

## NATIONALISM AND SCHOOLING IN TRANSYLVANIA 1867-1914: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON A RESEARCH PROJECT<sup>1</sup>

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Historical studies dealing with the influence of nationalism on the development of the Hungarian schooling system in the period of Dualism have up to now concentrated mainly on government linguistic policies and their impact on minority schools. The facts are well known: In 1879, Hungarian language instruction was made compulsory for primary schools throughout the country. Since the nationalist euphoria of the Millennium in 1896, the establishment of state schools came to be seen as a patriotic duty, as Hungarian figured as their official language of instruction, regardless of the ethnic origin of its pupils. In 1907, the Lex Apponyi decreed that pupils of Magyar origin would have to be instructed in Hungarian at confessional schools as well, if their number surpassed either 20 or 20 % of the student body. If more than half of the pupils were of Magyar origin, Hungarian as language of instruction would be compulsory for everyone. From the fourth year onward, all pupils should be able to express themselves in Hungarian. In addition, government control of confessional schools was stepped up considerably, trying to ensure their Hungarian character and their unconditional loyalty to the Hungarian state.

As a result, the number of confessional non-Hungarian or at least bilingual schools declined sharply especially in the Slovak inhabited regions of Hungary: whereas in 1880, elementary teaching had been held exclusively or at least partially in Slovak at 2313 elementary schools (from a total of 15.824), their number decreased to 365 in 1913 (from a total of 16.929). Thus, during the years immediately preceding World War I, only 16 % of all Slovak children were instructed in their mother tongue. Shielded by the national character of their churches, the Romanians as well as the Saxons of Transylvania fared somewhat better: for example, the number of orthodox and uniate confessional schools, where teaching was held exclusively or at least partially in Romanian decreased from 3.150 in 1880 to 2.170 in 1913.

As the nationalist politics of the Hungarian government caused most conflicts at the level of primary schooling, so far most research concentrated on this field. Yet secondary education was even more oriented towards assimilating non-Magyar students, especially since it had been pressed into a uniform structure in 1883. As well as in elementary schooling, the independent character of the

Romanian as well as the Protestant churches allowed for the upkeep of non-Hungarian secondary schools in Transylvania: other than the Slovaks, whose national gymnasia had been closed for alleged national agitation in 1874/75, the Saxons as well as the Romanians had full-fledged educational systems of their own, comprising German protestant gymnasia at Bistrița (Beszterce, Bistritz), Brașov (Brassó, Kronstadt), Mediaș (Medgyes; Mediasch), Sighișoara (Segesvár; Schäßburg), Orăștie (Szászváros; Broos) and Sibiu (Nagyszeben, Hermannstadt) as well as the lower gymnasia at Reghin (Szászrégen; Sächsisch-Reen) and Șebeș (Szászsebes; Mühlbach) and the German Upper Secondary School (Oberrealschule) at Sibiu, whereas Romanian was the language of instruction at the Orthodox gymnasia at Brașov (Brassó, Kronstadt) and Brad and at the Uniate gymnasia at Blaj (Balázsfalva, Blasendorf), Năsăud (Naszód) and Beiuș (Belényes).

Setting aside the discussion on the reliability of official statistical data, the fact that especially the non-Magyar confessional elementary schools were in a state of continuous decline is basically undisputed. Not so its interpretation. On the contrary, a vivid dispute has developed during the last decades over the impact of compulsory Hungarian language instruction on the process of assimilation in Dualist Hungary. Whereas Slovak and Romanian historians see schooling policies as a major instrument in a system of measures designed to promote forced assimilation of the minorities, Hungarian and some Western scholars have interpreted assimilation as a complex and more or less natural consequence of industrialization and urbanization, which was supported, but not initially caused, by state measures.

