

“Cluj-Napoca between 1939 and 1960. Diversity of Remembrances”

IN THE PERIOD February - November 2012, the city of Cluj-Napoca was the focus point of the international research project “Cluj-Napoca between 1939 and 1960. Diversity of Remembrances”, part of the Geschichtswerkstatt Europa programme of the “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future” foundation (EVZ). The foundation was established in the year 2000 and its initial objective was to provide financial compensation to victims of the National Socialist period such as forced labourers or people who were deported to concentration camps. According to the description which can be found on their web page states, “Geschichtswerkstatt Europa is a programme which supports international projects addressing the issue of the culture of memory and remembrance in Europe, which aims at strengthening the dialogue between young Europeans by comparing the differences and similarities in historical perceptions of the collective experience of oppression in the 20th century at a national, regional and local level”. The project collaborates with the Institute for Applied History within the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt Oder as well as with the Global and European Studies Institute at the University of Leipzig. In 2012 Geschichtswerkstatt Europa (GWE) offered grants for projects related with the war, post war and cold war period in order to contribute to the understanding of the formative years of the European cultures of remembrance. The project “Cluj-Napoca 1936-1960, Diversity of Remembrances” was one of the 28 projects chosen to be financed out of 93 applications from various states. Since this was a 3 person project independent of any institution it was provided a 2500 euro grant per person in order to cover travel costs, accommodation, project coordination and other project related expenses. Projects with more than 4 members, supported by institutions were eligible for an up to 15000 euro grant. The international research team which undertook the project “Cluj-Napoca 1936-1960, Diversity of Remembrances” presented mixed scientific backgrounds consisting of Yulia Gordeeva – historian, cultural anthropologist and sociologist from the Russian Federation, Diana Dranca – historian from Cluj and Flaviu Orastean – philologist and cultural anthropologist from Cluj. The research was tutored by Dr. Slawomir Kapralski, professor at the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Since there is no common remembrance of World War II and of the events which followed between European countries, European memory is seen by Geschichtswerk-

statt Europa as the sum of different perspectives. Cluj-Napoca seemed to provide a good example in terms of how these different perspectives can coexist and interact with one another. Throughout its history the city was inhabited by various nations each of which contributed to its development in its own way and were in conflict with one another at some moment in time. However, unlike other borderline Central-Eastern-European cities which witnessed the displacement of entire populations as an effect of World War II and completely changed their ethnical composition, post-war Cluj maintained more or less the same ethnical structure as before, though Romanians gradually became the majority. By the beginning of World War II, Hungarians constituted the majority, followed by Romanians, Jews, Germans and Roma. Each of these nations left their print on the city's development and each of them survived the World War II trauma in their own way. Between 1939 and 1960 the city changed borders twice: from Romania to Hungary and then from Hungary to Romania. Depending on their nationality, the citizens of Cluj were affected by this border shifts to a higher or to a lesser extent. As Cluj became part of the Hungarian state, the Hungarians living in the city experienced a moment of joy, the Romanians faced all the disadvantages of a national minority, whereas for the Jews it meant deportation to concentration camps. After the war, the city found itself within the borders of Romania once again. Those border changes as well as the war constituted traumatic events in the lives of Cluj's citizens, leaving their mark on their remembrances, because both the Romanian and the Hungarian states attempted to emphasize the city's belonging to their own national community while disregarding the role of the other.

In the first years after the war the new authorities tried to adjust the city to the new political reality by changing its landscape and symbols, by changing the meaning of the "places of remembrance". The changing of street names, of institution names (schools, factories etc.), the building of new monuments or changing the significance of others, urban planning, all this served to adjust the city to the new realities of a socialist Romanian state.

The main hypothesis behind the project funded by GWE was that people belonging to different ethnic and national groups will remember the events that occurred within the city in a different manner. The main goal of the project was to take an attempt at transforming the mutual negative stereotypes which occur among the different nationalities living in Cluj by means of dialogue and by finding common memories which could help eliminate the prejudices and misunderstandings that occurred in the past. The research results were to be published as a brochure in Romanian and Hungarian, as well as in an international language like English. Unfortunately due to time limits and limited funding, only the English version was published in the end. The team's plan was to research the way in which the processes that took place in the city during the war and the first

after war decade are seen through the eyes of the people affected by them, the way in which they affected their lives and the influence they had on the creation of modern day Cluj-Napoca.

The research consisted of a number of interviews conducted in the city of Cluj-Napoca with people who lived there or moved there in the years 1945 – 1960. During those interviews the team focused on the personal memories of those people, in order to see which events had the most important place in their remembrance, what shocked one nation most and which events went unnoticed by the others.

The research concentrated on two basic aspects. At first, memories of the everyday life in the after war Cluj and of the changes that took place in the urban landscape were collected by using methods of oral history and by interviewing people who lived through those changes. Having accomplished this, the team identified the main trends in the memories of that period of history. In order to do so, a comparative analysis of the interviews was made in order to find some general and particular tendencies which could show which events brought reasons for joy or pride and which ones were perceived as traumatizing.

