Identitás és kultúra a török hódoltság korában
[Identity and Culture in the Age of Ottoman Rule in Hungary].

The meeting of the Renaissance-Baroque Research Group of the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences held in Esztergom in 2008 addressed the subject of “Identity and culture in the age of the Turkish occupation.” The topic of the conference could hardly be more current. Over the course of the past several decades an array of sources has become available in Hungarian (one thinks for instance of the autobiographic account of Georgius de Hungaria or the narrative of the life of Osman Aga of Temesvár), both of which greatly enriched our understanding of the perceptions of Christian communities among Muslims and Muslim communities among Christians, and also provided further impetus for a more nuanced grasp of the motivations of the Other.

Several of the essays point out the contradictions in parallel historical narratives, noting also that the one-sided and monolingual (or in some cases bilingual) narrative traditions (first and foremost Latin and Hungarian) of the period of Ottoman and Hungarian coexistence offer only a limited grasp of the cultural and social events of the era. The legendries of literary history always note Bálint Balassi’s (1554–1594) extensive knowledge of languages, and as this volume of essays also makes clear, six or seven languages were spoken in Buda at the time, where there was a constant dialogue at different levels between the various interpretive communities. This multilingualism is a feature of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Hungary that could be considered unique on a wider scale. It would be difficult to think of a European literary tradition in the seventeenth century in which an author would have been able to fashion a topical parallel of Lucan’s famous aphorism (Coelo tegitur qui non habet urnam) in Turkish without simply aiming to create the impression of something exotic among his readership, but in his prose treatise, the Virtuous Captain (Vitéz Hadnagy) the Hungarian author Miklós Zrínyi (1620–1664) does this: „Ja deulet basuma, ia güzgün desüm“. The contemporary reader of his famous epic poem, the Siege of Sziget (Szigeti veszédelem, 1651) not only would have known the

meaning of “hamalia” (amulet) or “csingia” (Turkish stringed instrument), but also would have had enough knowledge of Islamic legends to understand why the confession of prophet Ali was so important and why “zöldfikár” (Zulfiqar, the never-dulling sword of Muhammad) was turned to dust by the mercy of God (Szigeti veszedelem 14, 66). And when Miklós Bethlen contemplates the existence of nothingness in his autobiography, which is an entirely apolitical, theoretical-linguistic problem, he considers the question, “what is the essence of nothing,” not only in Latin, German and Hungarian, but also in Turkish. This broad acceptance of Ottoman culture, an acceptance illustrated by the ability to append a relevant citation in Turkish to an idea expressed in Latin or Italian (whether scholastic or epical), created a unique opportunity for mutual influences to develop between the languages and the cultures.

The most important new aspect of the book is related to this: in this polyglot, culturally complex world one finds an array of collective and individual identities more diverse than anything Hungarian or even international scholarship has dealt with before. Among the essays that present collective identities, the contribution by Pál Fodor on changes in Ottoman-Turkish identities from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth is particularly worth mention. Relying primarily on historical sources, Fodor examines how the Osmanli identity came into being (and in how many languages), how it drew on eastern and western (“rumi,” Roman) sources, and how a historical past was fashioned, including the genealogy of the elite and a distinctive notion of historical mission. Historiographical sources are perhaps more suitable than all other kinds of sources in the study of processes of identity formation and self-definition because the historiography itself constitutes a deliberate reflection. Writers of history know that they are writing the past for posterity, and so they deliberately strive to recreate the tradition. In the Christian world one finds an example of this deliberate formation of tradition in the writings of the Humanists. The only essay in the volume to address this context is the contribution by Gergely Tóth, who examines the role played by the humanist Máté Bél in the formation of the piarist Humanist image of the patria in opposition to the Turks, who were seen as barbaric and perfidious, but also rich with exoticisms. This parallel between the Christian and Ottoman historiographical narratives (specifically, the intention to create a tradition) and the similarities in the tools that were employed in the service of this goal (fictive genealogies, religious sense of mission) indicate the importance of adopting a comparative perspective in the study of the formation of the image of the Turk in Hungarian humanist historiography in the period from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth.

