

THEIR DNA INCLUDES A STRONG SENSE OF THE COMMON HUMANITY

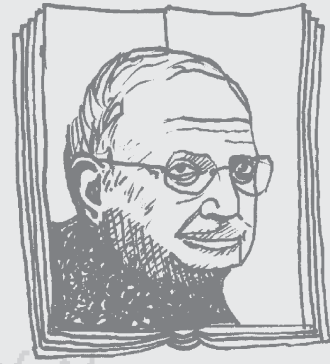
Allen Kassof

The author of these touching and colorful pages is the endlessly valuable Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011). This brief excerpt is from his exuberant memoir about traveling through Hungary and Romania on foot and horseback in 1933-1934, during the interwar period. After a foreboding allusion to a distant but rising Nazi Germany, he turns to describing the joys of a vibrant, multi-cultural Transylvania, a region that had been part of Hungary but that was incorporated into Romania following the World War. He and his youthful companions visit Tirgu-Mures (*Marosvásárhely*), the capital of Mures Country, in Northwestern Transylvania, on a market day.

Fermor, a gifted young Englishman, later a war hero and a leading authority on Greece, was barely out of his teens at the time of this great adventure. Decades later recovered he would recall his experiences from memory and from portions of his long-lost travel diary. He published *Between the Woods and the Water* (from which this is taken) only in 1986. (The earlier part of his journey had been recounted in his 1977 *A Time of Gifts – On Foot to Constantinople: From the Hook of Holland to the Middle Danube*. The final volume, “The Broken Road,” which was edited posthumously and published in 2013, takes him to Istanbul and is the last of a trilogy.)

Transylvania’s multicultural and communal mosaic was under stress in the aftermath of the border change, which remains a fraught issue to this day for many Hungarians (and Romanians). Even so, at the time of young Fermor’s expedition the diverse populations of Transylvania, as well as those at other cultural crossroads of Middle Europe and the Balkans, could still live peacefully in the comity of elbow-to-elbow daily intimacy and mutual cultural enrichment.

The rending of Romania’s delicate and complex multiethnic tapestry accelerated during the communist period. The suppression of national aspirations was especially harsh during the later years of Ceausescu’s rule. The remnant Jews, all but destroyed in the Holocaust and their number further reduced by emigration, effectively disappeared. Many Germans were deported at the end



of World War II and more were later ransomed to West Germany, gutting their community. Meanwhile, demographics reduced the numbers of the lesser minorities. (The Roma, or Gypsies, remain, faced with pan-European issues of discrimination and poverty). This left the Hungarians as the most important minority, without the insulating presence of other traditional populations.

With Ceausescu gone in December 1989, leaders of Romania's Hungarian minority, released from his repression, hoped to reestablish some form of cultural autonomy. But they soon encountered indifference or hostility from some Romanians who were making their own nationalizing cultural claims and who feared that Hungarian aspirations could be a prelude to secession.

I did not discover Fermor's account until 2010, in my eightieth year, so it had nothing to do with my intellectual formation. Yet it has had an important retrospective and confirmatory effect on how I came to understand my own much later experiences in the region that Fermor describes.

Following the demise of the Soviet Bloc in 1991, I founded a small, American-based non-governmental organization (Project on Ethnic Relations) to offer what assistance we might to the new post-communist governments on problems of managing ethnic tensions and conflicts. (During the previous twenty-three years, I had been in charge of the main U.S. academic and scholarly research exchanges with the USSR and Eastern Europe and was in close touch with the political transitions. I was in Romania in December 1989 when the revolution broke out there.)

Over the next fifteen years I mediated private discussions and negotiations between the majorities and the ethnic minorities throughout the region, but with the greatest impact in Romania. A handful of colleagues and I worked during the 1990s to bring together leading politicians from successive Romanian governments with the heads of Romania's Hungarian minority. We helped them to hammer out a series of agreements that defined their relations for the next two decades. (By 2014, the agreements had aged and were in need of revision and renewal; I was asked to interrupt my retirement to chair fresh talks, which continue as of this writing.)

We were dealing with the shards of the world that Fermor had so sensitively captured. Could some of them be put back together? Compared with the post-communist mayhem that broke out elsewhere in the region—especially the years of bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia—the Romanians (and their Hungarian minority) were exceptional in arriving at a set of imperfect but civilized compromises.

