

The Image of the Great Union As Reflected in Memoirs from the Bistrița-Năsăud Area

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Although they prefer to speak mainly about the war and its consequences, the writers from Bistrița-Năsăud see the union of Transylvania with Romania as an important event for their history and future.

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THE COMMEMORATION of the centenary of the First World War has brought about, since 2014, an increase in the number of investigations dedicated to this event. Researchers have published during this period documents about the battlefields, memoirs, and folkloric creations related to this event, and they have investigated various aspects of the topic. Some memoirs¹ and studies² dedicated to the way in which the war influenced the life of both those on the front and of the ones who were left at home have been also published in the area of Bistrița-Năsăud.

Unfortunately, most researchers have focused their investigation on the conflagration and its effects, neglecting the manner in which the image of the Great Union is reflected in the documents from the Bistrița-Năsăud area. Consequently, and considering the relevance of these documents for the understanding of the event that took place at the end of 1918, we shall try to present here the manner in which the image of the Great Union is reflected in the memoirs written in

the area of Bistrița-Năsăud. We shall focus on the works of authors like Gustav Zikeli, Albert Porkoláb, or Pavel Tofan, some of them published, others still available only in the Bistrița-Năsăud branch of the National Archives of Romania, highlighting the descriptions of the aforementioned event in their writings. We shall also compare them, whenever necessary, with other works from the same area or with other studies and articles dedicated to the topic.

We shall also try to focus on the interethnic perspective, particularly as illustrated by the work of the Saxon Gustav Zikeli from Bistrița, or by that of Albert Porkoláb who, although he was not one hundred per cent Romanian, fled to the Kingdom of Romania in the second half of the war.

When they speak about the Great Union in the Bistrița-Năsăud area, researchers usually prefer to draw on the anthology that contains the documents pertaining to the event³ and to emphasize its formal aspects, like the creation of the National Guards or the participation of Romanians from that part of the country in the Great Assembly at Alba Iulia. Therefore, memoirs are often neglected. Even when they speak about memoirists like Gustav Zikeli⁴ or Pavel Tofan,⁵ the authors prefer to insist on the information that they provide about the war or on specific topics, rather than going deeper and investigating how the image of Great Union is reflected in their works. Hence, in our opinion, the importance of such an investigation that aims to emphasize this topic. For today's readership, this approach is important both for its documentary value and for the information that it provides. For a historian it is also useful, because it highlights aspects related to the history of mentalities and it offers information about the manner in which education can influence one's way of thinking and understanding an event.

The first memoirist we shall present is Pavel Tofan, who was a veterinarian. During the First World War he worked in support of the Austro-Hungarian army in various sections of the front. Fortunately, he survived the war and wrote about it. His notes were only partially published, and are referenced in various books or articles.⁶ But, despite of the fact that these authors present and make references to his notes, they prefer to analyze his war experience, to show how the Romanian Guards from Bistrița were organized, to present the Romanian delegations at Alba Iulia and to emphasize that he is the only writer from this space who presents a complete list of these things, rather than speak about the way in which he describes the Great Union and understands the event.

Information about these topics is located in the final part of his memoirs. Here, after describing the organization of the guards and the Romanian activities in Bistrița and in neighboring villages, he speaks about the manner in which, with the help of Solomon Halița, sent as an envoy to Bistrița, the Romanians from beyond the Carpathians assisted in the organization of the local Romanian movement:

The old man Solomon Haliță received the mission and then a French and English passport that allowed him to go to Transylvania, but he also received money in order to help the Romanian people there to prepare the General Assembly at Alba Iulia and to get together the main protagonists from Transylvania, Sibiu, Dej, and Arad.

On 22 November 1918, in the morning, the aforementioned envoys arrived in Bistrița. During their voyage, gendarmes at a checkpoint shot at the car, without damaging it, however. Once arrived in Bistrița, they stopped at the barracks which hosted the headquarters as well as the Romanian volunteers' office.⁷

Then, Pavel Tofan also describes the journey of Haliță, who was his uncle, to Transylvania, as well as his successes. He speaks about the arrival of the Romanian army in Bistrița, after their discussions, showing that the first battalion which arrived there on 6 December 1918 was received with bread and salt by the mayor of the town and by the two archpriests, the Orthodox Grigore Pletosu and the Greek Catholic Dionisiu Vaida.⁸ After describing the route of the battalion, the history of its victories and other military matters, he speaks, at the end of his notes, written and signed in 1959,⁹ about General Traian Moșoiu's victories in Oradea during 1919. It should also be noted that the author insists on the fact that their arrival diminished the role of the Romanian Guards and he speaks about their victories against the Hungarians. By highlighting the enthusiasm of the local Romanian population and the help offered by them in avoiding the Hungarian ambushes, he shows the importance of the work and of the presence of the Romanian Guards for the local Romanian population.

