József Gagyi: The Year of Crisis in Szeklerland – 1949
Our Past Books series, edited by Pro-Print, Miercurea Ciuc, 2004

József Gagyi is an Associate Professor at Sapientia University, and author of numerous publications. This is his second book, published in 2004, after The Szekler Gate Patrimony (Mentor Publishing)

Following a rather unconventional standard, let me first summarize the reviews that have appeared in response to the book. If we start to search the Internet for the title of this book and we take only relevant results into consideration, we will get 21 web pages: a few registries of Hungarian libraries, databases about studies in the social sciences, and two articles in daily newspapers that present us the main characteristics of the publication. On November 13, 2004, Domokos Bölöni published an article in Népujság, and on December 22, 2004, Gábor Cseke wrote a review in Romániai Magyar Szó.

Both of these articles are unique in their form and content. The former publishes excerpts from the foreword and the afterword; the latter reads the book from the point of view of autonomy.

On the Transindex website, we find news about the debate on the manuscript. The participants of this debate, many of them notable social scientists whose names can be found in the Acknowledgments, contributed a great deal to putting the finishing touches on the manuscript.

I have also found two exigent critical reviews, one from Sándor Oláh, published in the June 2005 issue of the cultural journal Székelyföld, and another from Lehel Peti, a young ethnologist (his review will appear in Acta Etnografica and Etnográfia). Sándor Oláh was the reviewer who mentioned that choosing a single year could be considered as being a novelty in social historical research.

Why did the author choose the year 1949? We can find justification for choosing this particular year in the foreword as well; “indeed, while the turning point in Romanian political history was 1948, the social changes that followed on a local level began only in 1949.”

The afterword restates these powerful justifications for considering 1949 to be a thoroughly transformative year: a great transformation was started in 1949, which had radical effects on the individual as well as the communal level; the new authority reached every family.”

The power structure of the Communist dictatorship reached the local society; it expanded from the center to the periphery. It is important to note here that the author defines every significant term, leaving none untouched. Thanks to this, the orientation of a reader otherwise unversed in social history research could be trouble-free.

The year of 1949 is defined to be a pre-history of a longer transformation. We can read about this year in a few adjectival structures like: the year of power shifts, of moving cadres, of celebration, of cultural revolution, of the first plan, of the first collective farms. It is an intermediate year; the expansion of the new authority did not start and did not finish this year. It was a turning point in Szeklerland from the perspective of history and mentality. The author analyzed the spring and summer events of this year.
What did he present? Practically, the reaction of the local society, the rational strategy and the irrational answers of opposition to the interventionist measures of authority. So we can affirm that Gagyi described the answers of the periphery to the stimulus of the center.

The author defined the genre of the book: an historical anthropological analysis, which focused on the reactions of the rural society in Szeklerland to the expansion of central power. The scale of the analysis: he applied both micro- and macro-level approaches. The target group is social groups and outstanding personalities.

Resources used:

• The press of the period, which contextualized reality ideologically, and was an important instrument in the manipulation of models about reality and morality. The press was assorted, edited, and manipulated but it framed a window, through which the life, the actions and reactions, and the movement of the society of that period could be seen.

A significant part of the pressmaterial used by the author(6 out of 8 sources) was written in Hungarian:

- Falvak Népe. Cluj-Napoca, later Bucharest. The weekly of the Hungarian Popular Union.
- Monitorul Oficial. The Official Gazette of the National Congress.
- Művelődési Útmutató. Bucharest, monthly, since 1959 it was published with the title Művelődés by the Cultural Ministry.
- Népújság. Targu Mures. The central daily of the Hungarian Popular Union.
- Szabadság. Odorheiu Secuiesc. The weekly of the Hungarian Popular Union, Odorhei County.
- Scânteia. Bucharest. The central daily of the Romanian Workers’ Party.

Sándor Oláh considered that the advantage of the varied resources was that they offered for the analysis several points of view: leading articles, reports, portraits, reader letters, literary materials: fragments from novels, short stories, poems, criticisms.

• Fragments from biography interviews
• Archive documents
• Fragments from special journals
• Special reports (100 reports were written about the pilgrimage on June 4)
• The book is rich in international references (40 books, studies, 12 foreign, 17 Hungarian, 4 Romanian, and 7 Hungarian from Romania) about social movements, elite research, collective farms, the region and the period.

