



Romanian-Saxon Intercultural Aspects in Braşov

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Abstract. The Saxon civilization becomes a factor of unique significance due to the guilds that turned medieval Braşov into an oasis of freedom and material welfare. The Saxon civilization functions as a catalysing element in the cultural, literary and spiritual development of the Romanians. The two nations co-existed, one bearing the stigmata of a minority, they lived in the same geographic area, but not together. However, the influences from the main culture to the one undergoing a process of sedimentation were of major importance.

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Perspective creates the phenomenon.
(Eliade 1992: 15)

The notion of cultural diversity needs no more explanation. It has been researched from socio-political, anthropological, historical, cultural perspectives, proving its substance in a unified Europe and a globalised world. The most suggestive approach seems to be that of Kevin Wilson in his ample work dedicated to this phenomenon, *Aspects of European Cultural Diversity*: “everyday life, learned behavioural patterns, interfacing knowledge, conventions and specific signs

of identification shared by the members of a given community and transmitted both consciously and unconsciously” (Wilson 1995: 10).

The most pertinent opinions can be expressed about this complex and subtle phenomenon not by appealing to the memory of documents and libraries, but living together in explicitly multi-cultural environments. Since the Middle Ages the multi-ethnic structure of Transylvania (Saxons, Romanians, Hungarians, Jews, Szeklers) have constituted the most determining factor of cultural evolution and connection of the Romanian culture to the great movements of ideas of the Renaissance and Reform, of the Enlightenment and, last but not least to the awakening wave of national consciousness in the hectic nineteenth century. Even if socially and politically inter-ethnicity was not favourable to the Romanians’ history, the cultural benefit was incommensurable.

The principle of cultural diversity in Brașov – *pars pro toto*, in Transylvania – had to prove the fundamental modelling role of the Saxons, Hungarians and Jews in the Romanian ethos. These ethnic groups contribute to the configuration of a certain moral life of the Romanians, leaving on them an undeletable mark not to be deleted along centuries. Moral life, and implicitly Romanian cultural life are the results of a permanent cohabitation. The inter-ethnic dimension took on a cultural diversity dimension of a certain quality, German influence (in Transylvania, the Saxon one) that Lucian Blaga defined as catalytic and creative. The national specificity does not need to be approached from a racial perspective, but from a cultural one. The fact that Romanian cultural life, especially in Transylvania, is the result of a steady “cultural *mélange*” does not represent an exclusively Romanian phenomenon. It would be absurd and hilarious to support the idea of a racial purity, living in a historical and geographical area crossed through along the centuries by migrating or immigrant peoples.

Vasile Moraru, in a study entitled *Despre sași, morală și tăcere* [*About the Saxons, Morals and Silence*], as a starting point for the discussion about the way in which the Saxons have exerted their influence on the Romanian population from Transylvania, proposes the Bergsonian distinction between *open morals* and *closed morals*. Both nations carried with them, according to this theory, both types of morals. Notable is the fact that the type of closed morals has never developed a major conflicting situation. An only exception could be the perpetuation of a feeling of superiority from the part of the Saxons and, implicitly one of inferiority from the part of the Romanians. The author of the essay goes further, distinguishing between *deontological ethics* (the spirit of work, consciousness and punctuality of the Saxons) and a *teleological ethics* (that of utility, in the case of the Romanians).

The idea of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment arrived in Transylvania earlier than in Walachia and Moldova and took on an unmistakable Transylvanian touch, given by the cultural melting pot. In order to contour an image as suggestive

