magyars. It was of course school holyday, so we were in the crowd, looking. Incidentally, the «frontier town» character added to the hostility: you either spoke Magyar or you spoke Rumanian. The two hardly met.

There were myriad other potential confrontations, not necessarily exploding but always under the surface. N. used to be a notable cultural center before 1918; now it survived by imports from Budapest (literature, plays, exhibits, lectures), watched by the Rumanian authorities against subversion, that is any sign of Magyar patriotism. My own adolescent years took all this in as normal, in fact as something exciting since one was always treading the «forbidden» or at least the «no man's land». And a more distant history, the centuries as far back as the Roman empire, also played its role, according to who interpreted it. For example, was I, 12 year old, supposed to know the history of Hungary when facing Rumanian examiners in school? For the young boy it was a veritable moral test, from which I learned what in today's jargon would be called «decision-making». Then and there, I had to make up my mind, under the stare of the Rumanian professor (who had a Hungarian name slightly rumanized). I decided not to hide my knowledge; I got the best grade. I could have flunked just as well.

Why am I telling this pre-history, that of a young boy? To enable the reader to understand that sixty-five years later I returned to N. which is again called O., the Rumanian name. But here another story begins, simply because six decades is a huge chunk of time, and confronts you for the first time with the problem of Augustinian dimensions: What is Time?

Time, says Augustine approximately, is the confluence, better, the synchronicity of past, present, and future. Yes, this may be the schoolbook definition. Yet, I experienced it differently, as my *self* measuring by my present consciousness the events and places and habits of my past self, sixty-five years ago. Yes, I used to walk these streets and they are not very different now from what they were then, since Rumania is dirt poor after the Ceausescu decades, no money or will for improvement. Yet, the streets, the streetcorners, the cafes were not the same since I met nobody remembering what I remembered. In a way, I

was older than all the other inhabitants. First, because it was now the second, third generation which saw things differently, and meanwhile, Ceausescu, and his national-communism had proceeded to a kind of mini-ethnic cleansing, importing thousands of Rumanians from deep Rumania, to fill up the place of those forced to flee. These new residents had no idea of the old, multilingual Transylvania, they only spoke Rumanian. They even labored under a decree not to answer questions in Hungarian.

I entered stores, wanting to buy this or that — or rather only *this*, because the stores seemed devastated, almost total penury, even if compared only with Hungarian conditions, a few kilometers away. Or would enter a restaurant. Nothing on the menu, the waiter would mention two dishes, nothing more. Or I would take a taxi; there I had better luck, people in movement felt obviously more free to answer me in Hungarian. In scores and eating places they turned their head away, rather than uttering Hungarian words. This is what central/east Europe looks like, a decade after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and at a time when Washington favors planetary *openness* and the European capitals clamor about continental *unity*. Truth is, there is more distrust between these nations than 65 years ago.

So back to 65 years ago, myself being ten at the time. I recognized in minute detail the old buildings, squares, parks, avenues, tramways, the river bank where I used to walk with my first love. But, I understood it now, memories are not just immobile chunks of old visual impressions, they are words uttered, emotions which colored them, intellectual discoveries, surging loyalties and admirations. I was walking like a ghost, aware that I myself was like an old ruin that the passers-by, had they known, would have pointed out as a kind of time-monster. I would ask for such and such a street, indicating desperately where it was. Well, the street was still there but had a different name, and it was anyway disfigured (for me): our improvised soccer ground was now occupied by a big, stupid, derelict apartment building. It was like receiving a slap in my face. And the thing got worse when I automatically conjured up the faces and movements of the boys my age who, for me, peopled the soccer ground where the present neighbors just did not see what I *saw*.

I forced the issue and would visit homes where I used to live with my parents. The buildings were still there, the present tenants, at first suspicious, let me in after I explained. But what could I explain when they did not perceive the little boy who, 60 years ago, played on the terrace, climbed the trees, gathered friends with whom to engage in fantasy-wars among the tombstones of the centuries-old Turkish cemetery, just outside town. I would point to the entrance: there used to be, 60-70 years ago, colored glass plates above the gate! They politely smiled and very likely wished me to hell.