What did the author do? He edited a new narrative, elaborated one answer from a few possible ones to the question of what happened in 1949, and why it was important.

The author defined his dilemmas, his relationship to the topic of research. He considers his attitude as a kind of nostalgia toward the period. Gagyi did not want to see the processes from
a complete and objective point of view. He attracts our attention on the methodological problems: the sensibility of the affected people who are still alive, the deficiency and the distortion of the resources.

He is conscious of deficiencies:

- The problem of the archive documents which are in short supply
- The main decisions and processes of the period passed in secret
- The institutions appear schematically and statically.

**About the year 1949:**

An important event was the plenary session of Romanian Workers’ Party’s central leadership was organized between March 3-5, 1949, where the socialist transformation program of agriculture was announced. After this, the persecution of the kulaks developed.

- While rebellious peasants and the authority clashed in different parts of the country as well (Bihar county on July 29, Arad county on August 1-2, Suceava county on August 6), which resulted in execution and deportation, in Szeklerland another, archaic form of this clash developed: it started a millenarian, apocalyptic movement, with the leadership of a prophet-woman. People waited for doomsday, they believed in wonders.
- In Szeklerland the most frequent instruments of the new authority were agitation and propaganda.

**The structure of the book:** it has seven chapters, before which, in an introductory part, the author puts the occurrences in Szeklerland in a larger context, discussing the main characteristics of the location (here he mentioned that, because the majority of the population in this region are Hungarians, the content of the story is socialistic, and the form is national), the special status of the year from the point of view of resources: the least number of documents from the 20th century survived there, probably because of the fact that the authority changed at the local level in 1949. In the foreword the author discusses the first five chapters, as parts of presentation of documents about the establishment of authority in Szeklerland.

Let us examine some characteristics of the chapters separately: the book is based on several “how” questions. So the author did not only answer the “what happened” question, but he also tried to discover how the events took place.

1. **The year of juncture? The country and the world between 1948 and 1950:** (the author clarifies the title’s phraseology through references in the field) the main events of the period, the changes that took place in the upper echelons of power, the regulations, the reorganization at the ministry level, the Soviet-Romanian mixed enterprises, the agricultural plan, the assignment of the holidays (November 7 as official, August 23 as national).

2. **Administrations, organizations, offices:**

As we can realize from the title, this chapter discusses the institutional changes: the party, the Hungarian Popular Union, the pioneers’ organizations, the union of women, trade unions, new productive organizations,

– the police (militia, the year of moving cadres),
local "people’s councils,” temporary committees, public economic farms, the first collective farms (the first five were founded this year, one from Szeklerland in Torja),
– education – we can read about the 35 new schools opened officially, about the pragmatism of the starting vocational schools, about the assignment of the entrance examination system to universities: in order to register, young people needed documents to testify about their parents’ job and rent, agricultural taxes, acreage, collective farm membership, and clean criminal records of the father and the prospective student. It was mandatory to pass a written exam of Romanian literature, and an oral one on the Constitution.

– Public sanitation – the clinic is opened this year in Odorhei
– culture – this year about 2,370 new community centers were opened, which organized the propagandistic and artistic representation of the new regime, holidays, cultural competitions. The decoration was planned centrally: the order of the pictures, the inscriptions, the accessories. This year 5,027 new rural libraries, 355,685 new readers appeared. For example, in Mures county 58% of the library books at the 260 community centers were in Romanian, and roughly the same amount was on ideological topics (in Odorhei county, 141 community centers and 2 popular athenaeums functioned at this time).

Because of the massive and intensive Soviet presence and intervention, Romania could be considered as a “17th Soviet Republic” in terms of the army, police, local governance and economy.

3. Plan and reality: the year of the first one-year plan. All actions were described and fixed in plans, unlike the unplanned chaos and confusion of bourgeois society.

The authority planned to exceed the industrial production of 1948 by 40%. This was needed because of the lag after the war. The annual report described that the plan was completed at 109%. The industrialization of Szeklerland started.

They introduced the production of industrial crops instead of low-yield cereal crops. In Odorhei County, they raised the area for growing forage plants by 100%, in order to develop animal husbandry. This time, property issues for the fields needed to be clarified. An instrument for fulfilling the plans was the savings movement, and another was prolonged, continuous programs of labor, e.g. threshing.