190
A history of the formation of the collective identity of people or nations is a highly important field of research, of course, but so is the study of smaller regional communities in cases when narrative sources offer little insight into the meaning of collective identity. Éva Sz. Simon’s essay offers an excellent example of this. Simon examines the demographical history of the villages of Zala on the basis of Turkish and Christian assessments of taxes, comparing them with personal renderings of accounts, which yield glimpses of individual fates. Of course in these cases one cannot avoid the methodological question: to what extent can one venture generalizations about a community on the basis of an individual identity that can be relatively clearly reconstructed or a clearly discernible personal motive. The concurrence of the conclusions based on statistics and the accounts of individual fates, however, quells this doubt.

From the perspective of questions involving collective identity, the migrants that Zsombor Tóth has made the focus of his inquiry constitute an unusual case. Drawing on anthropological descriptions, Tóth characterizes these migrants as members of a community with “liminal group consciousness.” This liminality is characteristic of a common identity temporarily sustained by common interest, a common past, and common faith, an identity for which the acceptance of martyrdom was an important element among the exiles of Nicomedia. One of the important insights of the essay is that, alongside the acceptance of martyrdom, the maintenance of the community is only legitimized if the political and social status quo of the last minute before the moment of exile is preserved.

At the same time, one cannot neglect the fact that individual identity is always far more malleable than group identity and influenced by far more dynamic motivations than the identity consciousness of an entire ethnic group. This is indicated by the diversity of the essays on individual identities in the volume. Gabriella Erdélyi persuasively shows that marriage constituted the most important fixed point (particularly for women) in the personal system of values during the sixteenth-century anti-Turkish wars, even more important than religious identity. Pál Ács analyzes the formation of poet Pál Esterházy’s identity (a process that spanned his entire life) from his early poem, the *Egy csudálatos ének* (“A miraculous song”) and to his equestrian statue and stuffed crocodile that were put up at the end of his life. The case of Pál Esterházy was also unusual because (as one learns from Ács’ essay) his self-representation, which was defined and even dictated by political circumstances, was as restrained at the end of his career (when the theater, as it were, of his gesture of identity formation, the erection of an equestrian statue inside his castle, remained an internal space) as it was at
the beginning, when he wrote a collection of poems intended only for a private reading. Zsuzsanna J. Újváry puts Miklós Esterházy's 1641 gesture of political self-representation in context using new archival sources. The very fact that the sources on which she draws are still in manuscript form aptly demonstrates that the border between public and private construction of identity in seventeenth-century Hungary is not at all self-evident.

The existence of two such divergent political and ideological systems in the Ottoman (Muslim) and Hungarian (Christian) worlds, worlds that coexisted and at the same time were in constant battle with each other, created a need for mediators. Gábor Kármán’s essay introduces the reader to Jakab Harsányi Nagy, a translator for the Sublime Porte and the author of a Latin-Turkish language book. Péter Méhes writes about András Gálffy, Ádám Batthyány’s spy in the town of Kiskomárom. Klára Jakó examines the role that the provinces of Moldova and Wallachia played as mediators between Transylvania and the Porte. She has assembled remarkably interesting data regarding the ways in which Latin and Hungarian were used as languages of diplomacy in fundamentally Orthodox regions where the Cyrillic alphabet prevailed. Coexistence also created opportunities for relationships to develop between the languages and the literary traditions. Imola Küllős and Ágnes Drosztmér examine common features among folk ballads from various literary traditions. Vilmos Voigt articulates again the fundamental principles of the study of related Hungarian and Turkish melodies. It is particularly interesting when, in the course of cross-cultural mediation, one community appropriates a symbol seen by the members of the other community as peculiar to their culture. István Csörsz Rumen offers an example of this in the case of a musical instrument, the Turkish pipe. In the nineteenth century the Turkish pipe, which during the period of occupation had been considered foreign, became an element of the national-romantic self-representation of the Hungarian nation.

One of the important insights one can glean from the essays is that alongside the intellectual community, physical distance can also play a significant role in the formation of individual identity, and from this perspective the state borders that are formed by our historical consciousness are easily relativized. As Klára Jakó demonstrates, the envoy’s journey from Munkács (today Mukacheve in the Ukraine) to Alvinc (today Viințu de Jos in Romania) lasted six days, and the trip from Gyulafehérvár (now Alba Iulia in Romania) to Constantinople lasted seven, in no small part because of the conditions of the roads in Hungary (in one source one finds the complaint that from Máramaros “the road is truly
mean”). We can better understand why Gyulafehérvár was sometimes “closer” to Constantinople than Vienna or even Kassa (today Košice in Slovakia) if we take this question of distance (in space and time) into consideration.

