

Ghetto or Self-fulfilling Prophecy?
The Afterlife of Soviet Cultural Policy in a Transilvanian Town

By

Eszter Sipos

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Supervisor: Professor Jean Louis Fabiani

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Abstract

This thesis deals with questions related to cultural policy, its implementations and its legacy in the Transilvanian town of Sepsiszentgyörgy, a provincial town in central Romania. The town is an improbable location for a cultural centre, yet socialist cultural policies have created an interesting amalgam of creative forces in this location. The thesis analyzes how these policies of socialist Romania and their implementation in Sepsiszentgyörgy are represented in the discourse of the intellectuals of the town. Using a series of interviews as core material, their discourses will be analyzed having in mind the following questions: how do these discourses deal with the legacy of socialist cultural policy? What are their main frames of interpretation? Do they see the cultural space of the town as artificially created by socialist policy and if so what makes this space viable or unviable today? I argue that socialist cultural policy between 1968 and 1989, willingly or not, created an agglomeration of creative energies in Sepsiszentgyörgy. However the seed of most of the problems of today's cultural life of the town were also sown in that period, which, combined with the new discourses after 1989 have contributed to the malfunctioning of the town as a cultural space. The final section of the thesis presents the proposals for improving cultural life in Sepsiszentgyörgy which were offered by the intellectuals of the town.

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Introduction

Research Topic and Site

As the director of the library I was supposed to organize reader-writer meetings in the villages of the county, featuring writers who published books in line with the party's policies. So then I put the names of those authors on the program of these meeting, which of course had to be checked and approved by the Propaganda committee, and then I just did not follow the program. If somebody called me and asked, I simply lied. I said yes of course, the meeting was a success, many people came etc. I never got into any trouble for that because they only checked the plan. This is what the system was like. If now anybody wants to reconstruct what we did in those day based on those plans and reports, that person is in big trouble.¹

These words of Jenő Kiss, the former director of the Kovászna County Library (located in Sepsiszentgyörgy/ Sfântu Gheorghe, Romania) problematize some of the basic questions this thesis is concerned with. When it comes to socialist cultural policies, should we look at the historical documents to make deductions, or should we rather turn to the people who implemented these policies? If we consider their discourse, will we get a coherent narrative of how cultural policy was actualized? How do these narratives influence the present state of affairs? Besides being a former librarian, Kiss is also a former censor, which brings yet another dimension to the questions: how does the sometime ambivalent role of intellectuals influence their discourse about cultural policy?

In an attempt to answer these questions, this thesis will analyse the case of Sepsiszentgyörgy, a provincial town in central Romania, the capital of Kovászna County (Județul Covasna). The town of around sixty thousand inhabitants is located in the region called Szeklerland, which comprises the three counties with the largest concentration of ethnic Hungarians in Romania. Even though the town's history dates back to the 12th century, it acquired its function of county capital only in 1968. Therefore the question might be asked:

¹ Interview with Jenő Kiss. 27.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe. Unless otherwise mentioned all interviews were conducted by the author.

why choose this provincial town to illustrate questions of cultural policy and its legacy in the narratives of intellectuals? Why not consider Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca), the traditional cultural centre of the region? The answer is that the case of Sepsiszentgyörgy is interesting precisely in the improbability of it becoming a cultural centre for the Hungarian minority of Romania. While Kolozsvár is a large city in Transylvanian proportions, with a central location, a lively economy, a long history as a university and literary centre and home to a large Hungarian community, Sepsiszentgyörgy is a provincial town, without a long history as a town, not to mention history as cultural centre, situated in a region with far from booming economy and imperfect infrastructure. Therefore when considering the case of socialist cultural policy in this location, the force of other, maybe not so evident, factors have to be taken into account that led to the becoming of the town as a cultural centre. The thesis proposes to analyze how these factors connected to the cultural policy of socialist Romania and their implementation in Sepsiszentgyörgy are represented in the discourse of the actors involved.

The discourse of the intellectuals of Sepsiszentgyörgy will be analyzed having the following questions in mind: how do these discourses deal with the legacy of socialist cultural policy? What are their main frames of interpretation? Do they see the cultural space of the town as artificially created by socialist policy and if so what makes this space viable or unviable today? I argue that socialist cultural policy between 1968 and 1989, willingly or not, indeed created an agglomeration of creative energies in Sepsiszentgyörgy. However the seed of most of the problems of today's cultural life of the town were also sown in that period, which, combined with the new discourses after 1989 have contributed to the malfunctioning of the town as a cultural space. I show that the legacy of the socialist era has produced a collection of creative forces in the town, which however are seriously held in check by schisms and practices originating in the communist era.

Methodology

The core material for the study is a series of interviews conducted over the course of two months with the intellectuals of the town. When finding interviewees the method of snowball sampling was used: existing study subjects recommended future subjects from among their acquaintances, based on the specific skills that have been determined as being useful. In this case the “skill” was the importance the recommended had in the cultural life of the town according to the recommender. This respondent-driven technique offers another advantage: the social network of the intellectuals is made apparent. Due to time constraints of course not all the threads are rolled up, nevertheless the interviews offer a large amount of previously un-researched material and a complex picture is formed of the legacy of socialist cultural policy and its resonance with the intellectuals of the town.

The organization of the thesis follows the combination of two threads: a loose chronological line and a theoretical line based on Jim McGuigan’s (2004) distinction of three discourses of cultural policy. McGuigan uses this distinction in his quest for understanding how cultural policies are constructed and deconstructed within a nation state, acknowledging that these formations are by no means confined solely to cultural policy and that they are not internally unified. Each discourse functions in some sense to define the real world of culture and to position agents and subjects, producers, consumers, citizens and mediators, within the discursive space of the cultural field. The three discourses of cultural policy are *Stating*, *Marketizing* and *Civil/Communicative*. As McGuigan suggests, no discourse of cultural policy exists in splendid isolation from the leading discourses of the day and that although discourses are interactive, they all share some features that make them seem impossible to think outside of. After a short literature review, the thesis will analyse the discourse of Sepsiszentgyörgy’s intellectuals about cultural policy and its applications following the chronological periods and their most prominent types of discourse. In the first chapter the socialist era will be covered,

which was dominated by the stating discourse but certain elements of the other discourses were also present in the recollections of the interviewees. The second chapter will discuss the post 1989 era organizing the discourse of the interviewees on a dual line: first the problems of the town's cultural life will be presented as related to McGuigan's three discourses and then the solutions offered by the interviewees will also be analyzed.

Literature Review

Due to the complex nature of the topic, there are numerous theoretical strands which could be followed when analysing the discourse of the cultural elite of Sepsiszentgyörgy regarding the legacy of communist cultural policy. Of these strands this thesis engages with theories of social memory and cultural policy, against the backdrop of previous publications related to the topic from the field of historical and sociological studies of the region.

As cultural policy in the case of Sepsiszentgyörgy cannot be thought about without a detour in the history and nationality politics of socialist Romania, the work of historiographers is needs to be considered. To name only a few ones: Andrea Süle (1990) wrote about the political history of the Hungarian minority in Romania between 1945-1989 while the work of the members of the KAM in Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc (Regional and Anthropological Research Group) such as József Gagyí (2006), produced related studies that were diverse from a methodological point of view. The work of the new generation of Hungarian historians from Romania was first presented in the volume *Autonóm magyarok?* (Autonomous Hungarians?) edited by Nándor Bárdi (2005). The works of Stefano Bottoni tackled the topic of Romania's nationality politics during the communist era while historian Zoltán Csaba Novák (forthcoming) has done research on the implications of the 1968 territorial reform on the minority politics of the socialist Romania.

A significant work that tackles the role of the elite and the challenges to this role, is *Letters to the Editor ,The Values Guiding an East European Minority During Transition* by József D. Lőrincz (2004), focusing on the letters to the editor received by the Hungarian local daily newspaper published in Sepsiszentgyörgy, *Háromszék*, in the period between December 1989 and the end of 1994. The paper analyses the frames of interpretation that gave meaning to the role of Hungarian intellectuals in Romania both before and after 1989, arguing that the roots of their difficulties can be found in a more than 70 years old „minority rhetoric”, and in the techniques of expression developed during the Communist regime, which Lőrincz theorizes as *ambivalent discourse*. This notion is important for the analysis of the role of the elite and will be dealt with in the main body of the thesis.