Although he doesn't describe in detail the Great Union, providing his perspective on the event, and prefers to insist on the role of the Romanian Guards and on the Romanian preparations for the Great National Assembly at Alba Iulia, mentioning the contribution of some patriots like Grigore Pletosu—the Orthodox archpriest of Bistrița was known for his enthusiasm in welcoming the Romanian army¹⁰—, he offers an interesting testimony about the way in which the event was received by the local people from this area.

Another interesting testimony about the event and its reception comes from Gustav Zikeli. If people like Vasile Măgherușan, who fought in various parts of the empire, left some notes about the similar experiences there,¹¹ but not about the Great Union, while others did not survive the conflagration, and while Albert Porkoláb was too involved at the time in the reorganization of the army and in the establishment of Romanian administration in Transylvania to become part of this process,¹² he, a Saxon from Bistrița who never took part in any battle, wrote an entire book of memoirs, with a chapter dedicated to the First World War.¹³ He also speaks there about the event of interest to us.

Born on 25 July 1876 in the town of Bistrița, he was the son of a local shoemaker. Although he initially wanted to become a watchmaker, he later decided

to become a printer, as he confesses in his memoirs,¹⁴ after receiving training in various places, like Berlin, and after working for a while in Germany, where he came into contact with socialist ideas. Then, he returned to Bistrița in 1905, where he helped Carl Csallner with his printing house. There, he played an important role in the Saxon movement, both before and during the First World War, and after the union of Transylvania with Romania.¹⁵

During the war, he managed to avoid conscription because of his illness, and this gave him the opportunity to continue his typographical work. All this time he observed the war, which he would later describe in his notes. He wrote there about the imminence of the Russian occupation in the first years of the conflagration,¹⁶ about the events on the front and other related topics. At the end of the war, he was, like the other Transylvanian Saxons, enthusiastic about the promised equal rights, the right to have churches, self-government, and individual jurisdiction for each nationality in Transylvania.¹⁷ As he notes, he participated on 1 January 1919 in Sighișoara (Schässburg), as a delegate of his community, to a national assembly of the Saxons, where, like the others, he voted for the union.¹⁸

If at the beginning of 1919 he saw no problem with accepting and endorsing the union, later on the problems with some Romanians who were a bit too patriotic made him regret it. Referring to some episodes that took place in 1920, he writes in his memoirs:

One evening, as I was passing through Marktplatz, I saw a sergeant, together with some soldiers, trying to take down my shop sign, because, apart from my name, it said in three languages “Librărie/Buchhandlung/Könyvkereskedés.” I then addressed a high official who happened to pass by and he stopped the injustice. Then, in the late 1920s, a law was passed for the Romanization of companies. Everything had to be written only in the Romanian language. I requested to have my business listed only with my name, without mentioning its profile. In spite of all the threats and of the enemies I made on account of my decision, I refused to change the name of the business.¹⁹

Of course, these ethnical debates were part of a long series of exchanges that took place in Bistrița between Romanians and Saxons during the entire interwar period. We shall not insist there on their content. However, it is quite significant that, just like other Transylvanian Saxons, Gustav Zikeli did not see the Great Union as a problem for his people, and he was one of the delegates who endorsed it.

As we can see, although they prefer to speak mainly about the war and its consequences, the writers from Bistrița-Năsăud see the union of Transylvania with Romania as an important event for their history and future. Together with other manuscripts and documents that speak about this event, presenting the

role of Romanian Guards, the contribution of the Romanian army, or other aspects of this process, the memoirs from this area are also important testimonies for the relevance of this event for the Romanian space. Moreover, here, more than in other areas, we find not only notes written by the Romanians who contributed to the achievement of the union, but also Saxon ones, which reflect the local specificity and provide a multi-ethnic perception of this event. □