I stayed at the Catholic bishops residence, a priest the kind of which hardly exists any more. But even he did not remember, busy as he is carrying the

burden of a religious minority whom the nation's Orthodox envy (for Vatican funds) and regard as spies for Budapest. I felt in his vast rooms as one besieged although nothing untoward happened, even when the bishop left one morning by plane for Bucharest in order to reclaim, for the hundredth time, the local Catholic school, the local episcopal palace now used as a Rumanian folklore museum. «They will again promise me all I want; he told me on departure, but I'll get nothing. Yet my absence would be noticed». Such little wars and skirmishes (concerning the university's Hungarian section, concerning the Catholic press) fill the days, the year, a lifetime, not only of a few individuals, but of an entire «minority group» of some two million people.

Like in most other parts of this one half of Europe, history has deeply marked geography itself and certainly the mentalities. The sugarcoated descriptions in our media would merely be obscene if it «informed» us about what is not. But it informs us according to our own realities and values as if such things could be transplanted in another soil, another spiritual climate. Reading or listening to these cheaply false reports, one has the impression that, once «liberated» from the bolshevik tyranny, people in Transylvania (or Kosovo, Bosnia, the Ukraine, Moldova, Slovakia and farther up north and east) call themselves free and independent, and have only two preoccupations: becoming a democracy and installing a capitalistic economic order. True, the very smart ones, with funds and little scruple, welcome the change (*glasnost*, if you wish); they invest, buy up moribund enterprises, send moneys to banks abroad, travel, make deals with local potentates, and leave the country at the smallest sign of alarm. If we insist on calling these people the *elite*, we should get out of the business of history because such people are deeply despised and are regarded as traitors. Not rarely, they are assassinated, in spite of bodyguards and reinforced Mercedes cars.

The rest of the population feels betrayed: first by the East, now by the West, and this sense of betrayal is covered only by opportunism (learned under previous occupations like the Ottoman) and repugnant flattery for the *nouveaux riches* and the new power elite. If this is what we call «integration in NATO or in United Europe», by all means, let us fool ourselves. But visiting statesmen and businessmen — like Clinton in Africa — should not believe they are changing history, mentality, habits or styles. They change nothing, they merely reinforce the feeling of powerlessness and cynicism in the population.

Especially is this true of Transylvania. Part of Hungary from the region's historical structuralization, this land is rightly called the «Switzerland of the East»: high mountains, comfortable passes, abundant rivers, picturesque valleys, laboring towns. Therefore, coveted by neighbors, and once the focal point of Turkish conquest. Thus the story is similar to Balkan stories in general: many centuries's foreign occupation, imposition of the hegemon's religion and his customs, even language. Facing this situation: ever-renewed revolt against the

occupier, enormous sacrifice for what is constantly taken away, the schools and universities, the press, the freedom of worship, some say over taxation, how much and to whom.

What has been here listed adds up to a plague, each nation of the area, from Greece to the Baltic, knows the story by heart because, with local and ethnic variations, it is its own story. Yet, Transylvania has been relatively spared. Both occupying powers, Turks and Austrians, preferred not to fight in the mountains, against the vigorous peasants who therefore developed a spirit of independence. For one thousand years, the province belonged to Hungary (itself within Austrian overlordship from the 16th century on), and Magyars, Germans and Szekelys (of magyar stock) coexisted in relative peace. Then, slowly through the ages there appeared the Rumanians driving their sheep and cattle through the Carpathian passes. And this is the starting point of the Transylvanian drama, one which is so typical of half of Europe. Hungarians claim to have occupied (end of 9th century) an uninhabited area; the Rumanians claim to descend from the Roman legions who, under Trajan, subdued the indigenous Dac-s, forming the Daco-Rumanian entity, and speaking a derivative of Latin — like the French, Spanish, Portuguese. Hungarian historians deny it, they see the Rumanians as semi-nomadic pastoral tribes, penetrating into Transylvania and slowly outnumbering the other inhabitants. Until Woodrow Wilson arrived; he looked at fabricated maps, and decided that the whole province should belong to Rumania. Budapest never accepted this version of things; Hitler's neo-hegemonic success was due to a great extent to the parallel: German reconquest of territories taken by Versailles, and Hungarian reconquest of territories taken at Trianon. These are deeper realities than any pacifying slogans used around international negotiation tables.