As the core material for the thesis is a series of interviews, the question of identity creation through social mnemonic practices is an important strand to consider. Numerous scholars have explored the ways in which social factors combine to affect the patterning of memory and the extent to which individual memory conditions the codifying memories is still a much debated topic (Cappeletto, 2003; Bloch, 1998; Appadurai, 1981; Neisser, 1994). Halbwachs (1992) characterized collective memory as a filter of past events that tends to preserve only those images that support the group’s present sense of identity. Collective memory for him is as much a question of production as one of recollection, arguing that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed in accordance with the predominant thoughts of the present society. This reproduction is done in order to perpetuate a sense of identity that is as much defined by past events as by the social milieu in which these events are remembered. After Halbwachs, social memory was understood as the sphere of relations between social and cognitive practices (Tonkin, 1992), while oral historians, beginning with Thompson (1990) recognized the mediated nature of memory. In this view, narration and memory are themselves events rather than merely descriptions of events. As Connerton (1989) argued, the

control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power as images of the past legitimate the present social order. Thus the political implications of social memory are central to this thesis: the self-definition of the interviewees in relation to the socialist regime by way of reconstructing their autobiography informs their discourse about cultural policy.

The notion of cultural policy has been again a popular topic with social scientists, even though the empirical material for these studies came most prominently from the cultural field of the USA and Western Europe. The power of cultural policy has been recognized throughout the history of social sciences, with many revolutionary thinkers picking up on the importance of identification for collective loyalty. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx (first published in 1852) wrote that it is impossible to create a moral power by paragraphs of law, but there must also be organic laws supplementing the Constitution, i.e. cultural policy. Antonio Gramsci theorizes this as an equilibrium between constitutional law, which supposes a political coercive apparatus used to control the masses in conformity with a given type of production and economy; and organic law, which supposes civil society or the hegemony of a social group exercised through organizations such as the church or the schools (Gramsci cited in Miller et.al. 2002). Raymond Williams (1976) applied Gramsci's concept of hegemony to culture, arguing that hegemony is secured when the dominant culture uses education, philosophy, religion and art to make its dominance appear normal and natural. According to Miller (2002) national cultural policies are thus privileged terrains of hegemony as they "provide a means of reconciling contending cultural identities by holding up the nation as an essence that transcends particular interests" (p.8).

The role of cultural policy in socialist Romania was essential not only in terms of securing the communist regime but also for its nationality politics: as it became apparent from the interviews, the political reason behind investing Sepsiszentgyörgy with the role of a cultural center is itself a crucial issue in the discourse of the town's intellectuals. Even if the

cultural policy of socialist Romania was centralized and state-controlled, the interviews will clearly show what Yudice (2003) theorized as the *langue* and *parole* of cultural policy: in semiotic terms, both culture and policy have their *langue* (formal, rule-driven qualities) and *parole* (actual usage). Just as parole complicates langue, there is an inevitable overlap between the ideological and the actual registers of cultural policy. The practices of redirecting state controlled cultural policy and how these practices were presented in the discourses of the interviewees will be addressed in length in the first chapter of the thesis.

Chapter One: Uses and Abuses of the Stating discourse

Introducing the Stating Discourse

The idea that the modern nation-state should command the whole of society by using cultural policy to cultivate appropriate individuals was never exclusively a communist or socialist imaginary, but it became a commonplace assumption of both totalitarian and also liberal and social-democratic thought and practice (McGuigen, 2004). As we shall see, the operations of official cultural policy and artistic practice in Sepsiszentgyörgy, were more complex and internally contradictory than the image of the dictatorial and robotic culture for which Soviet policy was known in the West during the cold war and in the 1990s. Nevertheless, cultural policy in socialist countries was used to a large extent for social engineering purposes, the success of which remains to be discussed. Ernest Gellner considered this venture of the socialist system a total failure as “far from creating the new social man, one freed from egoistic greed, commodity fetishism and competitiveness, which had been the Marxist hope, the system created isolated, amoral, cynical individuals-without-opportunity, skilled at double-talk and trimming within the system, but incapable of effective enterprise”(1995. p.5). When considering the practices and recollections of practices in this case however, a more complex picture emerges: individuals who were both isolated and pushed together by the system, who used and abused the cultural policies of the socialist state cannot be pronounced as mere failures of the system.

If we follow McGuigen’s (2004) division of the three discourses of cultural policy, the first period that is covered by the interviews was one dominated by the *Stating* discourse. Time-wise this part of the material, that is the discourse of Sepsiszentgyörgy’s cultural elite concerning the town’s cultural development, refers to the period between the year of the new

county's birth in 1968 and 1989, when the Communist regime was overthrown. There were a number of recurring motifs throughout the series of interviews regarding state cultural policy, its implementation and its consequences in the before mentioned period and in this chapter we will look at these motifs. After having done so two threads will be discussed on which most of the interviews could be strung, concerning the reasons behind the state's cultural policy decisions. These two threads are essential to consider in order to understand why there exists a schism among Sepsiszentgyörgy intellectuals who have experienced this period in the town's cultural life in the 22 years this chapter is concerned with.

Nationality Politics in Socialist Romania

First the formation of Covasna County was an important act not only for the „golden age” of the town's cultural life, but also for the nationality politics of the Ceaușescu regime. Therefore, a brief overview of the Romanian Communist Party's nationality policies in general and concerning this county in particular, is needed.

From the point of view of nationality politics, the Ceaușescu-era could be divided into two sub-periods. The period between 1965 and 1975 was characterized by a relatively lenient political discourse, while the second period, starting from the late seventies up until the collapse of the regime in 1989, saw the general distortion of the system, including its nationality politics (Bárdi, 2006).

The Dej-era (the period just before Ceaușescu), was one marked by the pressing need of the RCP to win society over and an important means to this end was the party leaderships' skillful integration of the Romanian national discourse into its rhetoric, which gained an impressive momentum (Süle, 1990). Thus by the end of the Dej-era the socialist model upon which Romanian politics functioned, was Stalinist in terms of power structure and economy, but which ignored the internationalist discourse and played more on nationalist feelings (Novák, unpublished). After the death of Dej in 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu was chosen first

party secretary of the RCP (Romanian Communist Party). In the 4-5 years that followed, he consolidated his power by gradually disposing of his political enemies and thus created the political conditions that made the implementation of a new line of social and economic policies possible. The 9th party Congress was held in 1965, signifying the beginning of a new period in both political and ideological terms. The congress stated that with the eradication of the exploiting classes, socialism had vanquished in Romania and now a new phase of socialist progress begun. Regarding the ethnic question, an important statement of the congress was that the basis of this new socialist progress was the 'socialist nation'. This notion was decisive in terms of strengthening the autonomy of Romania within the Soviet bloc, and it also became an important motive of the RCP's nationality politics, as the congress did acknowledge the existence of minorities, but denied the need for collective minority rights. The 'socialist nation' and the terms linked to it (integration, homogenization) were interpreted in terms of the time-wise indeterminate but ultimately inevitable approximation of the cohabitant nationalities in Romania, providing the ideological base for the social, cultural and in the longer term ethnic assimilation of the minorities (Novák, 2006). Nevertheless, the ensuing economic and political changes and the active role Romania took in the international scene (the condemnation of the intervention of Soviet forces in Czechoslovakia) could only be imagined with a strong, unified and pacific hinterland. Some important measures in the formation of this strong base were: Ceaușescu's spectacular dismissal of some uncomfortable elements of the legacy of the Dej-era, his partial opening towards society and relaxing of the ideological grip. None of these changed the basis of the system, but, together with the oncoming economic growth, enhanced the general disposition of society (Novák, unpublished).

Minority politics also played an important role in the formation of the unified hinterland. During a relatively short period of time three major events took place that were

important regarding the country's largest minority: the administrative and territorial reform, the meeting of the party leadership with the Hungarian intellectuals (which took place in Bucharest, 28 June 1968) and the formation in October 1968 of the Council of the Hungarian Workers (Magyar Nemzetiségű Dolgozók Tanácsa). The final decision of the administrative reform committee was significant in terms of minority politics. Even though the preparations for the reform continued the principle from the 50s, according to which the nationality question in Romania had been solved and therefore there was no need to address the specificities of the minorities, still a compromise was reached. This compromise was not determined by pure economic factors, but the nationality component of the territories had also been taken into consideration: significant portions of the Szeklerland² were not attached to ethnically Romanian counties, in spite of previous plans and economic considerations (Vincze, 1994).