Some other landmarks were a new fiscal and budgetary legislation, a new collective contract, workforce allocation system (this was realized in Szeklerland only later), unitary taxation (they tried to stimulate the founding of collective farms with this arrangement), aggravated surrenders for the subsidization of industrialization and urbanization, and for the enhancement of the alliance between workers and peasants. Local committees decided how much was the surplus that had to be surrendered, and they controlled the grain for the peasants’ own necessity.

4. The class struggle: Gheorghiu-Dej: completing the plan means mobilization to class struggle, a patriotic obligation in which everyone has to participate, either on the side of the workers, or as their enemy. The stimulation of the conflict was an efficient weapon of central authority. The relative autonomy of the villages did not fit into the totalitarian strategy. That is why this situation had to be changed. The system needed to define public enemies. For this reason, they invented the persecution of the kulaks (an ideological creation, in need of constant redefinition; his main characteristics: saboteur, complainer, trafficker), and the persecution of clergy. "It was worse than the front line, because there we could know who is a friend and who is an enemy.”
The image of the “enemy” in the media was aimed at the intimidation of the community. For example, one of the common means of intimidation was the educational bulletin board, whose editing was helped by a centralized guide book. This initiative became another movement, with little ideological critiques and judgments below every article. The bulletin board’s quality was largely determined by its proximity to the nearest town.

The goal on the local level was to silence and insulate the clergy because of their explicit opinions. An unintended consequence: the central authority’s efforts and ambition to “divide and conquer” strengthened local solidarity.

An example of the collaboration of local society was that when Bishop Áron Márton was arrested, the clergy refused to take state assistance.

Work competitions were based on a changeable, well-defined system of criteria.

5. Holidays, campaigns: events representing central authority (similar to the medieval feudal system, when the private and public sphere as distinct social spaces fell dead); as they said, the events of showing unity. The evolved situation was analogous with Habermas’ representative public sphere. While in the medieval era jousts and religious ceremonies functioned as representations of authority, in the Communist era this role was filled by holidays and campaigns. New holidays: official holidays: May Day, August 23, November 7, the anniversary of Lenin’s death, Stalin’s birthday (the factories produced specific gifts and after an exhibition in Bucharest, a special committee brought them to the Kremlin), the 150th anniversary of Pushkin’s birthday, the 100th anniversary of Pavlov’s birthday, Hungarian-Romanian fraternity, Soviet-Romanian friendship.

They were characterized by megalomania. They applied censorship in organizing cultural programs. They wanted to reform the culture of Szeklerland, to eliminate the noxious bourgeois elements from the popular culture.

The month and a half-long cultural competition had an intensive echo in the press. In two months, 162 articles were published in three Hungarian dailies. It was organized at the time of pilgrimage, which the press did not even mention; the authorities demonstrated their power with the help of cultural competition. The tobacco factory from Sfantu Gheorghe introduced a new kind of cigarettes, Culture, in honor of the competition, with 1.8 lei, on the pack there was a young pair dressed in Szekler and Romanian costumes, and Romanian and Hungarian inscriptions.

The regulation of the competition was set for all the groups: composition, dress, repertoires, casting etc. The schedule also changed, they elongated the socially reserved time, people were obligated to work on Sunday, which aimed at keeping people away from the church.

The Hungarian-Romanian brotherhood was illustrated by pairs, dressed in popular accoutrements, dancing each other’s dances.

The organized sport programs aimed among others to step over the traditional moral bounds, the young from kulak families were excluded.

They tried to take over the old holidays with obligatory socialist “alternatives.” For example in Odorhei they organized a March 8 celebration of a large scale.

In the sixth and seventh chapter the author is preoccupied with the hard lines of the symbol-trading traditional elite, and then he presents the symbol-trading of rural society, the millenarian movement. The last chapter explains us the described phenomena.
6. **Insults towards the traditional rural elite:** the author introduces us the obligatory metamorphosis of the Hungarian Popular Union, how the meetings turned into courts of law.

Religious freedom means practicing religion according to the Constitution and the state. The Greek-Catholics for example could decide freely which church they would belong to.

In 1949 the religious schools were liquidated, and the Catholic orders were dissolved. The authorities considered the Catholic Church as an enemy. The Church lost its possessions. After Áron Márton’s arrest, the seminary in Alba Iulia was temporarily closed.

On February 1, the authority revoked the payment of 130 catholic clerics because of their antidemocratic behavior. They didn’t explicitly forbid the participation in the pilgrimage, but they organized parallel cultural and sport competitions, and they affirmed that the working people had to participate in competitions.

