

“What we managed to achieve depended on either the goodwill of people, or we forced it.”

Interview with Béla Kis, President of the Association of Transylvanian Hungarians (July 2008)

– *When and how was the Association of Transylvanian Hungarians established?*

– I migrated to Hungary in November 1987, and the Association was established in March 1988. Then there was still dictatorship, and Transylvanians, if their passport expired or had no documents, they were forwarded back to the Romanians by the authorities. There were all sorts of abuses there: the refugees were sent to the Delta of the Danube, were beaten or simply became unemployed. After a while, I myself had to hide in Hungary.

In the meantime, there were more and more Transylvanians in Hungary, and a kind of contact and concord evolved between us. Géza Németh, a Calvinist priest, was among the first who helped these people losing their last hope. As far as I know, he was dealing with drug addicts from the Moszkva square and other handicapped young people; he collected them in the prayer house of Csaba street and tried to convert them via religion. Moszkva square was a gathering place of Transylvanians in the end of 1987 and in the beginning of 1988: people were taken to work from there. Recalling the events, I suppose that Transylvanians migrating to Hungary started forming a group. We were more and more, and finally a separate Transylvanian group evolved; they were visiting the worships in Csaba street in order to exchange information. In the beginning, it was an underground grouping; I do not think that the authorities knew about it. It was characteristic of the whole atmosphere of the era that we were searching for Romanian spies between us.

Then in 1988 the so-called Szűrös Declaration was published. It was a very important event, since from that date it became officially possible for Transylvanian refugees to reside in Hungary.

– *What did this change mean politically?*

– After a while, I think, it was not sustainable that there was a mother country chasing its own nation into destruction. I suppose, at the same time, that beyond the internal pressure – we were more and more – the Western pressure also played a role in the political changes. There were indignant letters sent from the West, pressure in order that the Transylvanians should not be expelled back to Romania. From this moment, the Transylvanians could stay here also officially. We had to register ourselves at the police, and then we were granted the permit of residence. In the beginning, perhaps, we had to show up every week, then every month, and then we always got a seal that we could stay longer. After a while we could be employed, and that meant that we could start a new life.

– *What were the assemblies of the Transylvanians like in those months?*

– On the one hand, there were worships in Csaba street; on the other hand, there was some community life evolving. Everyone tried to collect information from Transylvania or transmit information to Transylvania. It was quite risky, since there was news that some were captured or shot dead at the borders or expelled back to Romania. The families of those who migrated to Hungary were not safe any longer. It was difficult to learn what happened to them or what happened to those who were here. That is, these assemblies had a kind of role of information exchange.

The meetings in Csaba street developed so far that there was not only one Transylvanian group, but two. There was not enough space in the room for all of us, and thus two worships were held. Then, by the concord of Géza Németh and Tivadar Pánczél, the whole organisation was moved to Rákosszentmihály, to the Calvinist church of Budapesti street. There were times when 500 people came. Assistance was divided, clothes, simple lunches, news were read aloud, news from home and from here, there was chanting, crying, praying, everything. It was strange, somehow touching, somehow depressing. I did not belong to the people who came for assistance, but so to say I was the man who prepared the simple lunches.

– *Where did the Transylvanians migrating here live?*

– At different places, it was very mixed. There were people living at their acquaintances and relatives, and there were people living at railway

stations. For example, I left Transylvanian with a rucksack, and went from one of my acquaintances to another.

– *Under what circumstances did you decide to leave Transylvania?*

– My migration was the result of a process of several years. I did not simply decide to leave and everything would be good. Recalling those times, it was quite shocking. At home I had to face permanent atrocities. I as a Hungarian had a completely hopeless situation and future. I got a university degree in Biology, became a teacher at Avasújváros.* It was a village populated by 99% Hungarians; only the policeman, the council president and the headmaster were Romanians. At the same time, in order that the school should not be Hungarian, Romanian children were brought from the neighbouring villages who were residing here. A Romanian class had to be established for them. The Hungarian class was soon full, and the other Hungarians had to learn in the Romanian class, in Romanian. There were a million problems and affairs with the Securitate, the Romanian political police. I taught there for one and a half years, then I was sent to Kolozsvár,** to the Biological Research Institute. My boss was a radical man, he had permanently anti-Hungarian manifestations. In the last years a process started, the regime wanted to cease the Hungarian intelligentsia. Those who were Hungarians in higher positions were dismissed or retired. No Hungarian teacher was employed in the university for 10 years. The situation was the same in the research field. I saw that my fate would be similar in a few years: I would either be dismissed from the institute or I would resign voluntarily.