When compared to the pre-68 period, the most positive changes in terms of minority politics took place in the field of cultural life, and although the period can be seen as a series of ups and downs in state oppression, it was nevertheless a successful time of the Hungarian minority elite in terms of institution-building: the Kriterion publishing house and the *A Hét* cultural weekly were founded in this period, and the Hungarian and German language programs on national television, to name just two examples. After the new counties were formed, two party newspapers were set up, the *Hargita* in Csíkszereda, and the *Megyei Tükör* (*County Mirror*) in Sepsiszentgyörgy. Among many other considerations, these newspapers were important because they became a forum for a significant transition: in the newly formed szekler counties local identity was gradually replaced by a „county-identity”. Their respective county elites and intellectuals did their best in their speeches and publications to press forward the legitimating identities of the new administrative entities. Their means were the creation

² Szeklerland refers to the territories inhabited mainly by the Székely, a Hungarian-speaking ethnic group in eastern Transylvania. They live in the valleys and hills of the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, the territory corresponding to the present-day Harghita, Covasna, and parts of Mureș Counties in Romania.

and usage of symbols, such as the mountains of Hargita in the case of the eponymous county or the *Műemlékeink* series (*Our National Monuments*, concerned with the county's built heritage) of the *Megyei Tükör*.³

Szeklerland had a prominent position in the national political discourse of the day. The stressing of szekler identity, their special traditions and the symbolic gestures of the party towards this region (e.g. Ceaușescu's relatively frequent visits and ending his speeches with a few Hungarian words) could well have been parts of the party's long term politics to separate and alienate these people from the rest of the Hungarian minority, though historical documents stating this intention are most probably impossible to find (nevertheless the idea kept popping up throughout the interviews). Thus Hungarian culture gained a distinctive color and momentum in the newly formed counties: new career possibilities were opened with the creation of county and town level cultural institutions; the newspapers drove numerous writers and poets into their editorial community, making the county municipalities appealing places for Hungarian intellectuals throughout Transylvania.⁴

A new line of policies was to come into play with the RCP's 1971 July plenary session, where Ceaușescu made a resounding speech about the necessity to upgrade the ideological-political activity of party members. The speech, which later became known as the "July Theses", signified an end to the more lenient period of his era. The implementation of the theses, which gained momentum in the late seventies, meant a harsh ideological control, deeply affecting Romanian society at large; they prescribed a deeper level of the party's interference in matters of ideology and cultural life: a more severe indoctrination policy was to be followed in public schools, propaganda was to be made more spectacular and intense,

³ Archives of the *Megyei Tükör*, 1968-1976.

⁴ Interview with Árpád Farkas, 01.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Lajos Sylvester, 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy. Interview with László Bogdán, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Márton Gajzágó, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

the selection of party cadres made more stringent, Western cultural and philosophical products were banned and the socialist censorship strengthened (Vincze, 1994). Cultural institutions of the Hungarian minority, which so far maintained a relatively unique character, were forced to reflect the new official policy. From the late seventies, these institutions gradually lost their partial independence and their function was degraded to the level of being the mouthpiece of the RCP.

Another important policy was that of the so called cadre-rotation, which was introduced at the 1972 national party-conference. The main idea of this policy was that county level party officials were shuffled around every 3 to 5 years, preventing them from gaining an effective net of connections and too much political power (Süle, 1990). Due to this reshuffling, many of the Hungarian intellectuals and party elite that were put into position during the sixties got replaced, the explanation being that they “misinterpreted” their opportunities. One example is the removal of Sylvester Lajos, director of the cultural committee in Kovászna County, on the charge that he had been erecting statues and organizing cultural events only when these had a Hungarian character.⁵

Thus by the early seventies much of the previous optimism among the Hungarian minority had vanished, due partly to the implementation of the July Theses, the restrictions in minority language education and mass relocation of population because of forced industrialization. A significant part of the Transylvanian Hungarians experienced frustration that the consequences of large scale industrialization and urbanization had radically changed their habitat and the ethnic composition of their cities.

With these historical considerations in mind, let us go back now to the interviews, and what motifs of state-controlled cultural policy were prominent in these discourses.

⁵ Interview with Lajos Sylvester, 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

The Formation of Kovászna County and the Symbolic Value of Sepsiszentgyörgy

The most prominent motif, present in almost all of the interviews is the importance of the county-formation, in terms of new career opportunities that presented themselves after the administrative reform. According to the national census of 1966, the population of the new county was 176, 858 (0.9% percent of the population of Romania); it had three towns, but even these were small: the capital of the county, Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe, had 22 058 inhabitants. According to nationality, the distribution of the county was the following: 79.4% Hungarians, 19.3% Romanians, 0.2% Germans, and 1.1% other (Varga, 1998).

As a cultural centre, Sepsiszentgyörgy the capital of the county hardly existed before 1968. However after the new county came into being, this town presented several major advantages for ambitious people. Hopes were high that with the new organization there would be massive investments. Many Hungarians moved into the new county from Bucharest, Brassó(Braşov) and from the regions of Szilágyság(Sălaj) and Kolozsvár⁶, to assume positions in the administrative apparatus, in the new factories and the whole new range of cultural institutions that started their activity then. Thus the town's symbolic value increased enormously, even to the extent that at the beginning of the seventies one could hear the idea that Sepsiszentgyörgy should become the new Hungarian cultural centre in Transylvania, replacing Kolozsvár as it was argued, the majority of the population and the state officials in the latter were not Hungarians any more. Even though this idea was never actually realized, it was not completely without its base according to Lőrincz (2004): as a periphery even in Transylvanian terms, culturally the town had not only drawbacks, but advantages as well. First of all, the key positions in the party, police, secret police, local administration, as well as in economy were occupied by Hungarians, and even more importantly, they were generally

⁶ Interview with László Bogdán, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Márton Gajzágó, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

considered to be “of the better kind”, or at least turned a blind eye upon moderately articulated cultural issues.

The most prominent figure in this regard was the first party secretary of the county between 1968 and 1972, Károly Király.⁷ In his autobiography Király (1995) wrote about the personal relationship he developed with high ranking party leaders, including Ion Gheroghe Maurer and Ceaușescu himself; the latter was further aided by the dictator’s obsession with hunting. On more than one occasion, Király could push forward local initiatives and after having a good sport at a hunt in the game-rich forests of the Szeklerland, Ceaușescu was easier to persuade, all it took was to put up the largest prey at just the right moment.⁸ Thus between 1968 and 1972, supported by local elite and intellectuals, Király was able to personally (and successfully) plead for the support of Hungarian cultural matters and investments needed for economic projects in the county. Király’s 1972 “revolt” and his resignation from the function of first secretary was a specific mixture of political and nationality factors. Being one of the most active county secretaries, his political power, his popularity and his successful and spectacular community building efforts could have been perplexing for the party leadership, which began to stress centralization after 1971. Király considered himself a good communist, but he never denied the importance of him belonging to the Hungarian community and he used his positions in the political system to fulfill the function of a “minority patron”. He helped his people in various ways, e.g. with getting a car, a job, an apartment, medical treatment or a positive consideration of an emigration request etc. He also mastered the skill of presenting local cultural initiatives as embedded in the Party’s socialist progressive rhetoric, even if this meant a bit of stretching of the latter (the statues of Körösi Csoma Sándor and the Benedek Elek memorial house are just two examples of this).

⁷ Interview with László Bogdán, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy. Interview with Lajos Sylvester, 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy. Interview with Árpád Farkas, 01.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁸ For more on this see documentary film *Királyvadászat*, 2004.

Király operated within a framework of communism and nation-service, up until the moment when the power structure of the system made transit between these two discourses impossible, after which he got into trouble with the RCP leadership.⁹

With a lenient party secretary like Király, a relatively tolerant secret police, and without an already existing cultural interest group to impose allegiances, the town became an attractive place for intellectuals of many different professions and backgrounds, reversing the brain-drain formerly experienced by the community of Sepsiszentgyörgy. The newly constructed factories also drew a large number of technical intellectuals, who, added to the already numerous medical doctors (for many of them this town was a place of exile, as they moved there after having been driven out of the Hungarian Medical Faculty in Marosvásárhely and the educational staff of the new schools, formed the basis of the culture-supporter community of the town (as spectators and as sponsors in the case of an art auction organized by local artists to benefit the Hungarian theatre).¹⁰ Besides the new job opportunities, state built apartments and artists' studios were also mentioned in the interviews as important factors¹¹.