The pilgrimage was a possibility to survey how large the mass is, which sustains them.

They sent trained agitators to the location: 170 people arrived from Targu Mures, workers who could barely write. These people had to prevent the masses from getting on the train, and they had to observe, to overhear them. Another task of these people was that they had to convince the masses to go to the sport competitions in the town center, and they also had to write reports.

In the reports they formulated what the party and the state would have to do, if they did not want the pilgrimage’s happening to be repeated.

We can find in the descriptions not only the measures the authorities implemented, but also the answers of the local society, the preparedness of the saint’s day participants, they were advised not to talk to foreigners, to break off their talking to each other when a foreigner is near, and they had some signs that warned them.

The intention of the authorities to attenuate the Church in fact intensified its solidarity. Here we can find the description of Bishop Áron Márton’s persecution, of the significance of the pilgrimage, the division of teachers.

The pilgrimage played an important role in the arrest, which was the last drag in integrating the Church into the new state structure. It followed the division of inferior levels. The pilgrimage became forbidden.

The instructors, who also participated in the choirs, had to choose between the two jobs. One of them was promised to be well-paid.

The dilemma was whom should they listen to? The model of the old elite became invalid to be followed; the one of the new elite was not trustworthy. The result: the masses remained without guidance.

7. **Miracle-seeing, millenarian movement. The reaction of the rural society from Szeklerland:** miracle-seeing, cultural crisis was an alternative form of rebellion.

The woman from Satu Mare, who saw miracles, was committed to the neurological unit first in Targu Mures, then in Sibiu, and she was even arrested and thrown in jail in Brasov.

It turned out that it was a mass phenomenon, the attention of the authority focused on it.

Satires, challenging articles appeared in the press, which aimed to mobilize people to doubt the phenomenon.
Waiting for the Apocalypse extended into other villages as well. It also characterized other Romanian and East Central European regions. Its essence: the end of the world will bring salvation, and the evil ones will reap their due punishments.

The final part: the definition and explanation of the (cultural) crisis from several points of view: class struggle is not a means against the miracles. A rational answer to ignorance is knowledge.

Besides the economic existence of the communities, the authorities attacked their symbolic entity, their innermost values. The reaction to this intervention was a chaotic, fearful, socio-psychical state of mind, which waited for miracles and freedom.

Some characteristics of the crisis:
1. the events will be known by large masses in a short period of time
2. public attention follows the events for long time
3. involved persons will be well-known in wide surroundings
4. they evoke the attention and violent intervention of the public institutions
5. the events questioned the most important values, the viability of the communities, the relation toward the transcendental.

The crisis produces tension, it mobilizes, and at the same time it multiplies the fear in society, the existential uncertainty (that is why it is similar to the medical report). The crisis can characterize both individuals and communities, if they sense real or imaginary dangers like the class war.

The crisis is a state in which the reactions form, run and dissolve the state. People reconsider their system of symbols, which assure the viability of community. In the course of this process the community makes the insupportable supportable. The crisis appears when repression and pauperization extend in society, says the author, in reference to Assmann’s theory.

We can come to the conclusion that ”in a crisis situation, the present, ruled over by the central authority, can be made relative with the help of a mythical impulsive force; the structures can decompose. If this action of relativization is successful and extended, it will lead to a revolution.” The central authority misinterpreted, intervened and repressed the Apocalypse movement, a phenomenon that did not occur again.

This study is a revised, enlarged edition of a chapter from Gagyí’s Ph.D. dissertation, which was submitted in 2001.

The afterword: from a socio-historical point of view, a rebellion of the past—which could not come to terms with its demise—and of the old rural system of values, took place in a millenarian form in this region.

We can find the explanation not only in the last chapter, as the author promised us in the introduction, but also throughout the whole book. For example, in the part about the elite, the author drafts the results of the intervention: the communities remained without a leader; in the part about the holidays he describes the disintegration of community values; in the part about the class war, he mentions solidarity as an unintended consequence.
Although Chapter 5 is classified by the author as part of the expository, factual narrative of Part I, I believe—based on my experience as a reader—that it is more similar to Chapters 6 and 7.

The book is substantive, creepy, and unique in its details as it balances the disfigured press and the reality behind it. The chapters can also be read separately, every sentence is well thought-out, edited, and articulated. Not only the information, but the whole description, the meticulousness, the attention paid to all the processes and events result in its eeriness.