– *When you left home did you know to whom you would go, did you have any plan?*

– The situation became completely impossible at home, and I decided to leave. I thought of Hungary, since it is a Hungarian language area, there were acquaintances, but since I could not remain, I left Romania aimlessly.

It was another method for making people emigrate that they were not granted passports. Legally one could travel to Hungary every two years, but in practice it was not permitted. One could go to hearings, but in vain, and then completely unexpectedly the permit arrived after six years. This was in fact a call to leave but never return, because the next

* In Romanian: Oraşu Nou

** In Romanian: Cluj Napoca

time you would get no passport, this was the last chance. I had to think about what to do. Finally, I decided to emigrate and give it a try.

– *Did you have a family at home?*

– Only my parents lived at home; I had no family, migrated alone. Certainly, I had friendly contacts, so the separation was not easy. The passport also had an expiration date; I had to leave in half a year, that is, until August 1987. I was simply unable to depart. It was my fortune that I had a contracted job in the research institute that I had to hand in September, therefore I wrote a plea referring to it so that my passport should be prolonged. It was extended until the end of November. I did the job according to the contract and handed in the material. In the meantime, time was passing, and my parents were desperate about what would happen if I did not go. They did not know that I wanted to leave permanently. I tried to visit all the acquaintances who were important to me. I only told my intentions to three of four people, but not to relatives. In the meantime, I visited everyone and silently said farewell to them. Slowly I also said farewell to my parents, but only two weeks later did I get on a train, on 2nd November. I also met others who wanted to migrate to the West. There were people who were repatriated several times. It was also very interesting that if someone managed to cross the border, we could be incredibly happy for them.

Later in Budapest I contacted people who were in similar situations. The idea of writing a letter to Mátyás Szűrös for the sake of staying longer was spreading. Then a letter writing movement evolved, and I am sure that these letters had an effect on later events.

– *Arriving at Hungary, were you less afraid of the Hungarian authorities? And what could you expect of them?*

– We also had to be afraid of them. If you were asked to identify oneself in the street and were found to have expired Romanian documents, you were repatriated at once. We had to be very careful in order not to meet policemen. In the beginning while I had a valid passport I was cleaning. I was registered under the name of some old lady; I got my salary like this. When my passport expired it was a very uncomfortable situation that the authorities could have found out at any time that I was an illegal migrant. I was going from street to street and where I saw construction I asked whether or not they needed a day-labourer. And finally I succeeded: I was digging gardens, insulating roofs, mixing concrete, there was always some job. In the meantime, with my rucksack on my back, one day I slept here, next day there, at friends, acquaintances, charity hostels, etc.

– *How did people in Hungary treat migrants from Transylvania?*

– It depends on whom. The picture was very mixed. There were people who helped a lot, mainly Transylvanians migrating to Hungary earlier. But in many cases we were called Romanians, there were malicious remarks, there were people who knew nearly nothing about Transylvania. There were people who believed that Transylvania was a village in Eastern Hungary. The great demonstration of Transylvania brought interesting experiences. Many, about 500,000 people participated. There were people there demonstrating for Transylvania, but were surprised at the sight of Transylvanians, believing that Transylvanians were shabby, starving and could not speak Hungarian.

From the circle of my acquaintances I got a lot of help. By the proposal of a group of spelunkers, with whom I was in contact as a spelunker, I was working for their construction company for half a year. In the meantime, for the sake of maintaining contacts, I was visiting meetings, to Rákosszentmihály and to the Endangered Plant Research Institute that was important to me from a professional point of view. After I while, I was offered a job and I was glad to accept it. They were very kind; they were the first to provide a room for me as accommodation that was an enormous aid for me.

– *From whom did the Transylvanians get further aid?*

– On the one hand, from the church. They helped the migrants to obtain lodgings or rented flats, and in everything that they needed. Those times people maybe helped each other much more, clothing, money and food were regularly among the assistance. Then there was aid coming also from the West.

In Budapest, at the meeting of Transylvanians I saw that people were coming, took the assistance, then disappeared. Next week another group of Transylvanians came there, but there was no cooperation. Perhaps those felt the strongest togetherness among each other who came in the very first wave, when there were really reasons to be afraid of what would happen to us.

– *Did this aid have any organised form?*

– The usual assembly on Friday had a scenario. We went in, the worship began, then news was read aloud, clothes and other assistance was divided, then people ate and talked. But in fact, no real organisation existed. There were people who felt it their personal affair and there were some who helped in the operation.