⁹ Interview with Sylvester, 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Interview with Levente Nemes, 17.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with László Bogdán, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with János Kerezi, 12.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Gyula Musát, 14.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Zsolt Szilágyi, 22.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹¹ Interview with Pálma Baász, 30.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Kerezi, 12.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

Implementing State-controlled Cultural Policy: Megyei Tükör and the Music Movement

It is hard to estimate based on the interviews, which new institution was the most influential when considering the ‘magnetic field’ of the town, as it is natural that the interviewees are biased towards their own profession. Nevertheless there are some central cultural institutions or movements where many lines converge: the newspaper, *Megyei Tükör*, the theater, the political activity of Károly Király, the state funded music movement and the work of an influential artist, called Baász Imre.

Megyei Tükör was the weekly paper of Kovászna County's RCP County Committee and of its temporary County Council. The chief editor was Sándor Dali, but the most famous members of the staff were young graduates of letters, who were colleagues, friends or at least acquaintances at the university in Kolozsvár. Some of them were already known as very talented writers and poets of their generation: Árpád Farkas, Lajos Magyar, László Csiki, Zoltán Czegő, Attila Vári, Péter Tömöry and László Bogdán.¹² The major topics were connected to provincial life: agriculture, rural schools, the problems encountered by young intellectuals when taking up their jobs in villages, the negligence of local authorities, the manners of people in public spaces, the economic situation of the county, and the quality of services. A whole range of articles aimed at the revival of history, the strengthening of a local, regional identity while the editors also revitalized the literary report as a genre. In general the articles were characterized by strong realism, and the refusal to avoid sensitive topics. Compared to the propagandistic „reports” of later years, the liberty they were granted in criticism is surprising (*Megyei Tükör Archives* 1968-1975). Of course, they also had to present party life, but such texts were usually written either by members of the party apparatus, they went unsigned or signed with a pseudonym which signaled to the public that

¹² Interview with Bogdán, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

the article was not really worth reading.¹³ Strengthening local and national consciousness was only one side of the coin. And while the image of the Szekler identity was idealized, in dealing with everyday matters the paper was quite critical: faceless, incompetently run institutions were not the only ones to blame for the quality of life, but the responsibility also laid with the ordinary citizen and his/her lack of proper manners. As it is obvious from these “lessons” directed at the reading public, the intellectual ideal of the editors was that of the traditional Eastern European intelligentsia, whose duty was to educate, maintain, and help the people.¹⁴ Therefore the relationship of the paper with its readers was seen as very important: readers were regularly asked to write short reports of events in their villages, or present their problems and in exchange the paper took it upon itself the task of mediating with the bureaucratic apparatus (Lőrincz, 2004). Even though the newspaper wrote mostly on local matters, its cultural column and its literary series entitled *Fórum*, had a reading public outside Kovászna county (some interviewees mentioned the newspaper as a decisive factor in their decision to move to Sepsiszentgyörgy as it communicated an image of a “freer land”).¹⁵

When talking about the newspaper, the question of the censorship cannot be bypassed. Authors of the *Tükör* remember the first few years of the paper as particularly liberal in this respect, as county level censors were usually people “with whom one could talk”, often on friendly terms with the editors (one of them actually gave stamped blank pages to the editorial staff and believed them on their word not to write anything ‘problematic’¹⁶) and even party officials were not provoking the journalists.¹⁷ Naturally this course of affairs changed by the end of the seventies, when the ideological constraints of the already mentioned July theses were put into practice and when the control of cultural matters was taken over by the

¹³ Interview with Sylvester, 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Gajzágó, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹⁴ Interview with Gajzágó, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹⁵ Interview with Nemes, 17.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹⁶ Interview with Kisss, 27.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹⁷ Interview with Sylvester, 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

dictator's wife Elena. Even though censorship officially ended in 1977, its duties were taken over by other party committees who outdid all previous censors in their enthusiasm and diligence. It is important to mention here the "pedlar's French" used by intellectuals, artists etc. with their public, the ability to write and read between the lines. Most interviewees who were active in that period mentioned this secret language, most of them in a positive sense, as a high level of attention between the sender and the receivers of the coded messages¹⁸; some remembered it in a more negative sense as being a way of expression hard to escape even after the system change, and one artist mentioned how too much pressure was put on their shoulders, as spectators looked for hidden meanings and political messages even where there was none, or at least not an intentional one. In these terms theatre was an important space of both state cultural policy and indoctrination and a space of the double meanings directed, indirectly, against the system. This function of the theatre as language sustaining and history teaching was noted by most of the interviewees, even if not valued with identical qualitative judgments. Historical plays and dramas written by Transylvanian Hungarian authors were central in the program and the Festival of Minority Theatres organized in the late seventies by the theatre was remembered by most of the interviewees as a significant cultural event.

This role of the arts was accentuated as the political and economic situation worsened; oppression pushed people together and even music concerts were frequented as a kind of "little invisible revolutions"¹⁹ and certain numbers of the concerts were applauded more, and not because of their professional quality (the program plans of the choirs had to be approved by the Propaganda Committee, but sometimes conductors smuggled in church music pieces or historical Hungarian songs by simply giving them a Party-friendly title).²⁰ On a national scale the socialist state was at the beginning highly supportive of musical education and Kovászna

¹⁸ Interview with Sylvester, 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Árpád Farkas, 01.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹⁹ Interview with Szilágyi, 22.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

²⁰ Ibid.

County took its share from this support: state funds were directed to furnish a whole series of brass bands with instruments, large scale choirs were made possible by making it compulsory for music teachers to attend some “extracurricular musical activity”²¹ and the national festival *Megéneklünk Románia/Cântarea României* (mostly referred to by my interviewees as “enjoying popular abomination”) organized by the Council of Socialist Culture and Education from 1976 on. It is interesting how this large scale, propaganda infused event was remembered by more than one of the interviewees as “not all that bad” in retrospect, as they provided a stage for amateur artists to present themselves and the tours that were parts of the national festival were an occasion for the professional performing artists to make connections and exchange their experiences.²²

Elements of Communicating Discourse: The Epistemology Group and Baász

Having taken a look at how some institutions and cultural policies affected the cultural life of the town, let us go back to McGuigan’s three discourses and how in reality they can never be found in pure form. Even though state controlled, heavily centralized cultural policies, *Stating*, was the most prominent discourse in socialist times, a large number of strategies emerged from the interviews, strategies by which the central policies were somehow custom-tailored, contested, diverted or outright denied. These strategies could be seen as the *Communicating* elements in a system otherwise defined by the *Stating* discourse. According to the definition of John Keane, civil society is a “community of actors whose legally inscribed patterns of association are voluntary, which means that its members are equipped with the power to interpret and transform the social and political structures within which they interact” (Keane quoted in McGuigan, 2004, p.51). Of course not all these characteristics could be discovered in the strategies used by the town’s cultural and party elite to negotiate an essentially state run cultural policy; nevertheless some of the local initiatives, groups and

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview with Musát, 14.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

actions fulfill important criteria of the *Communicating* discourse. In this respect the most significant recurring idea of the interviews was that even though on a state level funds were distributed amongst cultural institutions which by definition should have used these funds to realize the state vision of cultural indoctrination, in reality once these funds reached the county level administration, there was a space for negotiation. Most interviewees noted a high level of collaboration between local party officials with cultural actors even if the aims of these actors were not even close to orthodox socialist doctrine. The term “conspiracy” was yet another notion popping up throughout their narratives, e.g. two architect interviewees recollected the conscious stonewalling of county officials which prevented the implementation of the village demolition policy.²³ The recollections of the former director of the County Library revealed some other activities that were taking place “undercover” in the otherwise state funded institution: the compulsory reader-writer meetings already mentioned in the Introduction, and the activity of the *Electronics and Society Group*.²⁴ The existence of the latter was officially reported to the Propaganda Committee, so theoretically it was legal. Their actual activity however was better represented by the name they called themselves: *Epistemology Group*. The group/workshop started in 1985 and worked until 1988, with its main organizer being a young engineer Levente Salat. Members of the group were young intellectuals, mainly architects and teachers, drawn together by their shared interest in epistemology and in philosophical topics in general. The interviewed members of the group all mentioned that the formulation of some sort of social critique was their actual, not overly

²³ Interview with Kázmér Kovács, 06.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Aladár Zágoni, 18.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

²⁴ Interview with Kisss, 27.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

camouflaged aim.²⁵ The group produced an anthology of their papers and eventually it dissolved because some of its members were caught in other, ‘really’ illegal activities.²⁶

