

# **Voluntary Associations and Ethnic Survival among the Saxons of Transylvania**

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In 1890 a Transylvanian journalist and banker by the name of Karl Wolff observed that "Nowadays a people (ein Volk) does not die the glorious death of ancient heroes. Instead it withers away, growing ever weaker until it disappears without a trace like water absorbed in dry sand" (Goeliner 1973: 15). The context of these words was the accelerating pace of modernization which was rapidly changing the social and economic face of eastern Europe, and which, in the process, was transforming the political nature of the multinational Habsburg state to which Transylvania belonged at that time. In fact just twenty eight years later the joined to Hungary whose government had Monarchy collapsed, and in its wake there embarked on a policy of forced assimilation sprang up several newly constituted countries, aimed at creating from the culturally and each striving to create from its own polyethnic linguistically diverse population a single Magyar population a modern unified nation state.

It was not the fate of the larger nationalities which Wolff had in mind when he made his melancholy observations, but rather the fate of smaller ethnic communities caught up in the swirling events of the time. More specifically he was referring to his own people, an enclave of ethnic Germans, known as "Saxons", who had lived in the southern and northeastern portions of Transylvania for some seven hundred years. The Saxons encompassed (with the exception of a nobility) all the socioeconomic classes of the time; a large peasantry, a productive class of small town craftsmen and merchants, and (in the cities) workers, shop keepers, businessmen, officials, professionals, and a small but growing contingent of manufacturers. Saxon strength lay in their economic diversity, in their remarkably strong sense of ethnic identity (which served to bind together the different social and occupational classes of the population), and in their intellectual ties to Germany which gave them access to innovative new ideas and technologies.

Their weakness, however, lay in their small numbers, for despite their importance in Transylvanian history Saxons had always constituted a minority within the country. By the latter half of the nineteenth century they comprised less than 10% of the total population, numbering in the year 1890 only 217,670 in a country of 697,950 Hungarians and 1,276,890 Romanians (Illyes

1982: 18). This meant that the Saxons were too few in numbers even to dream of a separate nation state as did the larger nationalities. They were also too remote from the nearest German-speaking area for irredentism to ever have been a consideration, as indeed it was for their Hungarian and Romanian neighbors. Moreover Transylvania, formerly an autonomous principality within the empire, was now joined to Hungary whose government had embarked on a policy of forced assimilation aimed at creating from the culturally and linguistically diverse population a single Magyar nation.

Under these conditions survival could not when be assured through political means. Thus, said Wolff, "the roots of our people's power (unserer Volkskraft) lie not in parliament, but in the area of economic, community and cultural activity" (Goellner 1973: 15). With these words Karl Wolff founded the first credit union in Transylvania, one of many such voluntary co-operative enterprises which he either initiated or actively supported, thus earning for himself the name "father of the Transylvanian co-operative movement". Wolff, however, was not the first to create voluntary associations for the organization of Saxon resources and as the means of directing Saxon energies along modern lines. In fact the first such efforts date back to the 1840s when it became clear to Saxon leaders that the old order of things was over, and that new institutional forms were needed not only to protect Saxon interests, but to redefine underpin Saxon ethnic identity as well.

Ironically, the very existence of the Saxon nation was in large part due to its earlier political autonomy, an autonomy which goes back to the first appearance of Germans in Transylvania in the twelfth century touted a minority within the country.

These Germans were brought into the country by the Hungarian Crown to develop and defend what was then the still vulnerable eastern flank of the Hungarian kingdom. As an inducement to settle on this exposed frontier the colonists were granted title to the land they occupied (the Koenigsboden or "King's Land" as it came to be called), as well as the privileges of retaining their own customary law, direct rule by the king under their own official (the King's Judge, later known as the Saxon Count) and the privilege of selecting their own priests. These privileges were expanded, confirmed and increasingly consolidated to the point where the Saxons eventually constituted an autonomous nation within the Hungarian Kingdom. In the fifteenth century the Saxons joined with the two other nations of Transylvania - the Magyar nobility which controlled the counties, and the Szeklers, a Magyar-speaking ethnic

group concentrated in the southeastern portion of the country - to create a formal estates system which ruled Transylvania first under native princes, then under Austrian Emperors until modern times. Without this legal and administrative framework, which the Saxons guarded so jealously for centuries, it is doubtful that a German presence would have survived to any great extent in Transylvania. It also contributed to the Saxons developing a unified ethnic entity, a people with their own linguistic, cultural and psychological distinctiveness not only in Transylvania, but among other German-speaking populations of Europe as well.

This essentially mediaeval arrangement was temporarily abolished at the end of the eighteenth century when Emperor Joseph II (1780-1790) initiated a set of reforms designed to modernize the empire in accordance with the principles of the Enlightenment which were prevalent at the time. The Saxons were suddenly transformed from a nation, a ruling legal entity, to a mere ethnic and religious minority with no political power at all. Joseph's reforms, however, overshot his ability to enforce them, and were thus ultimately rescinded. Yet the pattern had been set for a series of fundamental changes, which in the course of the following century would mean the erosion of Saxon power, and its eventual termination.