It is in the nature of such ethnic conflicts that there are no solutions, only temporary ways of managing them. In Romania, reaching just and workable agreements is further complicated by the uneven distribution of the Hungarian minority. In 2011 in Romania as a whole, ethnic Hungarians constituted some six percent of the overall population; in Transylvania visited they accounted for about nineteen percent. But in Tirgu-Mures, the city that Fermor, they are a very large minority, forty-five percent. And in two counties, Harghita and Covasna, where the Szekler subgroup lives, they are a large majority, and Romanians are in the minority. No single formula can accommodate the needs of all of these majorities and minorities.

Meanwhile, population shrinkage in Romania endangers the Hungarian minority, which suffers disproportionately from the impact of assimilation through marriage, emigration, and an imbalance of births and deaths. The Hungarians, about 1.2 million as of the 2011 census, are perilously close to dropping below the percentage of voters required

to keep their main political party in the parliament. And there is a steady erosion of the population density required to assure cultural continuity in new generations. As though these problems were not sufficiently daunting, the poor relationship between Bucharest and an increasingly hostile and right-wing Budapest will put Romanian politicians on guard in any discussions with the leaders of the Hungarian minority. Tensions over upcoming centennials of the 1918 Union of Transylvania with Romania and the 1920 Treaty of Trianon do not help matters.

Nevertheless, there is room for guarded optimism that the Romanians and the minority Hungarians will be able to renew, adapt, and extend the agreements and understandings of the 1990s. Their most powerful asset may be that the DNA of both sides still includes a strong sense of the common humanity of long-time neighbors that Fermor saw so vividly in Tirgu-Mures and elsewhere in Romania.

Events in Europe (and now even America) show us how easy it is to separate the family of man into tribes. How sweet it is to be reminded by Fermor about the street-level deencies of a time still within our memory.

BETWEEN THE WOODS AND THE WATER

PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

TRIPLE FUGUE

How exhilarating it was next morning to be woken by the discord of reciprocally schismatic bells while the half-shuttered July sunlight scattered stripes across the counterpane! Furred and frogged, the magnates on the walls of the breakfast room surveyed us with their hands serenely crossed on the hilts of their scimitars. We looked at them in turn and admired the many tiers of emblazoned bindings. Heralded by fumes, a very old retainer in a baize apron brought coffee and croissants from a distant part of the house and talked to us as we spread and dipped and sipped; and his tidings from the night before unloosed a long moment of gloom: Dollfuss had been assassinated by the Nazis. But, as with the June purge a month earlier, our mood was such that the gloom didn't last much longer than breakfast: it all seemed such a long way to the west. But it was only five months since I had seen the small Chancellor leading that dismal procession in Vienna, after the February troubles. I hadn't even heard of Cluj or Klausenburg or Kolozsvár then. But Transylvania had been a familiar name as long as I could remember. It was the very essence and symbol of remote, leafy, half-mythical strangeness; and, on the spot, it seemed remoter still, and more fraught with charms. Under their sway, we were impervious to omens, and the spell of comedy, adventure and delight that surrounded our journey would have needed something still more drastic and closer at hand to break it.

Our euphoria was complete. It followed us all day along dark canyons and tilted woods and steep grazings and down into a valley where the serpentine haze of willows and poplars marked the windings of the Maros once again; and soon a subtle change

came over the towns and villages, not in the landscape—that was changing all the time—but in the inhabitants.

There had been plenty of Hungarian spoken in the few Transylvanian towns I had seen, and, among the Swabians of Arad, German too; but in the villages and the country, Rumanian had been almost universal. Now all at once the drovers watering their horses at the wooden troughs, the peasants in the fields, the shepherds nursing their crooks under the trees and the fishermen flinging their nets over the river were all speaking Magyar. We were among Szeklers, the Hungarians of Transylvania, half a million and more, who inhabit a great enclave of the eastern and southern Carpathians. It was this geographical position, isolated in a sea of Rumanians, which placed the ethnological problem beyond solution.

Some say the Szeklers are the oldest established inhabitants of the province; the Rumanians, as we know, fiercely contest this. The Szeklers were wrongly thought, in earlier times—like the Magyars themselves, indeed, but very much later—to have descended from the Huns. Others held that when Charlemagne swept the Avars from the Great Plain some of them might have landed up in these mountains. Or, it was wondered, could they be the offspring of the bellicose Kabars, a splinter-tribe that had joined the Magyars—later forming part of the vanguard of Arpad's host—during their cloudy sojourn in the Khazar empire? The most recent theory, I think, supports their Magyar beginnings: somehow they became separated from the main tribes when they moved west from Bessarabia with the Pechenegs at their heels; they must have made their way straight through the nearest passes to their present habitat, while the others pursued their more roundabout paths to the Great Plain. If this were so, the expanding Magyars, when they moved eastwards again and into Transylvania, would have found their Szekler kinsmen already settled. There is convincing evidence that the early Hungarian kings established or confirmed them along the Carpathian border as permanent frontiersmen, on the watch for the inroads of later barbarians; and there is nothing incompatible in the two last theories. At any rate, all through the Dark and Middle Ages they were the wardens and the light-horsemen of the eastern march, and in battle, when the main Hungarian cavalry took the field in full armour, they stuck to the fleet Parthian tactics of their nomad past. The Hungarians, the Szeklers and the Saxons were largely self-governing under the Hungarian crown, and many of the Szeklers, even if they were moccasin-shod and still signed their names with their thumbs, were ennobled *en masse*; all three nations—or rather, their leaders and nobles—had a voice in the councils of Transylvania.¹