Therefore methods of oral history combined with other qualitative sociological methods were applied. The basic method of collecting information consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews with open questions aimed to attract the respondents into a free continuous talk and give them the possibility to express themselves openly. In addition the team planned to use the method of active observation and analysis of personal photos, images from old postcards, books or museum exhibitions. Oral history, active observation, in-depth interview and visual media analysis helped reconstruct a picture of what urban life looked like in Cluj in the first 15 years after the war as it was lived by different nations.

From the beginning the team's main challenge was to find subjects for the interview. It was very difficult to find people who were adults during World War II and who are still alive today. Another challenge consisted of the fact that not all the potential subjects were willing to share their experiences and memories. In order to find subjects, different organizations such as the Romanian Jewish Association from Cluj, the German Forum in Cluj, a Roma student association and a retirement home were contacted. Another method used was the "snow ball method": interviewees were encouraged to ask their friends about potential interviewees so that each person led to another. In the end the team found 9 Romanians, 4 Hungarians, 6 Jews, one Roma and one German participant. The oldest interviewee was born in 1923 and the youngest in 1950. Most of the persons interviewed were either born and raised in Cluj, or came to Cluj right after the war and were children in the period under research. Voice recorders for the interviews were used,

and a brochure with texts and photographs was published in an attempt to illustrate the diversity of remembrances about after war Cluj-Napoca hoping this will allow the present generation to get a glimpse of the city through the eyes of the different nations that formed or still form the city's soul.

Contrary to what the team had expected, the field research conducted in Cluj-Napoca proved that ordinary people didn't really take part in the battle of symbols which the authorities of the time were leading. The "ideological garment" implemented by urban planning, by monuments and street names went in most cases unnoticed by the very people it was aimed at, and in most cases it was seen as progress especially by the generation born immediately after the war. All the interviewees, regardless of their age or nationality seem to agree on the fact that the relations between ethnic groups were much tighter than they are now. They emphasize the fact that regardless of their nationality and to which country the city belonged at the moment, people helped each other and remained good neighbours. It is worth mentioning on the other hand that both Hungarians and Romanians who lived in Cluj did not see the new neighbourhoods which were built after the war as part of the city, and there were some prejudices regarding their inhabitants. However those prejudices seemed to fade in time as more and more people moved there from the centre of the city and realized the living conditions were much better than in their old houses.

It is also worth emphasizing the fact that in spite of various attempts to shift the meaning or the symbolic places in the urban landscape of Cluj-Napoca, those symbolic places remained the same until nowadays: the central point of the city is still considered to include both the Catholic and the Orthodox cathedrals, and the main walking and meeting places are still more or less the same. The main free time activities depended on social status and financial condition, however cultural life was seen by most to be more accessible and better promoted in the period after the war. As stated in the brochure in conclusion, if, as Rogers Brubaker points out, the city's urban space became a battlefield of memory and symbols between the two major ethnic groups (Hungarians and Romanians), this conflict was created from above by the authorities and ordinary citizens did not take part in it and often didn't pay attention to the ideological changes in the city's landscape. However, the most important change that occurred between 1939 and 1960 was that Cluj-Napoca's Jewish inheritance was almost entirely forgotten, in spite of a temporary flourishing period after the war when it appeared the Jewish community was recovering after the great tragedy of the Holocaust.

All the events that occurred in Cluj at the time, and from which the city emerged as we see it today left their mark on the people who lived through them. The research team believe that with the help of oral history the young generation can understand better

BOOK REVIEWS

both the present and the past by establishing an emotional connection with those events through the unique personal remembrance of each of the persons who experienced them. On the one hand, oral history allows the interviewees to make incursions into their past and present without feeling constrained or interrupted. They are not confined to a strict question pattern but encouraged to allow for their remembrances to naturally flow and for one memory to lead to another. This not only produces a more detailed mental image of the events but also generates an open dialogue and paves the path to a better understanding of intercultural realities. It also allows a better insight into the way these realities work both on the individual and community level by reaching not only beyond the official version of the events, which is often manipulated to serve political reasons, but also beyond the prejudices which already exist between different cultures. The person who remembers has the chance to re-evaluate their attitude towards the events and those with whom those remembrances are shared form a closer connection with those remembrances and have the chance to re-evaluate the way they perceive those events and eliminate the prejudices created by the “official version” of the authorities. By using oral history our team attempted to facilitate this type of intercultural understanding not only between the ethnic communities living in Cluj-Napoca but also to present an example for other cities which faced or face the same inter-ethnic or intercultural challenges. We also attempted to point out that Cluj-Napoca is an interesting city not only because of its cosmopolitan atmosphere and cultural institutions but also because it can provide useful research material for any historian, anthropologist or sociologist who is interested in European borderline cities.

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