

## Refugees in Their Own Country Women, Children and Elderly People Caught up in the Transylvanian Theaters of War during the Great War

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*„The poor fugitives were  
desperate...”*  
*(Sextil Pușcariu)*

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**S**PEAKING ABOUT refugees today is perhaps more relevant than ever before, if we consider the waves of immigrants who are continually knocking at the gates of Europe. Of course, in recent years the magnitude of this phenomenon has become worrisome, at least according to some, but it is far from new in the history of the old continent. At the end of the seventeenth century, the world experienced movements and transfers of population, large or small, depending on the scale of the military conflicts that generated them. Of all these moments in history, however, it was the First World War that gave birth to an emblematic figure of the twentieth and the early twenty-

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first centuries: the war refugee.<sup>1</sup> Everywhere in Europe people could be seen at that time fleeing the advancing conflagration or getting ready to do so. This far from negligible segment of the population was to be “forgotten” for a long time in the research and the studies dedicated to the Great War.<sup>2</sup>

It was only in the 1980s that interest in the topic was piqued by a few literary works and tentative historical studies. In the decades that followed, research on the refugees of the Great War increased and diversified substantially, outlining a genuine direction of research in this regard. The results are quantified today in numerous studies and works that have reconstructed the ordeal of the refugees from the First World War, in its regional and continental facets and dimensions.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of this sustained interest over the past few decades, the refugees of the Great War continue to be a topic that has not been fully addressed yet. We refer here especially to the civilian populations located in the border areas of many warring states, such as Austria-Hungary, Russia, France and Italy, which had to take refuge from the war fronts inside their own countries. Their experiences and their status as *refugees in their own homelands*<sup>4</sup> represent a dimension of the war that is still little known, but which can complete and nuance the image of refugees and refuge during the Great War.

Among them were civilians from Transylvania, living along the border with Austrian Bukovina and the Kingdom of Romania. Their proximity to the theaters of operations forced them to abandon their threatened or invaded areas of residence and to seek safety inside the Danube monarchy. There were two such border areas, located at the northeastern and southeastern edges of dualist Hungary. They were inhabited by three major ethnic groups, Romanians, Hungarians and Saxons, accompanied, especially in the urban areas, by Jews.

From the very beginning it should be noted that although Transylvania, as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, had entered the war in August 1914, the civilian population had only experienced the front in isolated and temporary cases. Of course, border areas were the most exposed, for instance, in northern Maramureș and Bistrița, or along the southeastern border of Transylvania. Still, the menace was not permanent but episodic and of varying intensity. For example, if the areas in northern Maramureș<sup>5</sup> and Bistrița<sup>6</sup> were plundered and occupied for a short time in the autumn of 1914, remaining then permanently under threat until 1916, the invasion of southeastern Transylvania occurred in the summer of 1916 and the occupation by Romanian troops lasted little over a month.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we shall be referring to these two border areas where the military occupation regime lasted for different periods, but where the withdrawal of the civilian population followed a relatively identical scenario in terms of forms of manifestation, attitudes and behavior among the refugees. It was not too different from what was happening at that time in the rest of Europe. Its peculiarities

were determined by the duration of the occupation, the refugees' ethnic and social profile and, last but not least, by the support of the authorities and the communities from the areas to which they had been relocated.

## The Military Invasions of Northern and Southeastern Transylvania from 1914–1916

### The Moskals Are Coming! (September–October 1914)

ONLY TWO months after the outbreak of the war, the communities on the northern border of Transylvania, along the Sighetu Marmăției–Borșa–Romuli–Rotunda Pass line, found themselves under threat because of the advancing Russian troops. In the summer of 1914, the two Russian armies that had invaded Eastern Prussia, Galicia and Bukovina had advanced very swiftly, burning down entire villages and displacing thousands of civilians who stood in their way.<sup>8</sup> Under the pressure of these invasion forces, many civilians chose to withdraw to the interior of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, some reaching Sighetu Marmăției and other neighboring towns or villages. Most of them were Jews trying to find shelter from the destruction caused by the Russian armies.<sup>9</sup> Referring to this episode, Ioan Doroș, a priest from Slatina noted: “At the beginning of September 1914 many refugees from Galicia, most of them Jews, of course, descended upon Sighet, the capital of Marmăția. Some of them also looked for a safe place in Slatina.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the first contact of the inhabitants of the area was not with the invading troops but with the refugees from Galicia who were retreating from their path. Their untimely arrival generated the first signs of concern among the civilians in the area, who were still trying to make sense of the war that had recently broken out. The horrors described by the newcomers sowed fear and alarm in the hearts of the inhabitants, preparing them for the refuge they themselves were soon to embark on. This mayhem was fueled even further by the rumors that kept on spreading regarding the invaders' impending approach.