This working both within and outside of the system is also illustrated by the work of influential artist Imre Baász. He moved to Sepsiszentgyörgy in 1976, and lived and worked in the town for the rest of his life, which ended in an accident in 1991. From the many stories that kept pouring out from the interviewees about Baász, one is the story of one of his creations. This complex work was conceived and presented in 1981, for the county level exhibition celebrating the 60th anniversary of the RCP. There were two parts to it: an installation consisting of six white shirts stained with blood on a rack with handbills all around them. These handbills were of two types: copies and originals of old illegal Communist leaflets from the inter-war period and handbills made by Baász announcing the opening of the exhibition plus the set phrase of the inter-war handbills: "read and pass it on". The second part of the work was a performance, which consisted of Baász posting out the handbills on the eve of the exhibition. This might have gone unnoticed, but as he did it in a form that was associated with illegal activities - posting handbills after midnight with some friends-, the police immediately snapped at it. Baász and his friends were taken to the police and interrogated, but as the police found out that the handbills were in fact announcing an officially approved event, the artist and his friends were sent home, even more, next day they were presented with formal apologies. As Lőrincz (2004) notes, the handbills and their unusual distribution “lead to a mixing of periods of time, frames of reference, enemies, goals, values, etc., into a new unitary whole”(p.53). This story came up in a number of the interviews and its interpretations lead us to the last part of this chapter: the different answers to the why questions, in other words the positionality of Sepsiszentgyörgy intellectuals’ in

²⁵ Interview with József D. Lőrincz, 01.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Rozália Bakó, 27.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

²⁶ The Limes group was active between 1985 and 1987, its members were Hungarian intellectuals who met illegally to discuss matters of minority existence outside the framework of the RCP.

relation to the system. The widow of the artist saw this particular work as an attempt to hold a mirror to the political system by using its very own symbols and forms and by proving that these originally communist symbols were corrupted and even feared by the system.²⁷ Another friend of the artist, however, interpreted it as Baász's attempt to reintroduce himself in Party circles as a reliable man. He was unemployed at that time, and hoped that his remembrance of the illegalist communist tradition will make him popular among county officials who were his only hope to get a job.²⁸ Unfortunately the artist himself is no longer alive to tell his version of the story, yet these two interpretations, one that read the act as criticism against the system and one that read it as legitimizing, or even serving the system, bring us to the two 'threads' already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Who manipulated who? The ambivalent role of intellectuals

As Béla Bíró, one of my interviewees, said “there are two cultures in Sepsiszentgyörgy; one is the European oriented culture hallmarked by the experimental theatre of the town and the other is represented by the newspaper, the progeny of the *Megyei Tükör*, with its sometimes 19th century values”.²⁹ This dual culture, the schism that could be detected within the community of Sepsiszentgyörgy intellectuals is well illustrated by my own field experience, more specifically how I met the two “exponential” figures of the schism Bíró and Sylvester.

Lajos Sylvester (former cultural secretary of Kovászna county, former director of the Tamási Áron Theatre in Sepsiszentgyörgy and editor of *Megyei Tükör*, now a journalist of the local newspaper *Háromszék*) was the person most of my interviewees said I “must” talk to. We arranged a meeting at the Sugás restaurant, in the center of the town, and when I asked the waiter where I could find him, he almost looked offended that I didn't know where the table of the “szerkesztőúr” (mister editor) was. Sylvester was very helpful and happy that I chose

²⁷ Interview with Pálma Baász, 30.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

²⁸ Interview with Attila Kopac, 16.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

²⁹ Interview with Béla Bíró, 02.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

this topic and obviously took it as a compliment that I wanted to talk to him, and that despite the generational distance, I still found the “legacy” of the “sixty-eighters” interesting and meaningful. When asked about his days as the county level party official responsible for culture, he explained to me in detail the importance of the county forming and its “wonderful” first secretary Király, the strong educational tradition that existed in the county, the presence of large numbers of medical doctors and other ideas which later kept coming back throughout the interviews. He also mentioned the protecting force of publicity the newspaper could offer in times when there were “many powerful people who looked for ways to oppress Hungarian culture. They could not attack us openly because the news of our work reached other parts of Europe through the newspaper and the Ceaușescu regime was quite self-conscious about the West’s opinion”.³⁰ Sylvester also talked about the collaboration that was “close to being in cahoots with county level officials, especially in the beginning”, the importance of personal friendships between intellectuals and political figures, and that journalists were not provoked by county level party leaders because of the huge popularity of the newspaper. He explained the “cultural flourishing” of the town with its intellectuals’ capacity to “recognize their limits and work hard within those limits” and considered their work successful.³¹ His recollections resounded particularly well with what Stefano Bottoni (2005) and Lőrincz József (2004) have theorized as the identity crisis of intellectuals and ambivalent discourse respectively. According to these authors the “sixty-eighters” (Sylvester is a member of this generation of intellectuals who moved into Sepsiszentgyörgy around the formation of the new county in 1968) infused the duty towards their people with the usage of the ambivalent language already mentioned. They, or at least a large portion of them, became the perpetrators of state power and at the same time represented specifically minority issues, which were in many cases going against the policies of the RCP. This double role can be seen as a consequence of what

³⁰ Interview with Sylvester. 27.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

³¹ Ibid.

Stefano Bottoni called identity-crisis: in the early years of the communist regime in Romania, Hungarian intellectuals were on the one hand the fans, functionaries and beneficiaries of a system that tried to integrate them, but on the other hand because of their nationality they could never become truly organic parts of the state power and its nation-building efforts (Bottoni, 2005).

The role of these people remains a highly complex issue because taking the initially complacent nature of the early Ceaușescu period as a sign of willingness to solve the problems of the minorities, many of the sixty-eighters were ready to assure the party leadership of their loyalty, whenever this was needed, e.g. after the Prague intervention. One explanation for this is the one offered by Sylvester according to which the sixty-eighters recognized their boundaries and made use of whatever resources they had within those boundaries. Nevertheless another explanation of the town's cultural life became apparent from the interviews, according to which the roles, opportunities, careers and general feeling of "freedom" were in fact tools in the state's politics of assimilation. This line of explanation was most coherently stated by Béla Bíró (former journalist of the *Megyei Tükör*, now assistant professor at the University of Bucharest and the Sapientia Transylvanian Hungarian University). Here the story of how I contacted him is again quite telling in terms of who is and who is not a visible intellectual in the town. First the general confusion with the names: there are at least six people by this name in Sepsiszentgyörgy, one of them the director of an important school of the town, so when inquiring about Bíró, I always had to make sure we were talking about the same person. Second, after weeks of futile phone calls and e-mails, I got a map, found the little street he was said to live in and went on a quest. I found his house on the unpaved street in the gipsy quarter of the town, and after inquiries from neighbors, many of whom had no idea whom I was looking for, I finally found him. Generally, it seemed like he is totally invisible in the town even though as it turned out, he is a sought after scholar,

university professor and a prolific writer. Bíró explained his seclusion with the essential differences of opinion between himself and the “more visible” intellectuals of the town concerning the interpretation of their own roles and duties. He argued that the socialist state’s cultural policy after 1968 and its local implementation were parts of a larger scale nationality politics of the Ceaușescu regime which ultimately aimed at the assimilation of the Hungarian minority: “the successes we had here in Kovászna county had their prices elsewhere. Just when culture was booming here, other traditional Hungarian cultural centers in Transylvania have experienced massive oppression and ethnic colonization.”³² Bíró considered those intellectuals tragicomic who were integrated “into the system”, as their lining up behind the party flag communicated internal unity and stability to the international political scene, which was Ceaușescu’s main goal with his initially lenient minority politics. He considered that even the sometimes nationalistic undertones (which were mostly presented in the double-speak already mentioned) of the Szeklerland’s cultural activities, were in fact tolerated by the RCP only to justify their brutal repression of the rest of the Hungarian minority on charges of chauvinism.

