Introduction

Nineteenth-Century Transylvanian Intellectual Milieus

My study draws the topography of knowledge in one of the culturally most heterogeneous eastern provinces of Europe, Transylvania. It inquires into the tangled social settings and cultural as well as political force lines that shaped knowledge about Transylvania during the age of nation-building, a province which found itself successively under Habsburg and, between 1867 and 1920, under Hungarian state rule. The book is thus an exploration into the fascinating topic of communication and strife, imitation and emulation, cooperation and withdrawal, practiced by competing regional elites who, enjoying very different chances for self-assertion, attempted to define what was Transylvania(n) and how this related to the larger cultural areas in which they traveled and where they felt at home.

I follow the workings of Transylvanian learned societies engaging in the exploration of their fatherland, an activity reaching back to the beginning of modern scholarly sociability at the end of the eighteenth century. I point at the mechanisms of adapting international trends and practices of scholarship to local conditions and show how they became tied up with the formation of collective identities and embedded in a regime of social and political differences. The upper chronological end of my inquiry is World War I, which not only put an end to the Habsburg Monarchy, but also closed the first great wave of scientific modernization, in a national framework, that began about the middle of the nineteenth century.

The scholarly mapping of a certain territory took its origins in a knowledge field that was called Landeskunde in German and honismeret in Hungarian. Having no equivalent in English, it can be only circumscribed as the encyclopedic and systematic description of the land or the ‘fatherland.’ Landeskunde1 thrived in German-speaking continental Europe and made up a part of the state sciences or Staatswissenschaften, the latter employed in the training of

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1 There has been still no exhaustive definition of Landeskunde in English. For its interpretation as a form of scientific travel “at home,” while the gathering of empirical data served the goal of improvement, see Henry E. Lowood, “Science for the Fatherland,” in Patriotism, Profit, and the Promotion of Science in the German Enlightenment (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 205–261.
future state administrators.² Such a description proceeded along the disciplines of geography, topography, meteorology, natural history, ethnography, and above all history.³ Based on the accumulation of facts in the mentioned disciplines, the exploration of the fatherland fit ideally the learned societies, a result of the collective and concerted action of many individuals.

In Transylvania two such societies were explicitly dedicated to Landeskunde, one of them founded by Transylvanian Saxon intellectuals and called the Verein für Siebenbürgische Landeskunde (or Landeskundeverein, vsl, Association for Transylvanian Landeskunde, 1842–1947). The other was of Transylvanian Hungarian creation and carried the name Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület (or EME, the Transylvanian Museum Society, 1859–1950, reestablished in 1990). Both grew out of local intellectual milieus, both were founded around the middle of the nineteenth century, and both were the regional loci of Transylvanian Hungarian and German traditions of scholarship until the end of World War I. The passage of the eastern territories of dismembered Hungary, including Transylvania proper, Maramureș, and parts of the region Banat, to greater Romania in 1920 and the ensuing interwar decades hit the Hungarian institution hard, which witnessed the nationalization of most of its collections, its material and infrastructural assets. The Landeskundeverein fared with no comparable loss under the interwar era Romanian administration, yet it had to adapt to the radical transformation of the cultural and political landscape in the successor state.

This institutional crisis was not discontinuous with earlier processes that had begun in the late nineteenth century, though becoming by then an incontrovertible fact, namely, the preeminence of the capitals of knowledge in Bucharest, Budapest, and Vienna, and the loss of prestige of the once significant regional initiatives in the Transylvanian province. The Saxon institution had cast itself as a satellite of scholarly institutions in major German academic centers from the very beginnings, and the perceived reliance on the stronger partners further west transformed into a genuine dependence once the Nazi regime was established within and beyond Germany. The tribulations continued during and after World War II. In communist Romania both societies were