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The motor-car crept through the wagons and the cattle of the metropolis of the Szeklers and, by the sounds in our ears, we might have been in the heart of a Hungarian country town. Târgu-Mureş—still Marosvásárhely to its inhabitants—was in the throes of yet another market-day. I thought I discerned, without any prompting, a different cast of feature—something simultaneously blunter and more angular about brow and

1 'Nation' has a special sense in this context: it means the noble legislating minority Hungarian serfs, not being part of it, were no more represented than the similarly placed ancestors of the Rumanian majority. It was position in the hierarchy not 'nationality' that counted. There were Rumanian nobles who had a voice, but they invariably became absorbed into the Hungarian nobility and were lost.

cheek and chin—that corresponded to the change of language. There was a difference of costume, too, though the actual details have slipped away. Rawhide shoes and thongs were common to all, with the fleece headgear and the low-crowned black felt hat. But all along my itinerary the chief difference between country Hungarians and Rumanians had been the wide-skirted tunic or shirt, caught in by a wide belt, which the Rumanians wore outside their trousers. Both dressed in white homespun linen, but the Hungarians' shirts always buttoned tightly at the throat; their trousers were unusually wide from the waist down and sometimes pleated, which almost gave them the look of long skirts. *Gatya Hosen*, István called them; these were often replaced by loose black breeches and shiny knee-boots. But here the peasants, almost to a man, wore narrow white homespun trews like tights stitched together out of felt. Across the Hungarian plain and in Transylvania, the women's clothes had been varying all the time. Each village and valley enjoined a different assembly of colours and styles: braids, tunics, lace, ribands, goffering, ruffs, sashes, caps, kerchiefs, coifs and plaits free or coiled: a whole array of details announced whether they were betrothed, brides, married, spinsters or widows. Sometimes coifs framed these heads like spathe and spadix; among Saxons, they shot up in stiff scarlet cylinders. There were bodices, flowing or panelled sleeves, embroidery, gold coins at brow or throat or both, aprons front and back, a varying number of petticoats and skirts jutting at the hips like farthingales, and occasionally these were accompanied by coloured Russian boots. This village finery gave all gatherings a festal air, especially as the level of beauty among Hungarian and Rumanian girls was very high. Populations were inclined to remain aloof; but the more they overlapped and mingled—Magyar, Rumanian, Serb, Slovak, Saxon, Swabian and sometimes Armenian and perhaps some Ruthenes in the north—the more striking they looked.² Their everyday dress was a sober version of their gala outfits; but these exploded on feast-days and at weddings in ravishing displays. Clothes were still emblematic, and not only among peasants: an expert in Rumanian and Hungarian symbols, looking at the passers-by in a market-place—a couple of soldiers, a captain in the Roşiori, an Ursuline prioress, a sister of St. Vincent de Paul, a Poor Clare, an Hasidic rabbi, an Armenian deacon, an Orthodox nun, a Uniat archimandrite, a Calvinist pastor, an Augustinian canon, a Benedictine, a Minorite friar, a Magyar nobleman, an ostrich-feathered coachman, a shrill-voiced Russian cab-driver, a bear-leading Gypsy with his spoon-carving fellow tribesmen, a wool-carder, a blacksmith, a drover, a chimney-sweep, a woodman or a wagoner, and above all, women from a dozen villages and ploughmen and shepherds from widelyscattered valleys and highlands—would have been able to reel off their provenances as swiftly as a herald glancing along the flags and surcoats of a fourteenth-century battle.

2 At that time, Hungarian girls seemed to have cornered the international cabaret world; every night-club I can remember was full of them. Many sought their fortunes abroad and I remember from a nineteenth-century Russian novel that the word *Vengerka*—‘a Hungarian girl’—had an earthy and professional sense.