In fact there were a number of facts remembered by other interviewees, which would make sense or at least raise some interesting questions when examined within this framework. First the issue of the lenient censor who gave the pre-stamped sheets of paper to the newspaper: his friendship with the newspaper editors was not a secret. Why was he chosen to be their censor if even with a little bit of logic, one could guess that he will not fulfill his duties to the fullest, turning a blind eye to not obviously worded anti-system messages? There was also the recurring explanation that the secret police and Propaganda Committee was in many cases so stupid that they could not see the meaning between the lines³³, which was again problematized in more than one story during the interviews. For example when Levente

³² Interview with Bíró, 02.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

³³ Interview with Pálma Baász, 30.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy; Interview with Farkas, 01.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

Nemes, an actor of the local theatre company asked for a passport to go to Wien for a poetry festival, the director of the local secret police told him “be careful how you recite those poems, because a poem could be recited in many different ways and not all of them are good”.³⁴ Márton Gajzágó, yet another journalist of the *Tükör* also said that “we were left to believe that we had some control over things here, but in fact we just did what we were left to do”.³⁵ Both stories prove that in fact neither the secret nor the public arms of the state apparatus were totally unaware of the double talk that was going on but let it go for some reason. The reason, according to Király (as stated in his portrait-movie, *Királyvadászat*) was that the Party used Kovászna county as a display window for the West to look at, proving for the international public opinion that Romania in fact was not oppressing her minorities (the experience of my interviewees regarding the relative easy granting of passports in this county could be seen as a proof of this point).³⁶

At the same time if we apply Halbwach’s arguments about social memory as a filter of past events that tends to preserve only those images that support the group’s present sense of identity, both discourses seem to legitimize the very different identities these people have assumed. The fact that some intellectuals are more visible, their role more readily reconstructed by the community proves the point of Connerton (1989): the control of social memory of a group legitimizes the present state of power relations. By favouring certain figures and certain explanations of the role of these figures, a political act of self-definition is done: the community can see itself as having endured an oppressive system and even managed to outplay the system at its own game.

The legacy of socialist cultural policy has thus created an ambivalence not only by forcing intellectuals to use a mode of expression loaded with secondary meanings, but also by

³⁴ Interview with Nemes, 17.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

³⁵ Interview with Gajzágó, 13.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

³⁶ Interview with Kovács, 06.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

making the role of Kovászna county and its intellectuals open to interpretation. As we shall see in the following chapter, the schism regarding the role of the intellectuals and their recognition of their roles, was not the only fragmentary consequence of socialist policies.

Chapter Two: The trials of the new discourses

Problems of Transition

1989 meant a radical change for all aspects of cultural policy in Romania. With the regime change there came not only a new form of government and new policies, but the change was felt by actors in the cultural field on a general ideological level. State control of cultural life was significantly reduced, although in the early years of democratic rule some of the centralized state-financing system of culture remained in place.

The progress of cultural policies after the regime change cannot be fully understood without taking into account the mutation process in collective mentalities in general: in contrast to the state mismanagement and negative control of the whole system and political behaviour before 1989, the 1990s presented a tumultuous and sometimes incoherent succession of trends. National level state institutions which had previously exercised significant control over cultural life either ceased to exist or lost their control gradually: the Propaganda Secretariat of the Communist Party Central Committee and the National Council of Socialist Education and Culture were dissolved, state censoring of cultural production was ceased (although formally it ended in the 1970s, its function was carried out by the Central Party Committee until 1989), while the Inspectorate of Culture remained in place but became a non-functional institution of the state. The famed Securitate was also dissolved and the relaxation of the stiffening grip of the dictatorial system released a tide of creative and entrepreneurial energies into the cultural field. However, contradictory inspirations, the resistance of old structures and the lack of political backup, coupled with the gradual devaluation of culture's rank in the national budgetary system reduced the steady pace of change.

When interviewing the intellectuals of Sepsiszentgyörgy, in almost all cases complaint and criticism of the current situation emerged right away: the problems of cultural life of the town were discussed at length by most of the interviewees, with some of them actually offering their suggestions for amelioration. This chapter will present their discourse regarding the cultural scene and its problems after 1990, using McGuigan's three discourses of cultural policy as an organizational tool. Naturally most problems discussed by the cultural elite of the town are parts of a complex process of transition between two different social systems; nevertheless, discussing them in terms of the three discourses sheds some light on the possible solutions and opens up the space for a constructive debate.

As the country stepped into the era of democracy, most of the directors of cultural institutions were replaced due either to their political activities in the previous regime or to the simple fact that many of them left the town or the country altogether. The exodus of intellectuals had been going on even before the regime change, but with the opening of the borders, it gained a tremendous momentum and Sepsiszentgyörgy was seriously hit by its consequences. The breaking up of intellectual communities was mentioned as a problem by almost all the interviewees, yet most of them thought it was a natural process after being bound so closely together by state oppression. The decryption of artistic and public language that was so longed for during communist times also posed a serious challenge for many intellectuals. As Jenő Kiss put it “some of us made ourselves ridiculous by still looking for the secret police. It was similar to learning a new language and many artists felt they have lost their contact with the public because there was no weight to what they wanted to say anymore.”³⁷

³⁷ Interview by the author with Jenő Kiss. 27.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy. For more on the subject see *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*, by Andrew Wachtel.

However, it seemed from the interviews that there were actually people who would listen, at least at the beginning of the 1990s: in the case of Sepsiszentgyörgy the creative energies that were built up during the previous decades resulted in a remarkable proliferation of civil cultural initiatives, festivals, societies, clubs etc. Some examples are: the Médium exhibitions organized with great success by Baász, the AnnArt performance-festival, and the Concordia Amateur Theater Festival organized by the Jádzó Association. Besides these new initiatives some of the already existing institutions, groups and movements have managed to accommodate the new trends and gained strength from the new circumstances. The choir movement, for example, has been steadily growing - if not in numbers then in quality-, since 1990³⁸; the county newspaper managed to keep most of its readers, and last but not least the movement led by the towns' Tamási Áron Theatre has also managed to revitalize the institution of the theatre. The basic problems discussed in the interviews are shared by most of Sepsiszentgyörgy's cultural elite but in order to have a closer look at these problems the following sections will deal with three of them as they relate to the three discourses of cultural policy and illustrating each problem with one or two cases from the above mentioned initiatives and institutions.

From Spectators to Consumers, the case of the Tamási Áron theatre

1968 was a turning point in the history of the then twenty year old theatre, as the company began a qualitative regeneration in the lively intellectual atmosphere of the new county capital. During the management of Anna Dukász (1968-1973) and Lajos Sylvester (1973-1985) both the repertoire and the standards of the productions were characterized by consistency and careful consideration. In the relatively free initial years of the Ceausescu regime, the Theatre Directorate responsible for the endorsement of the programme schedule, gave permission for the production of numerous plays by Hungarian playwrights and even

³⁸ Interview by the *author* with Zsolt Szilágyi. 22.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

ones by so called "capitalist" playwrights. Another remarkable event in the history of the theatre was the Festival of Ethnic Theatres, with the participation of Hungarian, German and Yiddish companies from Romania. This festival was very popular with the local public (almost all interviewees mentioned it as an important cultural event of the socialist times), given the theatre's role in the preservation of the ethnical-cultural identity of the community. However the festival's digression from the state rhetoric of the unitary socialist nation sealed its fate. From 1984 the theatre was officially declared financially self-supporting, which forced the company to consider material gain over artistic quality and gradually the theatre approached its self-liquidation.

The political changes of the 1990s brought new possibilities for the theatre, once free from state censorship and other non-theatrical restrictions. Nevertheless questions of vision, style and form, content, quality and responsibility needed to be answered both through the performances, but also regarding the role of the company within the community of the town. The turning point came in 1995, when, responding the call of the then director Levente Nemes, eight actors of the *Figura Studio* and their director-manager László Bocsárdi from Gyergyószentmiklos/Gheorgheni, became part of the theatre. Even though the fusion was initially not met with unfettered excitement by municipality officials, spectators or the actors themselves, it proved to be the defining event for the theatre. As Bocsárdi has stated in numerous interviews³⁹, he saw the mission of the company is transcending its sociological function as language- and national identity-preserver and connecting the Sepsiszentgyörgy theatre's repertoire, language, style, techniques and messages into the circuit of international artistic life. The aim was to regard the audience of the provincial town as no less worthy of contemporary, experimental productions than people who are fortunate enough to live in big

³⁹ e.g. *Nem szabad megalkudni/ We cannot compromise, Interview with László Bocsárdi. 12.04.2007.*

cities.⁴⁰ The plays directed by Bocsárdi and Olga Barabás have in fact managed to raise the company to the forefront of theatrical life of Romania and Hungary. In 2009 the theatre organized the first edition of the Reflex International Theatre Biennale; the festival's impressive international program presented important contemporary performances from Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania, and also hosted the Berlin Deutsches Theater's first ever guest performance in Romania.

Because of its experimental style and outstanding cast, which won the theatre numerous national and international prizes, the company became the catalyzer for a whole theatre movement in Sepsiszentgyörgy: the town of about sixty thousand now has three independent professional theatrical companies and a thriving amateur and student theatre life.

⁴¹ This ingredient of the cultural life of the town and its overwhelmingly positive appreciation was the most obvious common denominator of the interviews. Practically all of them mentioned it as a positive example when asked about the viable cultural initiatives in Sepsiszentgyörgy.