Besides a number of regional studies by Hungarian historians on schooling policies mainly in southern Transdanubia as well as the numerous sociological investigations by Victor Kardy, most works have looked at nationalism in the development of the Hungarian schooling system from a rather global perspective. Very little attention though has been paid to the impact of nationalism on daily life in elementary and secondary schools. Eric Hobsbawms plea to study nationalism "from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of the ordinary people" so far has not been heeded much<sup>2</sup>. Aside from the official statistics, we have very little knowledge on the extent to which Hungarian was actually taught and instruction held in Hungarian in areas inhabited almost exclusively by non-Magyars. Even less do we know what this kind of instruction actually meant to the pupils, to what extent they acquired a working knowledge of Hungarian and, most important, how it shaped their attitude towards state and society.

Yet in the study I plan to undertake, the impact of nationalism shall not be narrowed down exclusively to the language question. In a Central European context, nationalism should rather be quite broadly defined as the orientation of

social thought towards ethnic identification as the essential basis of cultural, social, and political life. And yet, reverting once more to Hobsbawm, "we cannot assume that for most people national identification - when it exists - excludes or is always or ever superior to the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being"<sup>3</sup>. In the following considerations, I will therefore ask, to what extent nationalist orientations prevailed in elementary as well as secondary schools, who were its main exponents, which functions it fulfilled and which conflicts it caused. In doing this, I am going to focus on two elements which so far have largely been neglected by historians: the impact of preformulated social identifications and national orientations on non-Hungarian pupils on the one hand and the role of the peer group in shaping their respective responses on the other.

### **A biographical approach**

As mentioned above, one main source which has been exploited so far in research on the impact of nationalist schooling policies are official statistics on the development of the school system. But whereas these statistics impart a fairly reliable impression of global developments, they can say only little on the impact of nationalism on daily life in the schools. More promising in this respect are the yearbooks which were published annually by almost every secondary school of Dualist Hungary and even by some elementary schools, as well as school histories. An even more important, though somewhat problematic source, are memoirs and autobiographies. Published memoirs on our subject are mostly written by persons who acquired some political or literary reputation in Romania after 1918 and who look back at their youth in Dualist Hungary from a perspective shaped by their experience as adults during the inter-war or even the communist period and who describe events which took place several decades before they were written down. For example, the renowned pedagogue Onisifor Ghibu, who spent most of his secondary schooling at Sibiu wrote his memoirs with the obvious intention to show his development as an ardent Romanian patriot as a logical consequence of the suppression of Romanian culture in Hungarian Transylvania. On the other hand, the printer Gustav Zikeli from Bistrița remembered Hungarian schooling policies as contrasted with his negative experience of Romanian national policies after 1918. Yet if one takes obvious exaggerations into account and takes a closer look at the mechanisms of nationalist experience, such memoirs can well contain valuable information.

What insights can be expected from such an approach? As the memoirs of Onisifor Ghibu show, elementary as well as secondary schools in Sibiu were hardly the place to acquire fluency in Hungarian, even if this was the official language of education. Though Hungarian language instruction had been compulsory in elementary education since 1879, after four years at an orthodox confessional school

in the countryside, the parents of young Ghibu felt that their son would have to seriously improve his knowledge of the state language before attending secondary school. Following the advice of an Orthodox priest, they sent him to a Catholic, bilingual Hungarian-German elementary school in the province capital, a phenomenon quite common among all ethnic groups of Transylvania (as well as elsewhere within the Monarchy). As most of Ghibu's fellow pupils also were Romanians from the countryside and they all lived in the same quarter of the town, eleven year-old Ghibu had little incentive to make practical use of the Hungarian he was supposed to learn, and after another year, he still did not master Hungarian very well. On the contrary, the poet Lucian Blaga, who absolved most of his elementary schooling at the German elementary school at the Saxon town of Șebeș, in this largely German speaking environment came to master the language of instruction within a few months.