Amid such a climate of panic and despair, in the first days of October 1914, the civilian population of Sighetu Marmăției and the surrounding villages began to flee en masse, without awaiting the invaders' arrival. On October 3, the Russian troops occupied Sighet and the surrounding villages, posing a continuous threat to areas that were still unoccupied.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, other Russian troops threatened to break through the Romuli–Rodna–Cârlibaba–Iacobeni line and penetrate the Bistrița area. The civilians from those villages panicked and ran away.<sup>12</sup>

However, within a mere few days, the immediate and categorical intervention of the Austro-Hungarian and German troops in the area stopped the Russian offensive and the invaded areas were liberated.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the refugees managed to return to their homes in a short time. Their refuge had not lasted long, but was nonetheless traumatic for those who had experienced it. For those north of Bistrița, the October refuge was to be just one episode in a series of short-term evacuations that were to occur in the years 1914–1916.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Romanians Are Coming! (August–September 1916)**

**T**WO YEARS later, the communities of southeastern Transylvania located on the border with Romania were, in their turn, invaded and subjected to a regime of military occupation. This time the enemy was not the Russian troops, but the Romanian army, which had recently joined the war. In the summer of 1916, after two years of neutrality, Romania had decided to enter the war alongside the Entente, invading Transylvania on the night of 27/28 August. Units of the Romanian army entered Transylvania simultaneously, through several passes in the Carpathians, occupying a rather wide territory that stretched, to the north, up to the line of the Mureș River, and to the south, up to the neighboring areas of Sibiu and Petroșani.<sup>15</sup>

Entire villages, towns and communities located on the border with Romania experienced then a sudden transition from one political authority to another, and from a war waged at home to a regime of military occupation. Men and women, young and old, of various nationalities—the entire civilian population suddenly awoke trapped in a theater of war. Scared and unprepared, some chose to seek refuge, while others stayed put. What followed was an almost generalized exodus of the Saxon and Hungarian populations, who took refuge either in the interior of Transylvania, or in Budapest and in other counties in Hungary. Their retreat lasted from August 1916 until November of the same year, when, given the defeat of the Romanian armies, which were driven beyond the Carpathians, most of the refugees returned home, bearing the pain and memories of an unrepeatable experience.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Refuge: Mental Climate and Predisposing Factors**

**L**IKE WITH other refugees in their own country,<sup>17</sup> the Transylvanians' en masse displacement from the years 1914–1916 began in a climate of panic and concern, created by refugees arriving from other war-torn ar-

east and fueled by contradictory news and rumors that had relentlessly reached every community. Referring to the psychological impact the refugees from other areas had on the civilian population living along the border between Bistrița and Bukovina, the priest Pamfilu Grapini noted, in June 1916, that: “On June 11, the Russians once again broke the line between the Dniester and the Prut rivers and occupied Chernivtsi, and our troops evacuated the town and retreated before their tremendous power. Refugees from Bukovina passed through here on June 19–21 and the commune [Șanț] is full of them. And today, on June 26, there are even more refugees . . . the commune is barely coping with the horde of refugees, and every yard is full of carts, adults and children.”<sup>18</sup> Having arrived in successive waves, the refugees brought along with them other civilians as well, who were retreating from the path of the war.

