

“I can see that many refugees  
from Transylvania who migrated  
to Hungary remained in a bitter mood”

*Conversation with Árpád Spaller, Vice President  
of Association of Hungarians from Transylvania  
(October 2008)*

- *When and how did you migrate to Hungary?*
- This story began in 1981. One of our friends offered us to host our whole family, that is, two adults and two minor children. The host family had a suitable property, which was verified by the authorities, and the family was required to issue a notarized letter of acceptance. At the Hungarian Consulate of Kolozsvár Napoca/Kolozsvár, we asked for an application form, and after filling it, we handed in our immigration application together with many other documents. This seemingly straightforward process was much more difficult than expected. We asked for the application forms in the summer. The head consul was then away, and a member of his staff gave us the document. Normally, it wouldn't be a problem, but in this case it was. When we handed in the documents, the head consul “received” us, and with his hand in his pocket, smoking a cigarette, and shouting he asked who had given us the documents. He also said that we had nothing to do in Hungary, and if it depended on him, we would be never allowed to migrate there. We did not know the reason for his hostile behavior. All was explained, when we later read in a clandestine booklet that he sold applications for money. It was no wonder at all, since the Hungarian Consulate in Kolozsvár Napoca was in those days managed in a scandalous manner. There was debauchery nearly every Sunday in the summer. But the staff often got drunk even on other occasions. Then they were quarrelling, so loud that it could be heard in the street. The Romanian neighbours were offered coffee (at that time coffee was una-

vailable in Romania) and the employees of the Consulate were kind to them, but they ignored the greetings of their fellow Hungarians. I know these facts because my parents lived in the neighbourhood of the Consulate. From the window, we could see their yard. It was sad to see. The head consul was right, we were not granted the visa.

– *What could you do after the refusal?*

– We had to wait for two years, when we were allowed to try it again. But in two years, the head consul was replaced by Domokos Vékás whose family was from Transylvania. Under his management everything changed. Everything became much more human. It was no accident that later he was expelled from Romania. Everyone was given an application form without an interview. We obtained our visa in 1985. After that, we had our ordeal with the Romanian authorities. As we handed in our emigration application, my wife was dismissed from her job in the education field because she became an “unreliable and treacherous element”. I could retain my position, because I was working in Mezőtelegd,\* 20 kilometres from Oradea, as a special education teacher. We lived on one salary with two little children for one and half a year, until we got our final permit to migrate. We knew that they would let us migrate, since Romania did not need educated Hungarians. But no-one knew exactly when. Applicants were usually hindered until they had used up all of their savings so that they should leave as poor as possible. Aside from our books we did not take much with us: just furniture for one room and clothes. The books were checked by a “cultural cop” and not all of them were allowed out, the more precious ones were sealed, and the container in which all of these arrived was broken up. After the custom control, we were checked once again, and the container was simply left open.

Only a few people travelled on the long train. We crossed the border in July 1987. We really hurried, since we were promised employment and lodging, and we wanted to start working in August. It was a great disappointment when we learned that there was neither job nor a flat for us. I mention this, because the same institution later announced the availability of these jobs. Although we did not consider the proceedings honest, we had no choice but to accept it. If we had been informed sooner, we would have looked elsewhere. Those were hard times. September was coming and we had to have our children enrolled in school.

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\* In Romanian: Tileagd.

We had to leave Budapest and move to county Tolna as special education teachers. In a year, mainly because of the studies of our children, we moved back near Budapest. At first we lived in Gyál, then in Felsőpalkony, then we were finally able to sublet an apartment from the municipality of Budapest.

– *Why did you decide to leave Kolozsvár?*

– I have my roots in Kolozsvár. It is proven that even my great grandfather was born in Kolozsvár. The city, was the liveable place for us. I never wanted to leave it, since everything connected me there, my childhood and my youth. But Romanian migrants, who were paid to move from Moldova to Kolozsvár, had to have accommodation. As a result of this migration the ethnic Hungarian population of Kolozsvár decreased below 20 %. We were victims of this diabolic policy that began after the World War I. After graduating, I was officially sent to Szilágysomlyó.\* From there, I was sent to Papfalva,\*\* then to Mezőtelegd. We commuted to Mezőtelegd in inhuman circumstances. It would be too long to relate. Then I had a strong desire to move back to Kolozsvár. Naturally, we could not even dream of it. The Hungarians of Kolozsvár were all sent to distant places. We had a great circle of friends. Later, I learned that we were all shadowed by the Securitate, the Romanian secret police. None of this circle of friends was allowed to remain in Kolozsvár. The city became off limits for Hungarians. After that, anywhere I was sent, I never felt homesick. I called this state of soul “little death”, and it has continued to the present. Other circumstances also contributed to our desire of escaping: the visit of the Securitate in our home, the “inspection” over the Ady Circle in Nagyvárad,\*\*\* the humiliation of the editors of the journal *Ellenpontok* (“Counterpoints”), the maltreatment of my child at school, etc. There were many of us who wanted to emigrate.