Notes

1. Ion Cârja, Dan Lucian Vaida, Loránd L. Mádly, and Dan Prahase, eds., *Un ardelean în Marele Război/Ein Siebenbürger im Großen Krieg/A Transylvanian in the Great War: Albert Porkoláb (1880–1920)* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, Mega, 2016); Arhivele Naționale, Serviciul Județean Bistrița-Năsăud, *Războiul din spatele tranșelor: Contribuții documentare referitoare la județul Bistrița-Năsăud*, eds. Adrian Onofreiu and Cornelia Vlașin (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2017); Adrian Onofreiu, ed., *Victor Rusu (1872–1918): Destinul unui ofițer uitat—reconstituire pe baza documentelor adunate de Vasile Scurtu* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2017).
2. See, for example: Florin Vlașin and Dorin Dologa, “Locuitori din Năsăud participanți la Primul Război Mondial,” *Arhiva Someșană* (Năsăud), 3rd ser., 13 (2014): 99–115; Dorin Dologa, “Locuitori din Romuli participanți la Primul Război Mondial,” *Arhiva Someșană*, 3rd ser., 14 (2015): 87–93; id., “Locuitori din Salva participanți la Primul Război Mondial,” *Arhiva Someșană*, 3rd ser., 14 (2015): 97–107; id., “Locuitori din Mocod participanți la Primul Război Mondial,” *Arhiva Someșană*, 3rd ser., 15 (2016): 99–108; Florin Vlașin, “Locuitori din Coșbuc participanți la Primul Război Mondial,” *Arhiva Someșană*, 3rd ser., 14 (2015): 109–116; id., “Locuitori din Runcu Salvei participanți la Primul Război Mondial,” *Arhiva Someșană*, 3rd ser., 14 (2015): 109–116; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “O mărturie din Țara Năsăudului despre Primul Război Mondial—jurnalul colonelului Anchidim Șoldea,” in *Sebeș, timp regăsit... Lucrările Conferinței “100 de ani de la declanșarea Primului Război Mondial: Contribuția sebeșenilor la război și Marea Unire” (5 decembrie 2014)*, ed. Rodica Groza (Sebeș: Emma Books, 2014), 87–95; id., “Urmări ale Primului Război Mondial în localitatea Salva, județul Bistrița-Năsăud: orfani și văduve de război,” *Astra Salvensis: Revistă de istorie și cultură* (Salva, Bistrița-Năsăud) 2, 4 (2014): 81–84; id., “Imaginea Primului Război Mondial reflectată în cântecele funebre din zona Năsăudului,” *Astra Sabesiensis* (Cluj-Napoca) 2 (2016): 47–54; id., “Imaginea Primului Război Mondial reflectată în folclorul din zona Năsăudului,” in *Administrație românească arădeană: Studii și comunicări din Banat-Crișana*, vol. 9, eds. Doru Sinaci and Emil Arbonie (Arad: Vasile Goldiș University Press, 2014), 587–594; id., “Aspecte memorialistice în folclorul năsăudean din Primul Război Mondial,” *Revista istorică* (Bucharest) 27, 1–2 (2016): 99–105.
3. Ștefan Pascu and Ion Popescu-Puțuri, eds., *1918 la români: Documentele unirii: Uniunea Transilvaniei cu România la 1 Decembrie 1918*, vol. 8 (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică și