The general anxiety was also stoked by rumors according to which enemies were nearby, posing an immediate threat to the population. It is interesting that not all of them reacted in the same way. While some, more fearful, gave credence to the rumors and prepared for departure right away, others waited for the authorities’ evacuation order. In the fall of 1914 in Sighetu Marmăției, for example, the news that the Russian armies were in close proximity drove a large part of the population to quickly leave the city, before the authorities could announce the evacuation of civilians.<sup>19</sup> A different thing happened in Brașov in August 1916. There, in spite of the rumors coming from Bucharest regarding Romania’s preparations to join the war, the Hungarian and Saxon populations only sought refuge when the Romanian troops crossed the Carpathians and the authorities decided to evacuate the city and the endangered areas.

The evacuation decisions and orders contained precise instructions as to the salvaging of movable property (securities, papers, documents of certain institutions, etc.) and of the population. For example, in Brașov, in August 1916, after the mayor and the city officials hastily launched the operation of saving the movable property of the city, which was to be loaded on trains and sent to Budapest, the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior issued a series of instructions about the evacuation of the territory. All the Hungarians and the Saxons, as well as all the men between 17 and 55 years of age (initially only those between 18 and 50 years of age) who were fit for military service were asked to leave the villages and withdraw beyond the line of the Mureș River. Special measures targeted the mayors and officials of cities and villages who, during the evacuation, had to ensure the functioning of the institutions through deputies and provisional councils. The authorities’ orders were followed by a substantial part of the non-Romanian population. Thousands of Hungarians and Saxons withdrew from the path of the Romanian troops, taking refuge either in inner Transylvania, or in Budapest.<sup>20</sup>

The image of the refuge was downright apocalyptic and remained deeply imprinted in the memory of those who wrote down the memories of what they had experienced during those days. The Lutheran pastor Gustav Schiel provided a highly suggestive testimony about Braşov on 28 August 1916: “As early as 4 o’clock in the morning, everyone was in the street and the dreaded question: ‘should I flee or stay at home?’ shook every heart.” Hundreds of people were rushing to the station: “They had packed the necessary things and carried them in every imaginable wagon and carriage—even on wheelbarrows and prams—, still burdened with backpacks and crates, with little children in their arms, the older children holding their hands or clinging to the hems of their coats—a sad sight.”<sup>21</sup> The panic that gripped the population and the immediate impulse to take refuge from the enemy troops filled every endangered town or village. We find testimonies to that effect in memoirs and journals from the time of the Great War,<sup>22</sup> reflecting the situation in towns such as Braşov,<sup>23</sup> Sibiu,<sup>24</sup> Cisnădie,<sup>25</sup> Sfântu Gheorghe, and Miercurea-Ciuc (in the refuge of 1916), as well as in Sighetu Marmăţiei,<sup>26</sup> or Şanţ (the refuge of 1914).<sup>27</sup>

## The Path to Exile

**W**HETHER WE refer to the 1914 refuge (of the population in northern Transylvania) or the 1916 refuge (of civilians from southeastern Transylvania), the attitudes and behavior of the refugees were more or less the same. Their forced departure was the beginning of a traumatic and unpredictable ordeal. The refuge was tantamount to a leap into the unknown. They knew the place they were leaving but had no inkling where they would end up. They knew when they left but were clueless as to when they would be back. Everything was under the sign of unpredictability.

As a rule, the first to go were the well-to-do ones. They closed their shops, hastily gathered their most precious possessions and headed to the train stations. In Sighet, for instance, in 1914, the first to leave the city were the affluent ones. Among them were many Jews, who, judging by the experience of their brethren in Galicia, decided to leave, but not before marking the gates of their houses with the sign of the cross, to protect them from the fury of the Russian armies.<sup>28</sup> They were followed, one by one, by all those who had enough money to support themselves in exile. Women, children, the elderly and the few men left in towns after the general mobilization of August could be seen by the hundreds, all jostling one another at the station and trying to climb on board the trains provided by the local authorities. Due to the unimaginable congestion and the insufficient number of train cars, some of which were intended for the transport of the city’s financial assets, much of the luggage was left on the platforms or abandoned.