– *When you migrated to Hungary, did you have to solicit for permit of residence and employment from the Hungarian authorities?*

– Since we entered Hungary officially, not via the “green borders”, we were automatically granted the permit of residence and employment. The fact that we chose the legal way was good in the beginning, but later

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\* In Romanian: Șimleu Silvaniei.

\*\* In Romanian: Popești.

\*\*\* In Romanian: Oradea.

it proved to be disadvantageous. As opposed to “true refugees”, we got no advantages or allowances whatsoever. The authorities did not care about us at all, saying that we had entered Hungary officially, so we had been able to bring anything we needed, and we probably had everything. It was far from the truth, and they knew it, but it was the easiest way to get rid of a family. It was also a difficult and humiliating procedure to obtain our identity cards.

– *Did you want to settle down in Hungary for good?*

– Yes, naturally. We knew that if once we left, then we would never be allowed to return. We did not even think of that, since in that dictatorship I could not even remain in my hometown. Those who once migrated left behind everything. The official character of the procedures also contributed to the fact that we did not think of returning. After the change of the regime in Romania, in 1990, many people in Hungary said that we could return because everything had changed. Certainly, only those people said this who did not know the situation and the people living there. At that time I said that I would think of returning home if I could hoist a Hungarian banner beside a Romanian one. Certainly, it cannot be done even today, twenty years after the “revolution”. Those who had illusions were sobered up by the pogrom in March of 1990. All of this only strengthened the fact of migration. If we had migrated again, we would have moved only towards West. But we did not. When I had the opportunity to migrate to Western Europe, I did no longer want to move again. Our existence in Hungary was not unhindered, but I did not want to change it. As I see it, many refugees from Transylvania remained in Hungary with a tinge of bitterness.

– *When and how did you obtain Hungarian citizenship?*

– At the time we migrated to Hungary, in 1987, we could apply for Hungarian citizenship on condition that we give up our Romanian citizenship. The obstacle we had was that we could not afford the expense, so we did not pursue the matter further. Our situation was so bad that we were considering moving on. But, finally we gave up on that too. When we were able to apply for citizenship without giving up our original one, then it became less pressing. That is why we received our citizenship relatively late, in 1992. But our rights of Hungarian citizenship were not equal to the rights of “old” Hungarian citizens. For example, if we wanted to sublet an apartment from the municipality of Budapest, we needed an organization or institution to vouch for us. They did not

fully accept our degrees. Despite our academic background, the local community college in Budapest argued that our Hungarian is not good enough. All of these episodes embittered our stay here.

– *How much were you in connection with Transylvanian refugees arriving later?*

– We got to know refugees arriving later through the Associations of Hungarians from Transylvania. The newcomers visited the Association to get as much assistance and information as possible. They did not undertake a job voluntarily. There were people who wanted to advance through positions within the Association or who took money from the Association but never returned it.

And there were those old friends of ours from home, who, even if they did leave Transylvania, chose different paths. Therefore, friendships and bonds were broken up. Meeting with friends again failed to revive old friendships. A chapter of our life closed behind us. We could not follow what was happening in daily life in Transylvania. We did not experience it as we lived in a different reality. When we met we had no more common topics. There were only a few friends left, with whom we still keep in touch.

– *Were you not connected with old friend even when you arrived in Hungary?*

– No, we were not. We did not maintain these connections. We were not connected with those who stayed at home, because all of the letters were censored. This is why we were more likely to send postcards, which is not the best way to connect. We quietly ran out of topics in common. When we arrived I tried to contact old friends. For economic reasons, we had to leave Budapest resulting in a loss of contacts. In the meantime, one of my best friends migrated further to Western Europe. In a year, when we returned to Budapest – in 1988 –, the authorities started to deal with Transylvanian refugees in a formal way. As a result, the number of Transylvanian associations suddenly mushroomed. At first we made an attempt to join the Federation of Transylvanians, but they did not need us. At that time, the number of “Transylvanian experts” also increased, some of whom did even know Transylvania’s location. Those who really visited or lived in Transylvania in the darkest period and really encouraged us did not boast about their past, they only did what they had to do. Finally, I found the Association of Hungarians from Transylvania, in the beginning of 1989. The Association was less “fashionable” than the Federation of Transylvanians. I tried to do some

something for the fellow Transylvanians. At that time care packages started arriving from the West. I witnessed many abuses in connection to those shipments. These packages did not arrive to the Association, but we were only asked sometimes to help in their distribution. After the change of regime in Romania, I edited a journal within the auspices of the Association. It was called *VIGYÁZÓ* (“Guardian”), and it was, in fact, a quarterly with a selection of articles published in the Hungarian-language newspapers in Transylvania. It is a pity that without financial support, the quarterly was able to run only for five years.