A multidimensional light is thus cast on my hesitation as a schoolboy, reported above, whether at the exam I shall admit or not being well-read on Hungarian history. If so, I was admitting at the same time that I had a different image of regional history from that of my examining professors. In the 1930s, such an admission was risky but conceivable; today it would not be advisable. Relationships have deteriorated, and may do so further. However, the reader should by no means think that life was full of tensions and that we, as adolescents, did not have a marvellous time. Whether young or old, one adjusts with a relative ease to almost any regime that is not murderous, and children have a special way of finding the small door next to the half-closed gate. Everything was an adventure. The following episode reveals quite a bit. My family, retaining our Hungarian citizenship, had to renew the residence permit every year. There was the official channel, and then the one paved with corruption. In January on a given day I was always the one who took the envelope, with banknotes inside, to the head of the local office (I forget its name but not that of Mr. V.T., in charge of foreigners). I delivered what we can only

call bribe, to V.T.'s home and gave it to his wife. I remember clearly my mixture of fear and loathing, but it was like a natural event, as natural as the landscape or the street where I walked afterwards, feeling relieved after the mini-ordeal.

This was not all, V.T. was a minor official, after all. At about the same time, my father arranged through friends in Bucharest that a case of twelve bottles of the finest champagne would be delivered to a very high official in one of the Ministries. *This* was the substance of the bribe, part of normalcy, more a «thank-you» note for service rendered than an act of dishonesty, or, let's use a more appropriate term, corruption. Needless to say that my father was not the only one to act in this fashion, and that the whole country was a web of corruption, at low or high level. People in the know explained it by arguing that general corruption was a method of getting rich at all levels, a kind of *embourgeoisement* Balkan-style. Others preferred another variation on the theme. According to them — and the two theories are not incompatible — it was a habit ingrained since the time of Turkish overlordship when the Moslim rulers farmed out the collecting of taxes to their Greek agents who were overseeing the finances of the empire. These smart Greeks got rich on raising taxes (part of which went into their own pockets), they lived in a particular district of Istanbul called «Phanar», they were known as Phanariots. Why did the Ottomans send Greeks to Rumania? Because Rumanians and Greeks were alike Greco-Orthodox, still Rumania's mainline religion, a fact which allowed the Turkish empire not to meddle, and redirected the detestation of the unwilling taxpayers to their own correligiousists.

I have mentioned so far a number of ethnic strands in the relatively small corner of Europe: Saxons, Szekelys, Rumanians, Magyars, Greeks and Turks — each with their different religious affiliation which protected the ethnic consciousness and the nation-hood of the multi-colored *tableau*. With the *tsarina* Catherine the Great, Russia entered as a full participant with her policy of connecting Russia with the Black Sea, thus gaining access to the Mediterranean. From then on, end of the 18th century, two empires were fighting for regional hegemony, and this allowed a small land like Rumania to maneuver, eventually to get the Western powers to get involved too. It was part of these maneuvers and smart moves that Rumania emerged, beginning of this century, as a full-fledged player, able to increase three times its original territory, at the expense of Hungary. The Magyars still do not understand how this could happen, and they consider the events as reversible.

This is the situation which I felt like looking at again, after more decades than I care to count. My recent visit was partly a nostalgia trip, and this was extremely rewarding, but was also motivated by curiosity: Are there any changes such as Western orientation, American influence, new feelings between the two traditional antagonists? In a way, I did then a few months ago what I had done some thirty five years ago: suffocating under the false reports about the

de-colonized Third World, I undertook a trip of half-a-year around the world in order to see things with my own eyes.