Those who did not manage to get on the trains left by cart, while others, less fortunate, had to walk in search of a means of transport that would take them as far away from danger as possible. The iconic image of the moment remains that of an exit street, on the road from Câmpulung to Tisza, which “was blocked by dozens of wagons, carts drawn by men and even baby buggies, all loaded to the brim.”<sup>29</sup> The convoys of refugees were joined by some hospital patients, with the exception of the bed-ridden ones, who remained in the care of some Catholic nuns. The city authorities retreated together with the civilian population,<sup>30</sup> and so did the army, the gendarmerie, the police and the banks, only a few of their representatives remaining in town.

According to the testimony of a contemporary, “Máramarossziget [Sighetu Marmăției], a pretty settlement, became as desolate as a graveyard. Locked gates and windows, closed blinds; only here and there did the howling of a stray dog disturb the eerie silence.”<sup>31</sup>

The same happened with the population of the villages around Sighet and along the Sighet–Borșa–Romuli–Șanț–Cârlibaba line, threatened and occupied temporarily by the enemy troops. This is how the priest Pamfilu Grapini described the mood of the population of Rodna, in the autumn of 1914:

*On 5 October, the news arrived that Russian patrols had shown up in Borșa, all the way to Telciu and Romuli, and our soldiers had taken refuge in Salva. On 6 October we went to Rodna so Liciniu [his son] could go to school. When I arrived in Rodna, it was mayhem; all the shops were closed, the merchants had all run away. The court authorities, the forestry and mining administrations, they were all either gone, or ready to leave, loading up, offering up to 200 kroner to any man who owned a horse or several horses, to drive this man or that one to Bistrița. . . . I went to the railway station in Rodna. There were lots of Jews, with packages and other gifts, upset, crying. The train had left before the prescribed time. The station master, the employees, the servants, the furniture, all gone, and there were no employees at the train station. The houses were locked up and without furniture. They had all run away by train, with everything they had. . . .*<sup>32</sup>

The dramatic departure from home and separation from the loved ones (some elderly and homebound, others deprived of financial means), from the community and the native place is revealed by the refugees’ memoirs, thanks to which we can reconstruct today the scope and depth of their trauma. Here is what the mayor of Brașov, Ernst Karl Schnell, wrote down in his memoirs: “I can’t fully describe the pain that gripped my heart back then. Having to leave your hometown in your flight from the enemy is a difficult fate. We were moving forward into a future that was completely uncertain, haunted by a terrifying sense, as if we had lost the ground beneath our feet, as if we had lost any support. The native

place where we had felt so good, living in safe conditions, the native place where we had thought that we, and our children, and our children's children were protected was now lost, maybe forever."<sup>33</sup> No less suggestive is Sextil Pușcariu's description of the fugitives: "In the train station of Mediaș, I saw crowded trains of fugitives passing, with familiar faces from Brașov, people I had met so often in the street, and now I could see them in fantastic attires, with one piece of luggage packed in a hurry. . . . The poor fugitives were desperate. . ."<sup>34</sup>

What did the journey actually mean for these refugees? Depending on the means of transport they could find, the journey was yet another big challenge they had to cope with. It lasted from 2 or 3 days up to a week, with all the stops they made in various localities, to rest or to wait for one another. A testimony of the Reformed minister Károly Takács from Miercurea-Ciuc (Csíkszereda) eloquently describes his one-week journey to the county of Hajdú, his place of refuge: "After two nights and two days [by train], I arrived in Kolozsvár [Cluj]; here I waited for my family. They had fled from Étfalva (Etfaláu) by cart and after a few days of rest, we continued our journey towards Ciuc (Csíkszék) County and then to the county of Hajdú. . . . in Hajdúböszörmény, I settled together with my family."<sup>35</sup>

Most affected were the children, the women and the elderly. They had left in a hurry and were dressed scantily, deprived of food and forced to travel in freight wagons or in open carts, at the mercy of the wind and the cold outside. Because of overcrowding, the streets and the alleys had become roads of no return, places of countless dramas, caused by the loss of and separation from the loved ones. "In the crowded train station in Vinț," Lucian Blaga wrote, "I managed to get on a train only at the cost of bruises all over my body. A lot of people were fleeing towards the interior of Hungary. They said that a woman who came from Burzenland and was wailing next to us had lost her infant, from her arms, in the welter of people at the train station in Brașov."<sup>36</sup>