As the legal-political basis of Saxon ethnic integrity weakened and finally disappeared, the only formal institution capable of replacing it was the Lutheran Church. In this respect Paul Binder observes that "in place of the political administrative units of the Saxon nation (the remaining National conflux) stood the church organization. In place of the national count stood the Saxon Bishop". The Church thus formed "a legally constituted unity in the cultural life of the nation" (1988: 239).

The Church through its administration of Saxon schools, its organization of congregations in all Saxon communities, and by means of its ceremonial role, was able to support Saxon ethnic identity. Yet the Church was unable to promote Saxon interests and to assure Saxon prosperity in the changing political and economic climate of the times. Thus throughout the nineteenth century a number of voluntary associations were organized. These associations served as "a defensive barrier against the all powerful state", first that of Austria then that of Hungary (Goellner 1988: 254), and as effective means of harnessing the new energies created by modernization in order to improve the lot of individual Saxons and to further the collective strength of the community. Participation in these associations further served to

increase social solidarity and to strengthen group identity among Saxons of all social classes in a new and more effective manner appropriate to the times.

### **Economic Associations**

One of the earliest and most successful of these organizations was the Transylvanian Agricultural Association founded in 1845 which, by 1912, had established 230 local branches throughout the Saxon territory. This body introduced new breeds of live stock and plants into the country as well as new agricultural implements and techniques. In order to disseminate agricultural information the association established schools, presented agricultural exhibitions, and sent agricultural agents into the field. Also in 1873 a periodical, *Landwirtschaftliche Blaetter fuer Siebenbuergen*, began publication in Herniannstadt. In fact the Agricultural Association served as a kind of Saxon "ministry of agriculture".

Another important activity of the association was the establishment of financial institutions and co-operatives designed to aid peasant producers. In 1867 Joseph Bedeus organized a savings and loan association, and later Bedeus, together with Karl Wolff, founded the *Siebenbuergischer Vereinsbank*, the Transylvanian Association Bank, which helped peasants purchase land formerly belonging to large estates. Co-operatives of various kinds also sprang up for dairy and egg production and export, for strengthening the financial position of vintners and for the purchase by small land holders of modern implements to be used in common. Other purposes of such co-operatives were to help their members purchase breeding stock and to help them over bad times due to crop failure or poor harvests.

Such co-operatives were not only concerned with the well-being of their individual members, but with the nation as a whole which, in the nineteenth century, was suffering a decline in population relative to the other ethnic groups in Transylvania. Co-operatives thus strove to improve the productivity of land already in Saxon hands, and to acquire new land for Saxon families as an alternative to emigration. In this regard Wolff said that "all the different kinds of co-operatives converge in the common task of stemming the tide of emigration from the fatherland, in that they, with the help of the Agricultural Association, attempt to improve the management of resources, the use of new technologies and the productivity of the land worked

by the peasants" (Goellner 1973: 20). Also when new land was acquired families with many children were given priority.

Wolff also attempted to expand the idea of the co-operative into the area of commodity distribution through the formation of consumer co-operatives. This was stiffly resisted by merchants, however, and thus met with no success. Attempts were also made to create craft and trade associations, similar to the agricultural association, in an effort to place these enterprises on a more modern footing and to improve the welfare of tradesmen. For example the association in Mediasch stated its purpose as "to revitalize the trades, to make them aware of the current barriers to their progress and to raise the level of humane education in the middle classes" (Goellner 1988: 264). Such associations did succeed in establishing some technical libraries but were thwarted in their efforts due to state interference and disadvantageous economic conditions.

### **Community Associations**

In 1780 the Schutzengesellschaft, a kind of "Saxon rifle association," was founded with the double purpose of acquainting its members with the use of firearms and as an opportunity for social activities. In the decades before the 1848 Revolution athletic associations, Turnvereine, were also founded. These clubs were closely associated with the awakening of pan-German national consciousness as indeed were their counterparts in Germany. The goal of such organizations, as the constitution of the Mediasch club reads, was "to strengthen the spirit of ethnic awareness (des Volksgeistes) in a specifically German manner." This involved sport, song and practice at using weapons. Many members of such organizations filled the ranks of the Volunteer Brigade during the civil war of 1848. After the Revolution sports clubs faded, making a come back only in the latter part of the century, but this time for the sole purpose of sponsoring sporting activities. Volunteer fire departments were also organized in Saxon towns and cities with the aim both of fighting fires and of providing conviviality. After the turn of the century fire protection was taken over by municipalities and the social character of the fire companies was reduced.