Even though the theatre is regarded by most of the intellectuals interviewed in a very positive way, it is also a representative example of one of the greatest problems facing the cultural life of the town. These problems are posed by the introduction of the *Marketizing* discourse into the field of cultural policies. In the interview conducted with Bocsárdi (now the director of the company), several cast members and the financial director of the theatre, a relatively coherent narrative emerged. At the time of the interviews Attila Pál, the financial director of the theatre was quitting his job because he claimed the work of the company was made impossible by the “technocratic language”, as Bocsárdi called it, of the Local Council of

⁴⁰ Interview by the author with László Bocsárdi. 02.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁴¹ The Tamási Áron Theatre, The Andrei Mureșeanu Theatre and the M-Studio Motion-Theatre are the professional companies. The Osonó Student Theatre had many national and international successes.

Sepsiszentgyörgy, which is the main supporting administrative authority of the company. As Pál put it:

We were never on more friendly terms with any of the past town administrations than with this present one, these guys are professionals. It is fashionable to understand theatre in Sepsiszentgyörgy so politicians all come to pose in the theatre, but when it comes to finances, they just use a business language that is simply not working if we talk about an art theatre. We are not a comedy or musical theatre, we don't simply entertain the spectators. And this kind of theatre deserves a special consideration in financial decisions, you cannot translate its artistic value into numbers.⁴²

As it is apparent from this quote, McGuigan's argument referring to the Marketizing discourse of cultural policy, according to which "public subsidy today has been tagged to the willingness and capacity of arts and cultural organizations to attract private funding and to having a properly worked-out business plan" (p.45) is really relevant in this case. The city council was running a general financial and administrative check of the theatre at the time of the interviews, with the aim to make the institution "more effective".

As mentioned earlier, the main supporter of the theater is the city council. Regarding the council's discourse about cultural financing (which includes that of the theatre) a telling statement came up in the interview with the head of the council's cultural board. When asked whether the board members, who are actually the decision makers in terms of financing cultural initiatives of the town, do consult professionals when deciding about the amounts and the division of the cultural budget, the otherwise very helpful and eloquent lady looked at me very surprised and replied "well no, of course we do not interfere in professional matters. These organizations and institutions do as they wish; we are not censoring them in their professional work. We just deal with the money."⁴³ This "dealing with the money" however is seen in a different light by Pál, who did not complain that there is not enough of it, but that the council makes illogical decisions about the budget of the theatre:

⁴² Interview by the author with Attila Pál. 02.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁴³ Interview by the author with Irma Kerestély, 29.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

They require the company to have more revenue, but do not take into consideration that our main source of income is not ticket sales, but successful professional tenders. If the company changes its programme to attract mass audiences, ticket sales might go up, but they will not compensate for the loss the company would have on professional tenders, which explicitly require an artistic quality and vision, not an entertainment profile...the council does not even realize the damage they are doing to the town if they don't support this theatre.⁴⁴

The fact that this market discourse is implemented by a political body (even the cultural board of the council is elected according to party affiliations and not professional background), brings us to the next problem that kept recurring throughout the interviews: the heavy interference of local political bodies in cultural life. This can be seen as a continuation of the *Stating* discourse, nevertheless not a centralized one as most state authority over cultural matters has been delegated to local administrative bodies. According to many of the interviewees the problem is precisely that the decision makers are too close to their own decisions as there are no professional bodies to mediate between the institutions and the politicians who decide on questions of cultural budget.⁴⁵

Stating discourse made local, the case of the Concordia Festival and the szekler gates

In both *Stating* and *Marketizing* discourse, the question of returns is central: the discourses of state and market, in effect “treat culture instrumentally, to make it, for example a means of simply embellishing the nation state, or by reducing all value to exchange value by applying market principles to everything in cultural economy” (McGuigan, 1999). Sponsorship therefore is never innocent or disinterested: it is done for purposes of advertising, public relations or legitimization. This is when the proximity of the decision making bodies and the institutions affected by those decisions becomes a problem: local authorities want a quick popularity return but the lack of a longer term vision for Sepsiszentgyörgy makes any attempt at making the town a cultural center or even sustaining its present cultural level becomes

⁴⁴ Interview by the author with Attila Pál. 02.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁴⁵ Interview by the author with Gyula Musát., 14.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

problematic. The case of the Concordia Festival illustrates this problem well. Initiated by the Jászó Association of Non-Professional Hungarian Theatre Companies of Romania, the national festival was organized to offer a stage, a meeting point and workshops in directing and drama for amateur companies. The festival and the workshops started in 1990 and went on for nine years, with relatively large audiences of 100-150 people per show.⁴⁶ As one of the main organizers, Gyula Musát recalls, the problems started when the cultural finances were delegated to the county administration: “it was better when we belonged to Bucharest because we had our people there and we could lobby for money. For the county these kind of things were not that important any more because they were national level events”.⁴⁷ Using almost the same words, Attila Kopac, the director of the Árkosi Művelődési Központ⁴⁸ lamented that the town can never become a center of cultural life if the county politicians only want to finance local initiatives: “they say why give royalties to a foreign musician who holds a workshop here? We have our own artists, let them do it, they will do it for less and this will make us more popular and get us a couple of votes.”⁴⁹

The danger of this kind of short-term political thinking was mentioned by many other interviewees as well. The idea that the “closing in of the cultural commons of the town” is further accentuated by the council’s preference to support only those local initiatives that are, to use local journalist Árpád Farkas’ words, “superficial trademarks of our culture...politicians piggy back these events but then do not care to invest in the deeper levels, the meanings and heritage that is behind these signs”.⁵⁰ To illustrate his point Farkas used the example of the fashion of erecting huge székler gates everywhere possible. These are traditional wood-carved gates embellished with carved flowers, pigeon holes and a blessing on the household they

⁴⁶ Interview by the *author* with Gyula Musát. 14.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The Cultural Center of Árkos, a village near the town, organizing events that attract audiences from Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁴⁹ Interview by the *author* with Attila Kopac. 16.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁵⁰ Interview by the *author* with Árpád Farkas. 01.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

protect. In the past decades it has become a fashion mainly, but not only, in Szeklerland to erect them at the entrance of villages and towns or other important places like central squares and memorials. These gates are usually bigger than the original ones and in the past few months there have been cases when they have collapsed because of heavy winds. As Farkas put it “we erect these oversized gates everywhere and then they just stand in the middle of fields and squares and we do not even know whether we go in or come out through them. But the knowledge behind them is not passed down to our kids, they have no idea of the symbols on the gate or how big it should be. No wonder they fall down.”⁵¹

How come county administration has acquired this very negative image in a town where culture is most probably the only comparative advantage? How is it that they not realize the possibilities and energies present in the town? Why do they seem to work against the good of the town? Of course the picture is more complex than simply blaming politicians for everything however appealing this option seems. Institutions and civil initiatives share the responsibility in the current state of affairs by not putting in enough effort in the fields where they should exhibit their strength: communication and private initiatives.

Communication and Civil Society: coordination and volunteering gone astray

After 1990 the Inspectorate of Culture, the institution previously responsible for overseeing cultural activities, gradually lost its function of a coordinating center. The inspectorate’s first director right after the regime change was Mihály János, who remembers the initial years of his activities in this function the following way:

Right after the regime change there was such a tremendous need for organizations, events, associations in the cultural field that I decided to assist as many of them as it was possible. With the bad memories of state controlled days I did not inspect them regularly and figured professionalism will eventually shine through the worthy initiatives. The Inspectorate tried to support every initiative, without selection. In retrospect, I see we might have been wrong in doing so, but in those days enthusiasm was just too great... I was right in that the survival of the fittest

⁵¹ Interview by the *author* with Árpád Farkas. 01.05.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

idea worked, or in this case the survival of the highest quality professional work...but the Inspectorate lost its role as coordinator and there has't been such an institution ever since, which is a problem.⁵²

The lack of coordination and communication between the actors of the cultural scene was mentioned by many of the interviewees. According to Kopac most of the directors of cultural institutions fear dictatorship whenever somebody wants to convince them to coordinate their projects with each other. "This was planted in us during socialism and it needs a lot of work to get rid of these fears...this is a small town, if the programs overlap none of them will have a proper audience, so it is in our interest to coordinate them and to trust each other".⁵³

The lack of trust is also connected to yet another problem of the civil initiatives: the lack of leaders, which was explained by the interviewees in many different ways. The most obvious explanation was the already mentioned exodus of intellectuals, but two other explanations also came up. The first one was: if somebody tries to assume a leading position, others will suspect either some hidden personal motivation or simply fear their position and therefore they also fear competition, as argued by Pálma Baász and Kopac. The second explanation, mentioned by Musát, was that people eventually get tired of volunteering for culture. Probably the best example for this burning out of organizers is the AnnART performance art festival. Started by Baász in 1990 and continued by Gusztáv Ütő for ten years, the festival had grown from a one-day long performance-series into an international event that placed the artists of Sepsiszentgyörgy on the world-map of performance-art (not just as cultivators of the genre, but as organizers as well). As Ütő recalls „it is not a secret that our families suffered the cost of our volunteer activities...the initial energy and faith of the organizers couldn't have lasted forever...even so the festival accomplished a lot of things, but

⁵² Interview by the *author* with Mihály János. 28.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁵³ Interview by the *author* with Attila Kopac. 16.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

the burden was too heavy and on too few shoulders.”⁵⁴ Connected to this is the idea, mentioned by Bocsárdi and Musát, that politicians take cultural work for granted and do not want to spend money on it if there are volunteers who are willing to do the job. This problem however was not only mentioned in connection to the politicians, but as a problem of the civil society of the town: the lack of cooperation and the lack of young generations’ participation sealed the fate of many initiatives.