as possible of the medieval Braşov in contact with the ideas of the Renaissance, a few preliminary social and cultural statements have to be made. In Braşov the Saxons were socially and professionally organised in guilds and neighbourhoods. Both phenomena render an exclusivist, closed character of cast. The society of the feudal type is one in which stratification from *up to down* made clear and insurmountable distinctions between the different social levels. The guilds enter Transylvania with the coming of the German colonists, later having an organisation similar to those in Central Europe. Afterwards, this form of craftsmanship production spread amongst the Romanian population as well. These guilds had a closed character, foreigners having access forbidden. Neither the Hungarians who politically administered Transylvania had access to these guilds, not to speak of the Romanians. In Walachia and Moldova guilds appear much later, after the sixteenth century. Their model of organisation and functioning is an example of the German tenacious and creative spirit. The working hours in a guild were from 4 a.m. to 6 p.m.; the unmarried men had no right for association; widows were permitted to work in their deceased husbands' places; the members of a guild had to follow a civilised behaviour (saying hello, punishment for raising their voice, being forbidden for drinking alcohol). Members had to reward the best apprentices and they were forbidden to "steal" customers from another craftsman. Some privileges and prerogatives formulated in the guilds' act were in fact abuses against the other nationalities, outside the guilds. The explanation of this attitude was given by the Saxons themselves in the saying: "*they, the Saxons, could have a bigger love of industry than the other nations*" (otherwise, Voivode Vlad Ţepeş's destiny became tragic as a result of his trying to break the spirit of caste in the Saxon guilds). In 1447 governor Ioan Hunyadi strengthens the caste character of the city of Braşov passing a law to protect the Saxon towns against the claims of the feudal lords, awarding them a privilege on 4th November 1447 by which he forbids all nobles in Transylvania to oblige the serfs to settle in the Saxon towns and territories. In this way the Saxon city becomes an oasis of freedom in an endless feudal desert. Even if the German ethnic exclusivity is made into law, the citizens still enjoy personal freedom and immunity. Anybody who settled in town became a free man, no matter what his previous social situation had been. In such a climate of freedom and benefiting from the unconditional financial support of the patricians, the ideas of the Renaissance entered unhampered and gained an unmistakable local aura. An ethos cannot become real only through really valuable representatives. These existed in the cases of both nations, the Romanians and the Saxons. It is to be noticed that the Romanians in Braşov took an interest in and were influenced by the Saxon creative, building spirit, church playing an important role, too.

Johanes Honterus (1498-1549) was contemporary with important personalities of the Renaissance: Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas More, Albrecht Dürer, Martin Luther and Paracelsus. He is, without a doubt, the best humanist in Transylvania.

His name used to be Honter, but he added the Latin suffix to follow the good Renaissance tradition. A student at the university of Vienna, he becomes master of arts, and afterwards he enrolls on the university of Krakow, where he publishes two fundamental texts for humanism: *The Latin Grammar* and *The Basis of Cosmography or The Description of the World*. In 1553, he is invited to come back to Brașov to reform education, enjoying the respect and appreciation of the whole community of Transylvanian Saxons. We owe him the establishment of the first printing press in Brașov, in 1539. Textbooks will be printed here, books in Greek and Latin, he works of ancient writers (bringing Antiquity back to life in the spirit of the Renaissance). In the spirit of the great discoveries, the wish of the human being to overcome his limits, in search of absolute freedom, Honterus draws a map of Transylvania, to be published in Basel in 1532, being the first cartographic representation of this territory. The most important books of the Reform are published in Honterus's printing press: *The Book of Reform for Brașov and Bârsa County* (1543), *Church Regulations for all Germans in Transylvania* (1547). At this printing press did Coresi work too, between 1556-1583, and with support from the leaders of Brașov, Johanes Benkner and Lukas Hirscher, he prints dozens of books of religious character.

Johanes Honterus is the author of the first School Regulation in the country, *Constitutio Scholae Corensis*, in which he establishes the basis of organising the students, through a youth organization called *coetus*. A profound humanistic spirit, Honterus dedicated his whole life to education: he set up libraries, schools (the oldest girls' school in Transylvania) and he laid the moral foundations of the educational principles in Transylvania.

The Romanian school existed side by side with the one in the heart of the town. The Romanians from Scheii Brașov were responsive to the humanist-reformist ideas that modelled the life of the city. In Scheii Brașov, people spoke and wrote in Romanian continuously. At this school the first *Grammar of Romanian* was written by Dimitrie Eustatievici Brașoveanul. The first Romanian school functioned within St. Nicholas Church and it is the first Romanian school on Romanian land. The documents that confirm its age are the papal documents issued at the end of the twelfth century. Through this institution Brașov becomes a focus of Romanian culture through translations of biblical and lay books, textbooks and grammar books written here and through generations of scholars who were brought to the Romanian culture by this city. The importance of Coresi's printings is underlined in a succinct notice of the historian Nicolae Iorga: "it encompasses in itself what will shape the thought and feeling of future generations: literary language" (Pavalache 2008: 125).