– *From where did the care packages that you mentioned arrive?*

– They arrived mainly from the West. Mainly Hungarians living there did their best to support Transylvanian refugees. These care packages were distributed in Hungary. After the change of regime in Romania, these shipments were sent directly to Transylvania. But often the recipients of these shipments were not Transylvanian refugees. There was someone who even showed me – perhaps he did not sense that I was also a Transylvanian – how much he collected from the shipments meant for the refugees. There were shelves of clothing and abundant foodstuff, etc.

– *How much solidarity could you sense on part of the Hungarians?*

– It was a kind of solidarity mixed with pity. True, my friend who took me in did it without any kind of hesitation or conditions. He was very kind to us. We are still good friends. We spent a month at his home. It seemed a long time for me. We came to Hungary believing that we would have lodging and employment; that is, that Hungary was in need of our labor and skills. We were promised this, yet we did not ask for it. Finally, it happened differently. So there were exceptions, but the usual climate of opinion – which I also experienced in the country – was compassion mixed with pity. If we went beyond this, wanted or achieved more, we were not poor Transylvanians any longer. It was already impossible to feel pity. Especially after the political developments in Romania, many people said that “now you can go home”. As if it was so easy to move from one country to another. Also the climate of opinion became hostile and condescending. The sad reality was that we were left “twisting in the wind”. That is, we were not needed here, nor were we needed in Transylvania either. Those from home claimed that they stayed and stood their ground and did not run away, as we did. Naturally, this was not the case, since everyone goes through his own personal odyssey, but they jumped at the opportunity to deride us, who

earlier were the “subject of envy”. When I proved that my friend was one of the people who knew that I was shadowed by the Securitate, the Romanian secret police, but he did care to utter a word of warning of what I should expect, he became angry. As a result of my truthfulness, he no longer sought my company. Unfortunately, at that time, many people became “upstanding heroes”.

– *What was the attitude of the Hungarian authorities towards the refugees?*

– The Hungarian authorities were not prepared for this flood of refugees. For forty years the Transylvanian Hungarians across the border simply did not exist. It was comfortable not to deal with this problem, since the “friendly socialist Romania” solved the question of nationality. Officially, we became Hungarian-speaking Romanians. And no refugee can arrive from a friendly country. When the Hungarian authorities faced the facts, it was rather late. Although they tried to treat the issue institutionally, they reacted too late and with very poor organization. The Transylvanians had a much stronger sense of national identity than Hungarians born in their homeland. We were a burden for the Hungarian state, because we caused a ripple effect on still waters that they did not expect. We still had very much alive in us the sense of solidarity and the experience of passive resistance. They knew by experience that socialism was a utopia. They knew demagoguery, deception, and the darkest form of dictatorship. The majority of home-born Hungarians had no idea about it. We were the carriers of rebellious ideas, something not welcome in a “place of tranquillity”. Hungary benefitted from the contribution of many of the well educated, but this did not compensate for the perceived inconveniences. It would be worth to examine to what degree the change of regime in Hungary should be grateful to contribution of the Transylvanian refugees. Our sense of unimportance was highlighted by the fact that we were not given an apartment. For a number of years we had to sublet from the municipality of Budapest, at market prices. While we paid the market price for our rent, our neighbour who was a Hungarian-born citizen was given an apartment of the same size but because of rent control regulation had to pay only a tenth of the rent. Our attempts to correct this discrimination resulted in the “socially sensitive” municipality’s threat of lawsuit and eviction.

– *How much could you sense the activities of the Interministerial Committee established for the settlement of refugee affairs?*

– We who legally migrated to Hungary did not sense the activity of the Interministerial Committee. Their activities, as far as I know, were connected to people of refugee status. From this point of view, we were disadvantaged. We could not turn anywhere for aid. We were completely helpless.

– *Did Hungarian movements, for example, the demonstration against the destruction of villages in Transylvania, have any affect? What did it mean for you?*

– These movements turned the public attention to Transylvania, the events taking place there. At the same time, the Hungarian people realised that with joint action, even dictatorships can be defied. I can still hear the anguished pronouncements of people such as the journalist Pál Bodor. It was no coincidence that supporters of the regime were worried about these great and “unmanageable” movements.

– *What was your relationship with the churches like?*

– In their own way, the churches did their best to aid Transylvanians. They collected and distributed clothing and food. They also sought to provide spiritual support to the refugees. For reasons mentioned above – I was a migrant, not a refugee – I had only a marginal contact with the churches. At that time Géza Németh was the best known individual who aided and even sheltered illegal immigrants in Hungary. In this period I did not attend church services, I did not practice my religion. I was too immersed in problems of livelihood than religious practice.