In 1879 the Beautification Association, the Verschoenerungsverein was founded in Hermannstadt (sibiu). Its task was to plant gardens in public places throughout the city. Another such association was the Sebastian Hann-Verein founded in 1907 with the aim of preserving

antiquities and establishing and maintaining museums, thereby adding a further dimension to the historical awareness of the Saxon people, and thus contributing to their identity as a unique community in history. There was also the Karpatenverein also founded by Karl Wolff, which was organized to encourage tourism in the Carpathians. The association developed a resort, the "Hohe Rinne" in the 1890s, constructed trails and rest houses and published a journal which served as an outlet for the dissemination of scholarly information on the Carpathian Mountains. There were also the the Gustav-Adoff Association and the General Evangelical Woman's Association (Allgemeiner Evangelische Frauenverein) both associated with the Lutheran Church. The woman's society was founded by the city pastor of Hermannstadt (sibiu) with the purpose of calling "women to work for the good of the community" (Goellner 1988: 272). As a result of the actions of this association schools, orphanages, hospitals were both founded and improved.

### **The Association for Transylvanian Studies**

Anthony D. Smith has observed that if "ethnic forms" which he defines as "art, language, customs, family structure, religious literature, etc., lose their meaning, if the traditions become ossified and cannot develop anew, the entire ethnies (ethnic community) falls into cultural decline, however prosperous and powerful its individual members or their polity may be" (1986: 98). In the 1830s it was becoming evident that changing times were making obsolete the old juridical unity of the Saxons which had served as a conceptual as well as a legal justification of Saxon uniqueness. With the disappearance of the Saxon "university," and in the face of increasing Magyar nationalism the need for a redefinition of Saxon ethnic identity became ever more apparent. In 1840 in an effort to bring this identity in line with the times, and in order to reinvigorate ethnic forms, the Verein fuer Siebenbuergische Landeskunde, the Association for Transylvanian Studies, was organized.

It was hoped that by careful research into all aspects of Transylvanian culture and history the localism which had marked the traditional Saxon experience would be erased; that "we should stop being Hermannstadters, Mediaschers, Sachaessburgers, Kronstaedters, and should be Saxons, and should feel Saxon". Also the protocol of proceedings of 1847 stated that the association should animate "love for the fatherland," and that it should "unite, not divide...reconcile and not antagonize" (Goellner 1988: 55). This extended to the inclusion of

other nationalities as well, for as the call for the founding of the association stated "all friends of Transylvanian studies" were invited to participate "from all nations and from all social stations" (Guendisch 1988: 17). In fact Hungarian and Romanian scholars have participated in the work of the association from its beginning to the present time.

The association began publication of a journal, *Archiv des Vereins fuer Siebenbuergische Landeskunde* in 1843, and in 1878 it published the *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins fuer Siebenbuergische Landeskunde* to further encourage regional studies. The association also established a prize for a Saxon history which would be accessible to the public at large. The result was the writing of the widely read *Geschichte der Siebenbuerger Sachsen fuer das Saechsische Volk* by Georg Daniel Teutsch. The association also stimulated the work of folklorists and philologists investigating Saxon culture, and it initiated the dictionary of the Saxon dialect (still underway) and a linguistic atlas of the Saxon speech area. Another result of the association's activity is the publication, in several volumes and over generations, of the primary sources for the history of Transylvania, the *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte Siebenbuergens*, which provides a valuable source for the serious study of Transylvanian history.

Looking back over eighty-eight years of the association's activities Adolph Schullerus, editor of the Saxon Dictionary, noted in 1928 that the scholarly work of the association firmly established scholars as national leaders (Goellner 1988: 256). Indeed in place of a German university in Transylvania the association served to produce the kind of work (both in terms of scope and high quality objective scholarship) for which universities are responsible. In this regard a later Saxon scholar, Karl Kurt Klein, noted that the association was indeed a "little Transylvanian Saxon Academy of Science" (1971: 341). Saxon associations had their symbolic functions as well. This was seen in the ceremonial *Vereintage*, or special association days which were held each year during the week after Pentecost, and on special occasions such as the opening of a school, or the renovation of churches, historical sites, etc. By means of these celebrations, says Goellner, "national consciousness was extended to wider circles of the people" (1988: 282).

## **Diaspora**

The Saxon Church and voluntary associations were extraordinarily successful in facilitating the shift from a mediaeval estate to a viable modern ethnic community. In this way they were able to avert the fate of many of the smaller nationalities of the modern world, a fate so graphically described by Karl Wolff in his 1890 remarks. Today, however, the Saxons face an even greater threat to their survival as a separate ethnic entity due to a combination of factors both in Transylvania and abroad. The first are the ruinous economic conditions and the oppression suffered in Romania under the communist regimes which ruled the country since the end of the Second World War. And the second are the generous conditions under which ethnic Germans from eastern Europe are received in West Germany. All this had led to an unprecedented emigration from Transylvania to the German Federal Republic, an emigration which appears to be accelerating. In fact, according to one current joke, nobody wants to be the last Saxon out.

With fewer and fewer Saxons left in the country their already weak position there becomes ever more precarious. And once established in Germany neither church nor language serve to differentiate them from the rest of the population as indeed they did in their homeland. Also economic opportunities in Germany promote individual initiative rather than communal ties, thus weakening the solidarity which still prevails among Saxon communities in the West. It thus remains to be seen whether the Saxons can manage to survive as a separate entity into the next century or whether, as Karl Wolff said a century ago, they will eventually "disappear without a trace like water absorbed into dry sand."

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