- Enciclopedică, 1989), 77–83; Ioan Seni, *Năsăudenii și Marea Unire* (Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2008), 23.
4. Michael Kroner, “Gustav Zikeli, ziarist progresist, militant socialist și antifascist,” *File de istorie: Anuarul Muzeului de Istorie Bistrița* 4 (1976): 411–417; Teodor Tanco, “Gustav Zikeli pornind de la social-democrație,” in *Virtus Romana Rediviva*, vol. 3, *Rădăcini adânci* (Bistrița: Comitetul de Cultură și Educație Socialistă al Județului Bistrița-Năsăud, 1977), 276; Michael Kroner, “O filă din mișcarea muncitorească din Bistrița: Ziarul social-democrat ‘Die Volswacht,’” *File de istorie* 1 (1971): 52; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Două perspective inedite asupra Primului Război Mondial: jurnalul lui Gustav Zikeli și însemnările lui Vasile Măgherușan,” *Astra Sabesiensis* 3 (2017): 163–171.
 5. Andreea Salvan, “Pavel Tofan—Memorii din 1918,” in *Bistrița: 90 de ani de la Marea Unire* (Bistrița: Barna’s, 2008), 69–108; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “O sursă inedită privitoare la istoria Marii Uniri în zona Năsăudului—fondul dr. Pavel Tofan,” in *Sententia—sesiune internațională de comunicări științifice studențești: Volum de lucrări—ediția a VI-a, 03–05 decembrie 2015*, eds. Claudia Ioana Șoiozea and Iuliana Georgiana Spineanu (Târgu-Jiu: Academica Brâncuși, 2015), 280–286.
 6. See, for example the aforementioned sources from note 5, and Ioan Sigmirean and Adrian Onofreiu, *Istoria județului Bistrița-Năsăud în documente și texte (epocile modernă și contemporană)* (Bistrița: Răsunetul, 2001), 205. The original notes are at the National Archives of Romania, Bistrița-Năsăud County Branch, coll. Pavel Tofan, file “Memorii” (manuscript).
 7. Salvan, 100. Cf. Tofan, “Memorii,” fol. 21.
 8. “On 6 December 1918, the first Romanian battalion came in from Sărățel, led by Major Coroamă, after having crossed the border. A huge crowd of Romanians from Bistrița happily greeted them at the customs house in the lower part of town, where the commander was received with bread and salt by the mayor of the city, Karl Sanchen, the Orthodox archpriest Grigore Pletos, and the Romanian Uniate archpriest Dionisiu Vaida. The National Guard, led by Major Anton, formed ranks and gave the honor salute.” Salvan, 101. Cf. Tofan, “Memorii,” fol. 22.
 9. Salvan, 108.
 10. Vasile Boieriu, “Grigore Pletosu—protopopol de Bistrița,” *Ardealul* (Bucharest) 2, 15 (1942): 2; Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Restitutio Grigore Pletosu* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, Renașterea, 2014), 33.
 11. Cf. National Archives of Romania, Bistrița-Năsăud County Branch, coll. Anton Coșbuc, file 274, fols. 8–13.
 12. Cârja et al., 18.
 13. His memoirs, published in German, are kept in the National Archives of Bistrița (coll. Gustav Zikeli, file 5/1951). See: Gustav Zikeli, *Bistritz zwischen 1880 und 1950: Erinnerungen eines Buchdruckers* (Munich: Südostdeutsches Kulturwerk, 1989). We use there the Romanian version of his notes.
 14. National Archives of Romania, Bistrița-Năsăud County Branch, coll. Gustav Zikeli, file 5/1951, fol. 8. Cf. Rudolf Rösler, “Überzeugter Sozialdemokrat: Gustav Zikeli,” *Siebenbürgische Zeitung* (Munich) 5, 31 (March 2007): 6.

15. For more information about his role in this movement, and also about the history of Transylvanian Saxons in Bistrița, see: Vasile Ciobanu, *Contribuții la cunoașterea istoriei sașilor transilvăneni (1918–1944)* (Sibiu: Hora, 2001), 346–347 et passim; Ioan Scurtu and Liviu Boar, eds., *Minoritățile naționale din România (1918–1925): Documente* (Bucharest: Arhivele Statului din România, 1995).
16. He even presents there an interesting episode from the beginning of the conflagration: “Right at the beginning of the War, Bistrița also had its war story, but a tragic-comical one. On a Tuesday afternoon in 1914, the drums announced that the enemy was close and those who wanted to leave the town could take the train. The trains were ready to go. The Russian offensive had reached southern Bukovina. The weekly market was held in those years in Marktplatz. There was a huge scary bustle in the market. Peasant women who had come to sell their produce took some of their vegetables, leaving behind more than half of their merchandise, and fled by cart or on foot through Heiendorf or ran to neighboring villages. The railway station was full of peasants and townspeople eager to leave. Many panicked citizens rented peasant carts and left the town of Bistrița. In the afternoon, walking to the station became almost life-threatening. People were jostling, pushing, each seeking to board the first train. Towards the evening, we heard that there were battles on Treppiger Höhe. Some heard gunshots. The night passed and the enemy did not come. . . The next morning it was proved that it has been a false alarm. The mayor was removed from office.” National Archives of Romania, Bistrița-Năsăud County Branch, coll. Gustav Zikeli, file 5/1951, fol. 43.
17. *Ibid.*, 46.
18. *Ibid.*, 47.
19. *Ibid.*, 49.

Abstract

The Image of the Great Union As Reflected in Memoirs from the Bistrița-Năsăud Area

Using documents provided by the Bistrița-Năsăud branch of the Romanian National Archives, but also from other sources, the author tries in this research to investigate the way in which the image of the Great Union of 1 December 1918 is reflected in the memoirs written by people from that area. He analyzes the writings of Dr. Pavel Tofan, who played an active part in the organization of the Romanian National Guards of Bistrița, of Albert Porkoláb, also an important participant to those events, and those of Gustav Zikeli, a Saxon from Bistrița. The investigation provides an interethnic perspective on the reception of the event and it also brings to attention the way in which the intellectuals from the aforementioned space saw the union of Transylvania with Romania, also offering to the reader new information about some uninvestigated sources and aspects of the topic.

Keywords

Pavel Tofan, Gustav Zikeli, Albert Porkoláb, Alba Iulia, Romanian National Guards, Transylvanian Saxons