The Bureaucrat and the Intellectual

The death of Jakab Harsányi Nagy put an end to a versatile existence full of shifts and changes. So much can be said even if many facets of his life remain obscure. Not only do many important events in his career remain partially unexplained for lack of sources, such as his decision to renounce his ecclesiastical vocation, but there are a number of spheres of his existence which are entirely hidden from view. This is perfectly normal where second- or third-tier agents in the world of early modern politics are concerned. Since the sources are usually exclusively derived from archival collections of administrative authorities or from the private correspondence of their patrons, the authors of their biographies, deprived of all information on anything else, are obliged to concentrate on the public sphere of their lives. Characteristically, we know nothing about Harsányi’s family either. We can only surmise that he did not marry since there is no reference either in his letters from Constantinople or in his later correspondence to suggest that he had a wife. On the other hand we cannot exclude the possibility that he did indeed marry as a college rector after his peregrination but was widowed early. Although some parts of the Colloquia refer to family life – such as the detailed presentation of Turkish nuptial customs – these offer no basis for any hypothesis regarding Harsányi’s own experiences or ideas.

Even if his private life remains in obscurity, the sources at hand render it possible to make Harsányi’s biography a little more personal. Not being content with reporting what happened to him, we can also ask how he experienced the events through which he lived. In this chapter I will attempt to present his ideas about the social roles he filled, or, in any case, how he represented them to others. The analysis of his self-fashioning, a well-established field of inquiry in the last thirty years of Anglo-Saxon historiography, aims to show how historical agents built up their public image with an individual combination of the elements available in their age, and the kind of changes that can be regis-

---


tered diachronically among these representations. The working mechanisms of self-fashioning are well represented in the case of Harsányi by his noble status. This at the same time throws light upon the fact that the elements of the image made available for the public are not necessarily the ones which actually determine the identity of the self.

If we take Jakab Harsányi Nagy’s nobility as an objective status, it must have precedence among the elements of his identity since it was the first one he inherited from his parents. At the same time, if we look at the subjective side of his nobility, that is, whether he found his status important or at least worth mentioning, the chronological order is far from clear. Not a single source exists from the period before 1660 which would suggest that Harsányi found it important to call attention to his noble status. This identity element only seems to have been emphasised during his years of emigration. The fact that the letters of recommendation with which Gheorghe Ştefan provided him when he sent him to foreign notables, gave him the title “Generosus et Nobilis” does not mean much even though we know that they were written by Harsányi himself. The title “generosus” was regularly used for diplomats in this period. More significantly, there is a letter from 1666 which bears the signature “Jacobus


4 For the usage of “generosus” see, for example, the letters of Gheorghe Ştefan to Wenzel Euseb Lobkowitz (Szinna, 16 April 1662), ARMSI X, 530; to Frederick William (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1 October 1662), TMIR III, 80; to Carl Gustaf Wrangel (Dorpat, 11/21 September 1663), RA Skoklostersamlingen E 8422; and to Magnus Gabriel De la Gardie (Stettin, 6/16 September 1664), RA Delagardiska samlingen E 1500. In a letter written in Hungarian to Johann Rottal (Rosenberg, 25 June 1662), the Hungarian version of “generosus,” “nemzetes,” is used; MNL OL P 507 Fasc. 14, Lev. A. V. nr. 527, 605r. There is only one case when the title “generous” is not used next to his name: the travel pass written for him by the Brandenburg administration in 1676 only entitled him as “nobilis,” since in this case he started his journey not as a representative of a ruler, but in a private capacity, in order to republish his book (GStA PK 1. HA Geheimer Rat Rep. 9. Allgemeine Verwaltung J 16 Fasc. 3, fol. 52r.). On the use of the title “generosus” or “nemzetes” in Transylvania, see András Péter Szabó, “A magyar Hallerek nemzetségkönyve: Egy különleges forrás keletkezésének társadalomtörténeti háttere” [The ancestry book of the