– *In what did the Declaration of Szoka-Tabajdi count as a real breakthrough?*

– Comparing to former policies, the breakthrough was that people residing in Hungary illegally, became legal refugees. Hungary acknowledged the fact that the refugee issue existed, the fate of the Transylvanian Hungarians is critical and unsustainable, and it also became clear that the socialist fraternity is not as pretty as people had been made to believe it up to then. It was not an accidental recognition, but happened under international pressure. We Hungarians were always slow to anticipate events.

This gave hope to many Hungarians from Transylvania. Even for those who stayed at home, because they felt that something was changing in the stagnant water of the dictatorship.



– *What was known about the birth of this Declaration? Was it a central political decision or a decision made by individuals?*

– It was evidently a central political decision. In those times, and neither even today, it was not and is not the individuals who decide on so momentous political issues. At that time, those two young men only played the role of the spokesmen. But the issue was previously decided at a very high level. It may also be possible that they had asked for the opinion of the great brother, the Soviet Union. Those times we could feel that collapse of the whole socialist system was near. Then the Eastern Germans came, who used Hungary as a migration staging point to continue further West. Change was in the air. Everyone could feel it, but we did not know, quite well the direction of change.

How much did the situation change after Hungary joined to the UN Convention of Refugee Affairs in 1989?

It brought a change after which Hungary had to face the fact that refugees can also arrive from “the brotherly Romania” or from East Germany. These refugees contradicted the much heralded notion of socialist brotherhood. These events proved that the socialist camp was an artificially kept “marriage of convenience” that had finally come to an end. Hungary formalised the situation of refugees without coordinating with the other socialist countries, that is, it charted her own way. This was a great advantage for that seeking refugee status, because Hungary recognized them as refugees and provided assistance. I personally was not affected by it but there were many who were joyful.

– *What was the interest of the Romanians regarding the Hungarians? Did they want the Hungarians to leave or to stay?*

– Unquestionably, the interest of the Romanians was that we should leave. The domestic official policy, whether open or disguised, always aimed to have Hungarians leave Transylvania. They declared it already in 1919 that their main goal was to “Romanize” Transylvania. This policy has not changed since then. The fact that they hindered people as much as they could was only because they wanted to physically and psychologically torture people so that they would never intend to return. This policy also had financial factors, since families were usually permitted to leave the country with so many delays that they had to use up most of their savings. This whole system was a diabolic plan. Unfortunately, Hungarian policy-makers never learned anything from these developments.

– *We read that the first large wave of refugees arrived in Hungary during the Formula 1 in 1987...*

To a certain degree is true that these refugees came to see the race and riding in Western cars and taking advantage of the loose border controls decided to “jump out”. But that could happen only once. The second time, the border control was much stricter. Around that time, for a while, it was possible to migrate to Sweden. Many people left Hungary through Yugoslavia, with more or less success. But we do not know even today how many people were shot dead along the Hungarian–Romanian borders because they tried to escape. But I know that the Hungarian authorities also returned refugees back to Romania. We also know very little about their fate.

– *Did the majority of those who left from Romania want to migrate to Hungary, or did they want to migrate further?*

– In my opinion, most of them intended to stay in Hungary. First, because they knew the language, since this is their native language, they knew the local habits, they could assimilate more easily. Mainly younger people migrated to the West, and certainly those who were not naturalised in Hungary, mainly in the middle of the '80s. I think that it was a great omission of the Hungarian government. Those who migrated to the West were mainly young people and intellectuals. The authorities should have not permitted it any longer. But it was no wonder, since the same occurred in 1956. Dictatorship was always afraid of intellectuals, as it is still afraid of them.

– *Did less people migrate to Hungary after the revolution in Romania?*

– Immediately after the revolution many people who applied to migrate withdrew their application. According to statistical data in the two first months of 1990 the migration wave virtually ended. People had hopes and dreams about forging a fraternal meeting of minds and an accord between the two nations. Already in January, we could hear dissonant voices about this “friendship” about Hungarian aid and related things. I heard about all this while sitting on a train travelling home. Hungarian illusions were shattered by the anti-Hungarian pogrom in Marosvásárhely.\* This event created or contributed to a large wave of refugees leaving for Hungary. That year the number of Hungarian refugees from Transylvania exceeded those leaving at the end of the 1980's.

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\* In Romanian: Târgu Mureş.

They keep coming up to this day. Some come to work, others to study. And many of them stay. Many of them end up in the West, particularly those with high skills in areas of technology. But these days nobody keeps count of the ever decreasing number of Hungarians in Transylvania.