At the state secondary school in Sibiu, the situation remained essentially the same. At all times during the Dualist era, Romanian pupils accounted for at least half of the students of the local Hungarian state gymnasium. Romanian therefore remained an officially tolerated language of instruction until 1875 and a compulsory subject for Romanian pupils until 1892, when the previous orthodox priest was replaced as teacher of Romanian by a Hungarian linguist installed by the government. Yet it proved impossible to repress Romanian as the everyday language of communication among a large number of students.

In the largely German and Romanian dominated towns of Transylvania, it was difficult to acquire fluency in Hungarian, not only for the Romanians coming in from the countryside, but for the local Saxon population with its closed social structure and its age-old cultural traditions as well. Gustav Zikeli, born in Bistrița in 1886, had been visiting the local German elementary and secondary school for eight years and finished an apprenticeship as typesetter. Even though his Hungarian was far from perfect, it must have been more than average, as he was one of a few number of draftees chosen to serve as interpreter at the military court at Cluj (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg). During his stay at Cluj, Zikelis contacts were almost exclusively confined to a small number of fellow German soldiers. After his military service, he left for Budapest where he hoped to improve his knowledge of Hungarian. But even in the capital, he proved unable to find work as a typesetter in a Hungarian environment, as at the "Pesti Hirlap", most of his colleagues were ethnic Germans. Disappointed, he soon returned home.

These examples may well be far from representative, and they may say little about the quality of Hungarian language instruction in non-Hungarian schools. But they do make obvious that even for young Transylvanian Romanians and Saxons willing to acquire fluency in Hungarian, serious limits were posed by their inability to emancipate from a largely co-ethnic environment within as well as outside of Transylvania.

To what extent then did the language issue influence the social development of non-Hungarian pupils and their attitude towards Hungarian culture and the state? Even though the available sources rarely allow for a precise interpretation, Hungarian language instruction seems to have been largely accepted at German Transylvanian schools, since it could well be integrated into the cultural identification of the Saxons. Conflict arose not so much on the principle of Hungarian language instruction, but on its intensity and the pedagogical principles, as long as the government propagated the mingling of Hungarian language instruction with instruction of the mother language. Another source of conflict was the aggressive government propaganda for Hungarian state schools, which in Saxon towns like Bistrița suffered from a notorious lack of pupils. In the Romanian confessional schools, Hungarian language instruction on the contrary rarely seems to have lost its status as a somewhat alien element. The officially prescribed lessons in Hungarian language, history and geography aiming to develop a genuine Hungarian patriotism met with strong, if not overwhelming competition by Romanian folk songs as well as the strong identification of orthodox and uniate confessional schools with their churches, which imbued the pupils with a strong consciousness of their Romanian cultural traditions. As Blaga recalls, Hungarian language was notoriously his weakest subject, which was compensated for only by the fact that at the German school of Șebeș, the teacher was not quite firm in Hungarian himself, and at the Orthodox gymnasium of Brașov, Hungarian language instruction was not at the center of attention.

In the meanwhile, Romanian pupils like Ghibu, who visited German or Hungarian language secondary schools, found themselves in a situation of conflict between different sets of social identification. On the one hand, they could conform to the expectations set by the school authorities, emancipate from their overwhelmingly peasant origins and adopt a Hungarian patriotic consciousness. The most obvious sign of social rise into the educated layers of Hungarian society was the abandonment of the traditional Romanian peasant or shepherd costume for an urban suit, which was demanded from pupils of the upper classes. Contrary to Ghibu's claims, at least throughout the 1870s and well into the 1880s a large number of Romanian pupils at Sibiu seem to have conformed to such a process of acculturation, which carried much more social than national connotations. Romanian language instruction does not seem to have been very popular among Romanian pupils, and even though a large number of Romanian students spoke their mother language in everyday life, a number of them won awards for essays on Hungarian patriotic themes.