I myself wanted to gather the intellectuals, to form a little scientific community where a few lectures could be held and heard and common theses could be written. I announced this and 15 people applied, but only one couple of doctors who had university degrees were among them. Despite all of this, it seemed that there was some demand of cultural meetings broadening our knowledge. Finally, in March 1988 the first such meeting was organised where we invited Pál Bodor who is also Transylvanian and worked as a journalist of the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* in those times.

In those times, we could not even pronounce the word Transylvania. Examining the newspapers of the era, we cannot find it. The first name of the organisation was “Club of Transylvanian Hungarian Intellectuals” (Erdélyi Magyar Értelmiségi Klub = EMKE), on the one hand because of the thought of the formation of a scientific circle, on the other hand, because it rhymed with the name of the old EMKE (Erdélyi Magyar Közművelődési Egyesület = Public Education Association of Transylvanian Hungarians) that was an organisation originally operating in Cluj Napoca since 1885. We were warned not to call ourselves “Transylvanians”, but we did not change the name of the organisation. And no “association” could exist, there was no so-called civilian sphere. What was operating were the so-called clubs, but they were not acknowledged by the authorities either. Clubs that defied the regime only a little were simply prohibited and destroyed. There was a Committee of Clubs unifying about 52 clubs; this organisation and its members played a serious role in the change of the regime. The opposition evolved through these clubs. We were involved in this sphere very soon. The members of the opposition or changers of the regime stood for the affair of the Transylvanians, and we became partners very soon. We were connected to the Round Table of the Opposition and mutually aided each other.

– *Were there other groups organised by refugees?*

– Yes, but those times it was impossible to know which group wanted what. There were Romanian groups, very suspicious groups, these organisations were hard to investigate; one time they were established, then ceased; no one knew what they represented and who belonged to them.

– *Were there mainly Transylvanians at the meetings or were there also native Hungarians?*

– In our meetings there were mainly Transylvanians and refugees. The common fate and similar situation brought people together. They felt it

necessary to exchange experiences, tell what happened to them and ask for or give advice. The community of Rákosszentmihály had a somewhat religious character, not secular. The togetherness was connected to praying, but with us it was connected with lectures. We always invited different lecturers. After the lectures, everyday pressing problems were put in the foreground: assimilation, creating and leaving home. More and more questions arose which no one had dealt with earlier. For example, that two Transylvanians could not get married here, because they were Romanian citizens, or because they could not obtain a driving licence, since they were not Hungarian citizens, etc. The chasm between refugees and institutions dealing with refugee affairs was surprisingly enormous; they did not even know about these problems. One time we invited the director of the Transylvanian Office and due to this meeting, many problems were later solved. The association became a contact organisation between the refugees and the official authorities.

– *Were the Transylvanian communities connected to each other and cooperating?*

– In the beginning, we did not understand how to treat other organisations. I participated at many other opening sessions, but there was little chance for cooperation due to local and temporary interests. We tried to represent a kind of intellectual line. Many people were upset at this, saying that we wanted to exclude labourers and peasants. We were a little surprised at this social stereotype and I tried to explain that it was not an intellectual group because it consisted of intellectuals, but rather because its activity was intellectual.

– *Did these clubs have to get registered?*

– No, clubs did not have to be registered; if they were organised, they existed. The state security probably examined it, and then if there was any problem, further assemblies were not permitted, for example, they were not granted a place to meet. Those times there was no act of assemblage, there was no basis on which they could have introduced charges against us. Mainly individuals were arrested.

Later associations also started being formed based on the principle that their founding was not prohibited by any legal regulation. Then we learnt that Greek refugees also had an association. It turned out that we could not officially establish an association, but we could enter associations. We had to find 10 Hungarian citizens who were willing to give their name to the establishment of an association. There were people who later had problems due to this, but we finally succeeded.

- *Why was it important to operate within the frameworks of an association?*
- Legally an association meant much more. For example, we could obtain welfare, supports, assistance. A civilian sphere started evolving; the opposition was becoming stronger and stronger. We offered cooperation to other similar associations, but it did not really work and does not work even now. In those times, in the West Transylvanians were kept together by the International Association of Transylvanians, and I was in contact with them. In the meantime, a lawyer in Hungary established a private organisation of Transylvanians. I was present at the opening session and offered my cooperation for them. Finally, about six organisations joined there in order to draft a common program for common purposes.
- *What were the common purposes?*
- That is a good question. In those times wrote down on a sheet what we wanted to do and tried to increase the organisation's popularity. We were doing it until others stole our programs. What was common? For example, evidently the protest against the village destructions and Ceaușescu, but cooperation was late.