Positive examples and Suggestions for Improvement

At the same time there are movements and organizations which managed to involve members of the rising generation in their activities, both in terms of leaders and participants. The leadership of the Saint George Jazz Club, founded by Gyula Musát, for example, was passed on to one of the club’s enthusiastic young members, Endre Prezsmer who continues to manage the club with success, organizing numerous national and international sessions. Another success story is the progress of the choir movement in Sepsiszentgyörgy. Most of the large scale choirs of the socialist era stopped their activity after 1989 because they were mostly forced-membership groups. Yet the most successful choir of the town, the Vox Humana - founded in 1972 and conducted by opera singer Zsolt Szilágyi- continued its activity with renewed strength. Vox Humana experienced a serious challenge in 1992 when a significant number of its members decided to form their own choir under the name Pro Musica, conducted by music teacher Zoltán Sipos. Despite their obvious initial tensions the two choirs have managed to develop a healthy atmosphere of competition and today both of them continue their work. Their local and international success contributes to a large extent to the proliferation of choirs in Sepsiszentgyörgy. This positive example of cooperation brings us to the solutions to the problems of cultural life in Sepsiszentgyörgy as theorized by my interviewees. It was reassuring to hear them offer these suggestions after the outpouring of

⁵⁴ Interview by the *author* with Gusztáv Útő. 29.03.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

complaints, showing that there still are creative energies in the town which could be activated for the improvement of the town's cultural life.

The work of groups such as the choirs was seen by many of the interviewees (Kovács, Szilágyi, Sipos, Kerecsi, Musát, Kató) as important in „anchoring” young people in the town; they considered that the exodus of youth can only be halted by strong local communities where people can feel their participation is meaningful. This idea of anchoring as a cultural revitalizing force was further developed by Lőrincz, who argued: „the home-building program by itself is not going to attract young intellectuals to settle here after their studies.”⁵⁵ This colonization has to serve some vision, young people need goals to work for and a challenging intellectual atmosphere. Giving them a house is not enough.”⁵⁶ Lőrincz was in fact one of the local experts (social scientists, historians, journalists etc.) who were asked by the council in 2008 about their suggestion how to revitalize cultural life in the town. Their proposal was that with the settling of approximately a dozen of intellectuals from the same generation an *core* should be formed in Sepsiszentgyörgy and then around this core more young people will gather. This process should also be supported by the council initiating an „intellectual-in-residence” program, a shorter term scholarship that would allow scholars, artists, actors, writers etc. to spend some creative time in the town, adding to its intellectual appeal. The idea was listened to and appreciated by town officials, but so far no apparent advances were made regarding its implementation.⁵⁷ These suggestions are apparently updating the formulae of the bygone era, namely the plantation of intellectuals. Still, the concept has to be updated, says Lőrincz: „the administration has to be very precise in determining the tasks and the revards.

⁵⁵ The Gyere Haza/Come Home Program initiated by the City Council of Sepsiszentgyörgy in 2009 is a housing project designed for young people with a university education, involving free of charge land and a long-term loan for home-building.

⁵⁶ Interview by the *author* with József D. Lőrincz. 01.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

What this county could offer in 1968 was similar to a job abroad...in those times this place was like a different country, but there is not much left of that magnetic force today.”⁵⁸

The success of these kinds of revitalizing plans, according to many interviewees, would depend on the laying down of a coherent vision for the town. The urgent need for a plan in social, cultural, economic matters was the most striking similarity of the interviews. Each and every one of them mentioned the idea and although they used different words, such as plan, vision, policy, principle etc., the basic idea remained that the numerous cultural initiatives of the town need some kind of coordination and a long term goal; the sudden freedom that came after the suffocating control of the socialist regime found people very enthusiastic, with lots of ideas and energy, but initiatives took individual paths and in so doing, the community building force of cultural life in Sepsiszentgyörgy was fragmented and weakened. Due to the lack of cooperation civil society cannot function as a mediator between state control and the profit demanding market discourse which is slowly taking over the cultural field.

There was one other aspect that also needs to be addressed according to many of the intellectuals of Sepsiszentgyörgy. This one is again closely related to civil society as a space for rational debate: the concept of constructive criticism. Kopac, Bocsárdi, Bíró, Kiss, Pálma Baász all mentioned the need for criticism and professional selection as essential for the survival of the town as a cultural space that can offer something beyond mere self-reassurment. To use Kopac's words:

The audience here claps for everything, and when I ask journalists, why they don't criticise poor productions, they say they can't be too harsh, this is all we have and we have to protect it. This is ridiculous. It is the worst we can do to our artists, we are making them handicapped if we do not criticise their work.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Interview by the *author* with Attila Kopac. 16.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

Kiss explained this inward turning of the cultural community of Sepsiszentgyörgy by arguing that as a minority, Hungarians are always haunted by the idea of their extinction so they take a defensive stand. „This often means applauding our own kind even if our own kind does not deserve it and secluding ourselves away from the larger flows of cultural life in the country.”⁶⁰ Thus the legacy of socialism and its nationality politics lingers on: the intellectuals who have been interviewed during the research have all mentioned this seclusion by fear of assimilation as a basic problem, which presents a danger to Sepsiszentgyörgy. Mihály Vargha, the director of the Szekler National Museum, saw the future in opening up towards the Romanian community, because, „whether we like it or not, we live here together and we have to make the most of it, if for nothing else, than for our own sake”.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Interview by the *author* with Jenő Kiss. 27.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

⁶¹ Interview by the *author* with Mihály Vargha. 12.04.2010. Sepsiszentgyörgy.

Conclusions

In an attempt to answer questions related to the legacy of socialist cultural policy, this thesis analyzed the case of Sepsiszentgyörgy. Even though the town is an improbable location for a cultural centre, as we have seen, socialist state policies have made this place a particular case, where creative energies came together and formed an interesting conglomerate. The core material for the thesis was a series of interviews conducted with intellectuals of Sepsiszentgyörgy and the way the town deals with its legacy was presented through their discourse. These discourses were analyzed combining a loose chronological line with a theoretical one based on Jim McGuigan's (2004) distinction of three discourses of cultural policy: *Stating*, *Marketizing* and *Civil/Communicative*. I argued that the discourses of the interviewees are far from unitary and the schism between the intellectuals of the town, as evidenced by their recollections of the socialist era, informs their current positionality in the cultural field of the town. Even though socialist cultural policy created an agglomeration of creative energies in Sepsiszentgyörgy, some basic practices and discourses naturalized by that system now pose serious problems to the survival of the town as a cultural space. These practices and discourses are now completed by the forces of the market economy rhetoric and mediated, with differing success, by civil society. Therefore the problems do not originate solely from socialist policies, yet one of the biggest problems of Sepsiszentgyörgy today is its seclusion by fear of assimilation, a fear that was implanted into the community during communism by the RCP's nationality politics. This closing in of the cultural space is further aided by market rhetoric and local political struggles. Nevertheless almost all interviewees had some propositions on how the cultural life of Sepsiszentgyörgy could be revitalized, a proof in itself that the creative forces of the town are not yet extinct. The project of creating the town as a cultural centre was to this extent a self-fulfilling prophecy, yet the ghettoization of the cultural terrain needs to be addressed by political decision makers and intellectuals alike, in order for the bitter-sweet fruit of socialist policy not to be wasted.

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