On the other hand, there was a number of Romanian pupils who rejected identification with the Hungarian educational elite and instead chose to cling to their traditional way of life. This rejection of an officially preformed identity found its expression not only in the demonstrative emphasis on the Romanian language,

Romanian clothing, or Romanian names and surnames, but became most obvious in the open rejection of everything Hungarian. This was made the easier in an environment, where Romanian pupils could find support within a co-ethnic peer group. Cultural and linguistic assimilation as well as silent and open protest thus seem to have had much more to do with the individual, juvenile attitude towards established authority than with faith to a national consciousness.

What is important here, though, is that until the 1890s, juvenile protest for a long time seems to have remained largely confined to the local sphere of everyday life without being able to relate directly to concrete political ideas. This situation changed sharply when in 1894, the Memorandum trial made Romanian national heroes, which could serve as figures of identification to the Romanian youth, even more so at the Hungarian state gymnasium at Sibiu, where some of the accused had spent their school years. For the first time in Transylvania, Romanian pupils such as Ghibu went out into the streets wearing tricolore badges in the colors of Romania, demonstrating for the acquittal of their heroes and establishing contacts with students from the Orthodox seminary. From now on, Romanian pupils could openly demonstrate strengthened self-confidence towards their professors as well as in public. By being able to revert to a preformulated set of national ideas, they also found a means to articulate their protest in openly nationalist terms, thus acquiring political quality. Even the limited example of Sibiu thus demonstrates the far-reaching importance of the decision within the Romanian national movement to turn away from a policy of passivism in mobilizing mass support for national Romanian demands. Formulating the above hypotheses at an early stage of my research, the results can of course only be tentative and will have to be corroborated by the intensive study of a much broader source basis. Yet I would dare to draw the following conclusions at the present state of my knowledge: On the one hand, the development of social identity among the Saxons and Romanians of Transylvania was a complicated and multi-faceted process in either direction, be it towards assimilation with the dominant Hungarian culture or the reversal to traditional customs. At school as well as in later stages of life, the co-ethnic peer group often limited the ability to acquire fluency in Hungarian as the outward sign of assimilation, without necessarily carrying nationalist connotations. On the contrary, nationalism among the Saxons and Romanians of Transylvania for a long time seems to have been confined to a small elite of nationalist activists. Only since the turn of the century, and in the case of the Romanians much earlier and stronger than for the Saxons, ethnic nationalism as the supreme orientation of political as well as social thought began to permeate the schools and other originally unpolitical areas of everyday life, to transform other forms of social conflict, and to cause an increasing number of individuals to orientate their behaviour along national lines.

### Sources and literature

The above considerations are based mainly on Ghibu, Onisifor: *Auf den Barrikaden des Lebens. Meine Lehrjahre*, Cluj 1988 (original title: *Pe baricadele vieții. Anii mei de învățătură*, Cluj 1981); Blaga, Lucian: *Chronik und Lied der Lebenszeiten*, Bukarest 1968 (original title: *Hronicul și cântecul virstelor*, Bukarest 1966); Stanciu, Ioan: *Istoricul liceului Gheorghe Lazăr din Sibiu. 250 ani de la întemeierea lui 1692-1942*, Sibiu 1943; Zikeli, Gustav: *Bistritz zwischen 1880 und 1950. Erinnerungen eines Buchdruckers*, München 1989; The most detailed statistical data on elementary schooling in Hungary can be found in: *A Magyar szent korona országai népoktatásügyének fejlődése. Magyar statisztikai közlemények. Uj sorozat* 31(1913).

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1 The following considerations are based upon a paper presented in April 1996 to a seminary held at Cracow on the History of education in East Central Europe under the chairmanship of Prof. Dr. V. Karady and Prof. Dr. H. Kulczykowski and derive from a larger study which I am preparing on the history of nationalism and schooling in Transylvania and Slovakia 1867-1918.

Due to the character of this article, as a conference paper, there are no traditional footnotes, the reader being instead referred to the literature listed at the end of the paper.

2 Hobsbawm, Eric: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge 1990, p. 10.

3 *Ibid.*, p.11.