As regards the refugees' destinations, most of them sought to reach the capital of dualist Hungary or get as close to it as possible, since there they would find shelter. In 1914, the refugees from northern Transylvania followed three directions. The first was to Satu Mare and from there to Budapest.<sup>37</sup> On 4 October 1914 alone, 6 trains with refugees from Maramureș arrived in the central station of the city.<sup>38</sup> The second direction was towards Baia Mare and Cluj, and the third to Bistrița. While most of the refugees to the capital of Hungary were wealthy Jews, families of officials, lawyers and physicians whose financial situation allowed them to travel longer distances and pay for temporary accommodation, those travelling to the other two destinations were generally of more modest means, hoping to find shelter in churches, or among friends and relatives.<sup>39</sup> Not infrequently, their destination was dictated by the greater convoy of confused and desperate people.

For those deprived of material means, the solution at hand was taking refuge in the mountains or in the surrounding villages. This is attested in the parish chronicles and in the memoirs or diary entries of priests from villages located behind the fronts, flooded with refugees. As the minister Éliás Mosolygó from Borşa wrote, among others: “As seen from the above, in the village of Borşa, because people were afraid or terrified, being so few, they all took to the hills, where they heard the shots but, thanks to the mercy of God, they were spared from the wrath of the enemy...”<sup>40</sup>

In 1916, the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior insisted on regulating more strictly the destinations to which the refugees were directed, dividing them in terms of their areas of residence, and sending them to a few counties in Hungary, as follows: those in the counties of Ciuc and Mureş–Turda (Maros–Torda) were settled in the counties of Hajdú and Szabolcs; those in the counties of Trei Scaune (Háromszék) and Odorhei (Udvarhely), in Békés and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok; those in the counties of Sibiu (Szeben) and Alba de Jos (Alsó-Fehér), in the county of Bács-Bodrog; those coming from the counties of Braşov (Brassó) and Târnava Mare (Nagy-Küküllő) were headed to the county of Torontál; those from the county of Făgăraş (Fogaras) were steered to the county of Cenad (Csanád); those from the county of Târnava Mică (Kis-Küküllő) were distributed in Csongrád; not least, those in the counties of Hunedoara (Hunyad) and Caraş-Severin (Krassó-Szörény) were assigned temporary residence in the county of Arad. The measure had been prompted by the growing number of refugees who had taken Budapest and its surroundings by storm during the first years of the war. Therefore, the authorities sought to lessen the pressure on the capital city and to guide the refugees towards other villages or towns that could accommodate them.

Due to the overcrowding of trains and the difficulty with which they could procure other means of transportation, many refugees did not reach the assigned destination, but headed for other places in Hungary where they had relatives or friends who could put them up. Of course, the rich went to Budapest and other cities like Miskolc, Debrecen, Bratislava, Komárno (Révkomárom) or Győr, where there were already hundreds of other refugees.<sup>41</sup>

## The Refugees in Numbers

**T**HE NUMBER of refugees from Transylvania in the years 1914 and 1916 remains to this day difficult to quantify because of the high mobility of the population. There are only partial estimates, which cannot provide a complete picture of the full scale of this phenomenon. For example, it is es-

estimated that of the 21,000 inhabitants of the city of Sighet, over 19,000 fled towards the interior of the country in 1914. The number of the other fugitives from the Sighet–Borșa–Romuli–Rotunda Pass area is unknown.

By contrast, as regards the refugees from 1916, coming from southeastern Transylvania, some sources endorse the idea that their number was in the thousands. Around Sighișoara (Schäßburg, Segesvár) alone there were more than 100,000 refugees,<sup>42</sup> who desperately sought to get on the trains packed with people and goods, or to find other fast means of transport to Cluj, or to other towns in central Transylvania.<sup>43</sup> According to Miklós Betegh, a government commissioner in Transylvania, over 206,000 people<sup>44</sup> crossed the mountains through the Piatra Craiului Pass alone, fleeing the occupying forces.

Beyond these partial figures, one thing is certain: the number of these fugitives represents a percentage, as yet unknown, but not inconsiderable, of the over 6,000,000<sup>45</sup> European refugees displaced by the Great War.