Were I more naive, I would have imagined a new environment, a slow but certain integration with Western ways, a modicum of prosperity, democratic signs and symptoms of post-communist fraternization between Hungarians and Rumanians. I saw none of this, rather a feeling of daze after fifty years of the most brutal kind of communism, hopeless poverty, public life non-existent. The past half-century was worse than in the neighbor country. The reason is not the exceptional barbarity of the Ceausescu couple, it is the linguistic situation. Magyars always bemoaned — and were proud of — the fact of speaking an altogether different language, a linguistic island in a sea of Slavs, Germans and Latins. This time this was an advantage. Below a certain level Russians and Hungarians just do not communicate, and no matter how servile the Hungarian satraps were vis-a-vis the Russian overlord, words just did not mean the same thing. The Hungarians's solid hatred and contempt for the communists *and* the Russians cannot be duplicated in Rumania.

Now Transylvania is both Rumanian and Hungarian — the majority of long-time resident Germans having been literally bought up by the Kohl regime, about \$2000 a piece. But although Rumanians are the majority by far, Transylvania is an advanced post of Hungarian culture *and* an open door to the West. «Rumanization» seems to be the main line of Bucharest policy, and thousands of Rumanians are re-settled in Hungarian territory; yet Rumanians are scared and worried lest Budapest makes an aggressive move. What such a move would be, nobody knows, and Budapest multiplies its signs of good will; yet the resentment and the fear are thick in the air as soon as one crosses the border, and Rumanians behave as if they lacked solid roots. And there is a curious twist here nowadays. Thanks to Bruxelles's propaganda for a united Europe, many people are persuaded that such a Europe would indeed be a solution to their problems. Hence the American decision that only three candidatures are to be considered for NATO irks Bucharest which belongs to the «second tier» while Budapest to the first. On the eastern European scale this is a painful humiliation, and a suspected sign of Hungarian maneuvering at Bruxelles, Bonn and Washington. This suspicion will have been added to the never-ending accounting between the two. The bypassing of Rumania is understood in Bucharest as a success of a long line of Hungarian historians who argue to this day that Rumania's Daco-Roman origin is a baseless myth, and that in reality the ancestors of Rumanians had moved up from the deep Balkans as seasonal nomads following their goats. In short, that they do not belong to Europe.

Only by correctly weighing these charges and counter-charges do we understand the impasse of Hungarian-Rumanian relations — and beyond them the impasse of the Balkans and territories elsewhere. As we have seen, the

impasse is much more than merely of a political character, it is religious, cultural, personal. No Dayton could undo the inextricable threads, the latter are existentially tied to every word and gesture. Again, we should not imagine a tightly knit fabric of hostility. In my time, at least, many cultured Rumanians, while strongly nationalistic, had grown up and studied in a still Hungarian Transylvania. Here are two examples of what this could mean.

The Franco-Rumanian writer, Emil Cioran who lived in Paris until he died last year, remembered with a shudder his childhood in Transylvania when fear of the Magyar *gendarme* was universal among the minorities. Although he never learned Hungarian, he was fascinated by the language of that «superior race» which lorded over the likes of Cioran. He used to have nightmares even later in life, and it may be that he wrote such a beautiful and precise French to show it even to himself that he can master a foreign language. Of course, in the 1930s, that is a short decade after Versailles, Rumanians in Transylvania made much of their «Roman» origin and francophilia, by ignoring their native Rumanian language and cultivating French the «cousin's» language. This too was partly a rebuff of Hungarians and their attachment to German, through the Austrian-Habsburg connection.

The other cultural illustration was that of the Rumanian poet and statesman, Octavian Goga. A fierce nationalist, he had translated in his youth and mature years the poems of the greatest modern Hungarian/Transylvanian poet, Endre Ady. It was more than a translation, it was a cult, and Goga published several works on the Magyar poet. He mastered the Hungarian language to perfection, even while conducting an anti-Magyar policy. The pluri-dimensionality of the two nations's relationship can be seen from these examples and from hundreds of others. Declaring, in Wilson's or Clinton's fashion (Versailles, Trianon, Dayton, Bruxelles) that from now on Bucharest and Budapest are to live in peace and love each other, or that both will be democratic and liberal, is like nursery tales, likely to exacerbate the always latent enmity. Let us rather assume that a kind of harmony (even unconscious and unwilling) may grow out of their tensions which are linked to historical memories, good *and* bad experiences, but which are not guaranteed, like in an insurance policy, against the vicissitudes of destiny.