It was characteristic of that period that we were the only organisation and suddenly writers and journalists started visiting our meetings. They came and conducted interviews with Transylvanians, they wrote their reports and books. And there were often questions like *How did you cross the border? What did the officers of the Securitate do with you? How were you beaten?* etc. We were a little surprised that they wanted to hear only terrible stories from us. It was not compassion what worked, but sensationalism. Writers, journalists, reporters – it was the best for them if someone was crying in front of the camera.

Returning to the assemblies, it crossed our mind that there should be an organisation amalgamating different Transylvanian groups. We could have been supported from the West. There was a Worldwide Association of Transylvanians, and we thought, why not become members, somehow I considered it natural. I met István Zolcsák, the president, who said that he did not support two different Transylvanian associations. Then I found out that the previous day a female journalist was present between the negotiating parties, and this lady had also been present at our meetings.

There was a period when a campaign was initiated against Géza Németh, different discrediting articles were written about him, stating

that he had stolen so much and abused Transylvanian refugees. I myself knew about nothing specific like this, these were only rumours. Then this female journalist visited me so that I should tell her what a bad man Géza Németh was, and I was unwilling to do so. Her feelings were hurt, saying that I was a patron of Géza Németh, and according to her statement, it was the reason why I had not been informed about the new organisation.

Later, by Zolcsák's proposal, I met one of the prospective leaders of the Association of Transylvanians and told him that we had already a club and we could work on the establishment of the association. He said that we will be allowed to enter the Association of Transylvanians. It became clear for me that we were too little to participate in it, simple newly arrived refugees, while there had been prominent personalities among the organisers of the Association for long. We decided to continue our own meetings and programs, and then we would establish an association.

– *Who were the members of the association and how many were you?*

– It was always changing. There were stable people, and there are people who have been members since then. But mainly in the beginning, the membership was changing week by week. In the beginning, it was important because of the applications how many members the association had. Those who wanted to enter filled in an application form and became a member of the association. It was inaccurate, since there were people who filled in the form, but we have not seen them since then. At the same time, there were people who were afraid of entering, saying that it would be registered by the Securitate, but they nevertheless came to the assemblies. While we were gathering members, we had about 870 members.

– *Were they all Transylvanian refugees, or were there also native Hungarians among them?*

– In the beginning, they were nearly exclusively Transylvanians, because it was not officially considered a good thing to be a member of a Transylvanian organisation. Those who joined it as Hungarian citizens were very decisive and broad-minded from this point of view, but these people were also mainly of Transylvanian descent. There were native Hungarians who feel Transylvanian affairs their personal duty, or people who got to know Transylvania through us. At the moment there is a strong core membership, about 400 people who pay the membership fee and visit the meetings regularly, there is a layer that sometimes comes, they are contacted with us, but usually do not pay the membership fee any longer, and there is a wider circle that hardly ever comes.

We published a book, the list of *Migrating Transylvanians*. There are about 3,000 names in the book from among Transylvanians living in Hungary or in diaspora somewhere in the world, the names of those who voluntarily filled in the application form. There are people living in Japan, but it is important to them that they are Transylvanians.

– *When the Transylvanians migrated to Hungary in 1988–89, did they plan to ever return? For example, when you left, did you think that you would ever return?*

– Many people migrated because they wanted to live better. Many of them migrated and went further, since their identity might not have been so important to them. There were people who came to Hungary and were so shocked by their home situation that they never returned and never want to return even now. There are people who do not want to hear about the Romanians or the Transylvanians, and do not even want to be Hungarians.

Everyone reacts in a different way. There are people for whom the emotional bonds are so much that they simply cannot leave. There are people who come to Hungary but are unable to adjust themselves to the local circumstances. There are people who manage to go home and believe that they really came home. But at home they have to face another problem and as time is passing they want to return from where they emigrated.

– *Have you ever thought of returning home?*

– Yes, I have. I can go back to Kolozsvár, but the town that I knew is different; it is not the same any longer. The town and the people changed. I can feel home because I often return home. Finally everything changes, not only Kolozsvár, Budapest is also much more different than it was twenty years ago. Those who left Budapest twenty years ago and now return home do not feel home. It is very hard to return. It does not mean that I return to the same place but to enter a completely new atmosphere. I must depart once again; fortitude and audacity are necessary in order to start a new life. There are many people in this situation. Here they get to know the possibilities and the people, learn what and how to do, for example how to establish a company. These things all must be done at home in a completely different way, these things operate differently, and it is very hard to adjust ourselves to a new system. There is evidently an attraction to the homeland, one tries to live a little at both places, but in fact one will never find one's place, this is the truth.