Contemporary studies bring extra depth to Stefan Coresi's personality. If for a long time he was considered a simple printer, today his role is undoubtedly that of a cultural founder, founder of Romanian language and literature, being influenced

by reformist theories that changed the world. The Romanian printing press in Scheii Braşov had a financial factor. Beyond the encouraging reformist atmosphere, that made Coresi's prints spread all over the historical regions, the governor of Braşov, Lukas Hirscher writes the following to the governor of Bistriţa: "both the Moldovan ruler and also the one in Walachia, with the approval of their nobles, have imported many books to their territories" (Pavalache 2008: 126). Coresi's books are financed by the Saxon community, the interest coming more from Johanes Benkner and his daughter, Agneta Hutterin. Thus they used the paper produced at their own paper-mill, their earnings becoming remarkable. The governors of Braşov had direct financial interest in Transylvania, the cultural interest being of secondary importance. The argument to this idea is the famous *Neacşu the Nobleman's Letter* from 1521, written to governor "Hanas Benkner" in which he warned of the Ottoman peril.

The emulations of the German spirit are considerable along the centuries. Humanism, and later the Romanian Enlightenment are contaminated by the German spirit. A decisive moment of the Romanian-Saxon interaction is that of Paşoptism movement. The revolutionary ideas of the European Paşoptist movement enter Transylvania due to literary magazines that are published in Braşov in the nineteenth century. In 1837, literary magazines like "The Romanian Courier" of Heliade-Rădulescu, "The Courier of Both Sexes" or the Geek periodical "Athina" arrived in Braşov with difficulty. The Hungarian and German magazines arrived much more easily: "Beobachter," "Siebenbürger Zeitung," "Siebenbürger Bote," or "Erdelyi magyar hírvivő." We cannot talk for the moment about a local press in 1837. George Bariţiu and Timotei Cipariu had the intention of starting it. Because of financial reasons (safe estimated earnings), the printer Johanes Gött, having Ioan Barac for editor, publishes the first periodical in Romanian, entitled "Sunday Paper". In 1837, the same printer publishes the German periodical "Siebenbürger Wochenblatt" and then the supplement "Unterhaltungsblatt für Geist, Gemüt und Publizität." The same year, Iacob Mureşanu arrives in Braşov, his family playing an important part in creating a literature inspired by Paşoptism. Iacob Mureşanu is a teacher, Member of the Romanian Academy, and the editor of the prestigious "Gazeta Transilvaniei" (Transylvanian Gazette). Andrei Mureşanu, his brother, is the author of the national anthem "Deşteaptă-te, române". Only in 1833 the publication "Foaie pentru minte, inimă şi literatură," (Leaflet for the Mind, Heart and Literature) and "Gazeta de Transilvania" appeared, a magazine where sonorous names of the Romanian Paşoptism wrote: Mihail Kogălniceanu, Alecu Russo, Cezar Bolliac or Nicolae Bălcescu. Johann Gött supports not only the publication of Romanian magazines but also those in Hungarian. So in 1837 he publishes the periodicals "Erdélyi hírlap" (Transylvanian News) and the supplement "Mulattato" (The Amuser). The famous Sámuel Brassai and Zsigmond Kemény write for these papers, Braşov

being the only town in Transylvania in which papers in three different languages, Romanian, Hungarian and German, are published.

At the same time, Johann Gött sets up a literature cabinet and a party society under the name of “Lesecabinet und geselliger Verein”, afterwards named “The German Casina”. The intellectuals of the time, Romanians, Hungarians and Germans meet here, they read the papers of the time and the books provided by a small library. So does the cosmopolitan way of life of the nineteenth century unfold in the same ambiance of cultural diversity, cohabitation and inter-communion of the three nations.

The history of Brașov is fascinating. Fascinating are, taken separately, the myths and legends that are woven around the existence of the three cultures, which, as stated previously, have peacefully cohabitated. This cohabitation is owed not only to the local genius, but also to the church, which made peace with all the cults along the centuries and contributed to the citizens’ education. Also, the social, cultural and anthropological results of the cultural diversity speak for themselves. The Romanians belong to a minority culture, but, as Constantin Noica remarks, this affiliation does not mean a qualitative inferiority of this culture. We can conclude by saying that Brașov is a cradle of Romanian Humanism and Enlightenment, with specific touches given by the Saxon cohabitation.

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