The essay by Antal Molnár also addresses the definition of “space,” and Dániel Siptár writes on the actual physical reconquering in the eighteenth century of spaces intimately intertwined with intellectual and spiritual life, examining how the Franciscan and Jesuit orders reoccupied churches that in the period of Turkish occupation had been transformed into mosques. His analysis and the detailed description of the process of mental and sacral reoccupation are complemented by the insights offered by Balázs Sudár, who examines the earlier station in this history, i.e. the process of the transformation of Christian churches into Islamic places of prayer. Szabócs Varga offers perhaps the best example of the historical mutability of the mental map. He makes insightful observations concerning the spread of Bosnian heroic epics. The cities of Eszék (today Osijek in Croatia), Kanizsa, and Mohács all figure unambiguously as parts of Bosnia in these texts. Indeed Mohács is depicted as the geographical and historical center of the Bosnian heroic epics, a genuine lieu de mémoire.

Sándor Bene presents the history of a communal concept of space that is both anachronistic and, given its mutability, could even be considered fictive. The definition of Illyria became an important question, particularly following the Christian reconquering of the region. In this context, Bene compares the image of Illyria of Luigi Fernando Marsigli (who was committed to the neo-stoic, absolutist-rationalist concept of the state, but showed a lifelong patriotism only for his native city of Bologna) with the illusionary mappings composed on the basis of a legendary past of Pavao Vitezović Ritter and György Rátkay’s expansive notion of the territory of Dalmatia, Croatia, and Slavonia.

The other essays in the volume all address questions of identity formation and self-definition and the world of public representation, whether self-representation or representations of the enemy or the Other (Árpád Mikó, Érika Kiss, Ibolya Gerelyes, Emese Pásztor). An essay by three younger contributors to the volume examines representations of the Other, the enemy. Each of the three essays draws on sources that have been heretofore unfamiliar to Hungarian scholarship. Borbála Gulyás, for instance, presents the images of the Turks used in celebrations and ceremonies in the Habsburg court, adding important observations regarding how these depictions figure in the all’antica rendering in these games (which are essentially chivalric and medieval in their origins) and how the plots begin to acquire allegorical significance after 1570.
Steven J. Mock recently published a book on how defeats were used by communities for their power in the formation of national identities. While the examples to which he refers are taken from the twentieth century (Israel, Serbia, Ghana), the observations he makes are relevant to the study of identity formation in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Hungary. If one seeks to offer a persuasive answer to the question as to why defeats are so important in the formation of national identity (one thinks of Mohács, Sziget, or even the Battle of Vezekény (today Vozokany in Slovakia), this is because historical consciousness, unlike other forms of commemorating the past (such as mythology), demands authenticity. Trauma, whether individual or communal, is always authentic. Trauma offers an unquestionably solid source for the formation of identity. It would be worth examining thoroughly what these defeats meant for Hungarian historical consciousness of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, how they can be narrated, and what theological, poetic, and political ideologies must be constructed to create a context in which their significance can be grasped. The volume also makes clear (in particular the extensive research work of Pál Fodor and Balázs Sudár) that we still know very little of the Ottoman-Turkish literature that was written in Hungary. Fodor’s essay provides a point of departure for the study of what the Ottomans knew of the Christian faith, but it would be nice to learn a bit more about what they knew of the denominational conflicts of the Reformation and the extent to which they deliberately used the fault lines among people of the Christian faith for political gain. Péter Méhes offers an excellent example of how the Muslims at least took an interest in Hungarian history: the Sanjak-bey of Mohács went with eighteen of his mounted retinue to the home of Benedek Víg and asked him to translate the “Hungarian Bonfinius.”

In recent decades international scholarly literature has devoted considerable attention to the study of the origins and elements of images of the enemy in humanistic and later national historiography throughout Europe. This volume constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of how the image of the other was formed and transformed in Hungary.

Translated by Thomas Cooper

Gábor Kiss Farkas

---