## The Refuge: Acceptance, Rejection, Adaptation

ONCE THEY had arrived at their destination, especially those who went to Budapest and other large towns in Hungary were welcomed by the locals, in train stations, with food and money. Moreover, the local authorities did their best to identify and allocate available housing to them.

It should be added that civic associations, the Red Cross, and Jewish organizations mobilized in exemplary fashion in their support. These organizations intervened with the state authorities for the allocation of funds designed to ensure a decent life for the refugees. In Budapest, where many Jews from the counties of northern Hungary took refuge, the Jewish community had to multiply its efforts, on the one hand, in order to provide them with material support, and on the other, to face the society's growing hostility towards them.<sup>46</sup>

The measures adopted by the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior for dispersing the mass of refugees and distributing them in various localities were designed to transfer some of the burden of their upkeep from the government to local communities.<sup>47</sup> At first, the host communities welcomed the refugees with compassion, giving them staple nourishment (milk for children, coffee, tea, butter and bread for adults), clothing and temporary housing. The case of the city of Debrecen is well known. There, upon the arrival of refugees from Transylvania, in 1916, the city authorities and certain charities organized activities in support of the newcomers. There, as early as 1 July 1916, on the initiative of mayor Endre Márk, the Committee for Transylvanian Refugees was established. It was in charge of four committees responsible for issues related to the provi-

sion of housing, food, money and jobs. Thanks to this body, the refugees benefited from the outset from advice and support in finding accommodation, in the distribution of financial support from the state, and most of all in identifying a place of work in the community.

In fact, the issue of jobs was one of the thorniest, both for the community and for the refugees. The war brought major changes in the job market, reversing gender roles and causing almost insurmountable financial crises. It was often difficult for the community itself to find jobs and to cope with alarming inflation rates. Therefore, the arrival of the refugees created additional problems and competition. That is why, not infrequently, on the streets of cities with refugees one could hear voices hostile to the fugitives, accused of “stealing” jobs. For the refugees, finding a job proved to be a real challenge. The most afflicted were the industrial workers, the craftsmen and the farmers who had lost their entire life’s gain in a second, being forced to subsist on the minimum aid they received from the state. The situation of civil servants, notaries, lawyers, teachers and priests was somewhat different, as the local authorities integrated them in the administrative system of the municipalities, putting them in the service of refugees.<sup>48</sup>

Special attention was paid to children. Charities rushed to support them from the outset, providing them with food and shelter, and helping with their integration in local schools. A noteworthy effort was made by Stefánia, a charitable association from Debrecen, which took over some the refugees’ children and placed them in a spa, distributing others in a public assistance center.<sup>49</sup> Pupils and students were integrated in the local school system.

It is undeniable that, in addition to the modest financial support from the state, the most consistent aid came from the civil society. For instance, on 8 September 1916 alone, the amount of 32,812 crowns was collected in Debrecen from the charity balls, banquets and performances organized in the city.<sup>50</sup> The amount obtained was used exclusively for food and money for the refugees.

## Being a Refugee: Attitudes, Feelings

**F**OR THOSE forced to live in exile, the period spent away from home, in communities that could be friendly or hostile, amounted to a hiatus in their lives. It was as if their entire existence had been brutally put on hold, as they were forced to start over from scratch, in a community in which they could not integrate. Having left in a hurry, with a few things gathered in a bag or suitcase, often separated from their loved ones, who had been left helpless at home or had been assigned to other areas, the Transylvanian refugees incessantly nourished the thought of what they had lost. They had left behind homes,

households, businesses, and loved ones about whom they no longer knew anything. Losing them meant almost the loss of their own humanity. The thought that everything they had gathered in a lifetime had been shattered, looted or destroyed by the enemy was dreadful. Their inner struggles are poignantly captured in the notes of the Reformed minister Károly Takács, who wrote the following: “My flock have lost all their assets, everything apart from their lives; the Romanian soldiers burned down many of their houses, robbed their stores, took all the valuables from the houses that were left intact by mistake, so that if we go back to Csíkszereda, we will not find anything other than ruins or just the four walls of our rooms. Dire poverty awaits us, particularly considering the impending winter.”<sup>51</sup>

The situation was desperate, as their daily life as refugees was utterly unpredictable. Despite the support of the host communities, the lack of a regular income, the instability of employment and the ongoing war increased their anxiety and despair.