I myself was also thinking a lot about it, and many people also asked the question why I do not return home. Mainly because after the change of the regime: “Ceaușescu is dead, everything is in order, you should go home”. All in all, the situation of the Hungarian population in Transylvania is not much better, only different. I myself would ask why I should return, what I could do there. Here is the association, this is a contact organisation, I am also in contact with Transylvania and try to do something.

– *In what fields do you try mainly to act?*

– In the cases of Transylvanians, for example, once at the Committee of Coordination of Refugee Affairs, where there were the representatives of different ministries present. Here they attempted to solve problems, drafted and amended legal regulations. Their work was good and efficient, rational changes in the legal system could be achieved. But it was also among the assignments of the Committee to grant the right of renting 50 flats in Budapest to Transylvanians in difficult situation and to treat reduced credits.

– *Did this committee have direct contact with Transylvanians?*

– Yes, certainly it did, Transylvanians could go to the office in order to ask for information or lodge complaints. Apart from this, they negotiated with the local self-governments about how to help refugees, in some cases, by offering cheap plots or jobs. I wanted to achieve that in this committee the Transylvanians should have their own representatives, and finally I myself was assigned to be this representative. I was present at these sessions and commented on the events, I could make proposals and raise issues, I could vote for decisions. It was a very effective body, but unfortunately it ceased.

– *Did the other Transylvanian organisations have their own representation in the committee?*

– Those organisations did not raise these issues so much. Our association emphasised the importance of dealing with Transylvanians living in Hungary. The others were not interested in it as much; they were rather struggling for Transylvania, their purpose was to help people still at home, to create the autonomous Transylvania.

What we tried to achieve, the support of Transylvanians living in Hungary, and possibly their representation, is not looked upon well even today. While Romanians living in Hungary are granted serious assistance by the local self-governments, we get nearly nothing, only some little sum after some quarrelling. I am unable to make the official bodies realise

our situation even today. We are members of the Hungarian nation, but migrated here from the neighbouring countries. We are in a different category from other immigrants, but we also have problems that should be dealt with. The problems of assimilation of Transylvanian children are not important for the Hungarian authorities, since we are simply Hungarians.

– *Did you expect something else when you decided to migrate to Hungary?*

– The fact that we were not kindly admitted, as far as I can judge it subsequently, was not very surprising. The continuous migration of Transylvanians started even before the turn of the century, before the Treaty of Trianon, and Transylvanians were not kindly admitted in Budapest even those times. All other immigrants are more important in Hungary, with the slogan that we are not strangers, but rather a people to be assimilated. But Transylvanians have their own identity. It does not mean that we are not Hungarians, but there are certain characteristics in our traditions, behaviour, manner of speech which we should not discard. We should not speak in the same way as people speak in District 8 of Budapest or anywhere else. But many people want to integrate us.

In our case, the issue of refugees or of migration lasts only until they realize that 70 of 100 people migrate here from the neighbouring countries, and they are simply Hungarians from the neighbouring countries. Then the issue is no longer interesting. After that the authorities deal with the remaining 30 percent. 70 percent are Hungarians, and they do not have to be cared for, since they have neither problems nor importance.

– *You mentioned that in 1988–89 you had a strong mutual cooperation with the forces participating in the change of the regime. What did it mean?*

– We obviously wanted the communist power to cease, since in that period even the word Transylvania was prohibited and the blazon of Transylvania could not be our symbol, saying that there would be international problems. Like this, we could struggle on the side of the opposition, but from the part of the communist regime there was no positive attitude. What we managed to achieve depended on either the goodwill of people, or we forced it. There were people who were understanding and saw through our situation. For example, those who were the members of the Committee of the Coordination of Refugee Affairs had a very helpful attitude.

– *What kind of change did you expect in this period?*

– No matter what, we wanted the disappearance of the regime and freedom for citizens, freedom to travel, etc. – but in that period it was not drafted in such a form, we rather wanted that restrictions, barri-

ers and pressure should be ceased at last. Finally, a multi-party system evolved and democratic votes were held. Later we had to realise how false these things were, and that democracy does not unconditionally equal freedom, since power can also be abused in democracies, there are people exploited and what is permitted to one, is not permitted to the other. But back then there was still a fantastic enthusiasm, people were motivated because they had something to hope for. We thought that with freedom, people would be honest, justice would prevail, and misery would disappear. Unfortunately, these notions were not realised. Furthermore, certain people changed and become the same as their predecessors. When the Pan-European Picnic was held and the Iron Curtain was demolished, or when the great Transylvanian demonstration was organised with the enormous masses, we had unforgettably enthusiastic moments and felt that nothing could stop the world becoming better...