## The Return

**T**HAT IS why the news according to which their native areas had been liberated and they could return home was received with great joy and satisfaction, generating bursts of exhilaration among the refugees. This happened in 1914 for the refugees from northern Maramureș, and in 1916 for those from the southeast of Transylvania.

Referring to the episode of 1914, it must be emphasized that the victories obtained by the armies of the Central Powers in northeastern Hungary in the first decade of October 1914 led to the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Sighetu Marmăției and from the villages temporarily occupied by the enemy. On 10 October, Hungarian newspapers published a press release of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, announcing the fact that the Russian invaders had been driven away from the counties of Upper Hungary, and that it was possible for the refugees to return to their homes.<sup>52</sup> Upon hearing the news, most of them decided to do so, although they had been extremely well received and treated in the host communities. Their period of exile, which had lasted from a few days for some to several weeks for others, thus came to an end.

At the same time, the refugees from occupied Galicia remained in Budapest and in the surrounding areas. Their return would have to be delayed until the spring of the following year or even later. The presence of these refugees and their long-term upkeep, at the expense of their host communities, made this problem increasingly complex. As the war dragged on and the society became

increasingly exhausted and devoid of resources, the refugees turned into a burden that seemed unmanageable in moral and material terms. That is why the successive waves of refugees from the years that followed had to cope with a dual, contradictory attitude on the part of the communities in which they were settled. On the one hand, they were welcomed and treated with compassion and understanding, and on the other, they were met with hostility and distrust.

For the refugees from the year 1916, the end of the exile was brought by the victories on the Transylvanian front of the Ninth Army, led by the German General Erich von Falkenhayn. At the beginning of October, this army forced the Romanian troops to retreat from the areas they had occupied on the other side of the Carpathians.<sup>53</sup> As of mid-October, some of the refugees rushed to return home. A circular of the Ministry of the Interior issued on 21 October regulated their return, stipulating that farmers, traders and craftsmen would have priority in returning, followed by women, the elderly and children. It was a measure designed to avoid the overcrowding of the means of transportation and, at the same time, to prepare the reception of the others. The return was controlled and phased over the span of several months. For example, the last fugitives left the city of Debrecen in the summer of 1917, when the school year ended.

Upon their return home, a new stage began for the refugees: reconstruction. They had to rebuild not just the material assets they had left behind, but also their moral, human fiber, which had been severely shaken in the few months they had been in exile. The effort was huge. In a traditional society such as that of Transylvania, extremely attached to property ownership and a stable residence, their loss was tantamount to social downgrading, to a degradation in the eyes of the world. Therefore, their restoration was a social and moral imperative, by which the individual and the family restored their connection with the past, with tradition, with their family prestige and memories.

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(Translated by CARMEN-VERONICA BORBÉLY)

## Notes

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### **Abstract**

Refugees in Their Own Country: Women, Children and Elderly People Caught up in the Transylvanian Theaters of War during the Great War

The First World War engendered an emblematic image of the twentieth century: the figure of the war refugee. For more than four years, Europe was a theatre of war in which entire populations were displaced from their regions of origin, while others awaited similar decisions. Having entered the war in 1914, Transylvania was one of the areas where refugees sought shelter. Throughout the war, in different areas and in various stages, the Transylvanian population had to cope with several waves of refugees who tried to find a safe haven in the interior of the province. This research aims to reconstruct and analyze this experience of the civilian refugees from the border areas of Transylvania, who looked for safety inside their own province. In other words, we intend to focus on the behavior of the refugees and on that of the population from the receiving areas, the attitudes and reactions of the host communities, the image of the refugees and its reception at the local community level, the initiatives taken by the state authorities and by charitable organizations, the difficult integration in the new communities, the host communities' reactions of solidarity or rejection, the refugees' return and reintegration in their places of origin, as well as the rebuilding of areas and houses that had been partially or fully destroyed.

### **Keywords**

refugees, First World War, Transylvania, Austria-Hungary, civilians, trauma