

# Utopian Thinking in Transylvania

## German and Hungarian Case Studies

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I'D LIKE to recall two colorful cases of practical utopians here, belonging to the southern part of Transylvania, one of them a German (Arthur “Gusto” Gräser), and the other a Hungarian (Béla Bicsérdy), who actually share a formal, German-inspired Austro-Hungarian social, moral, political and cultural tradition. Both of them had people wearing uniforms in their families, because the uniform—be it military or civilian—signified at the time of their initiation into life (I mean the threshold between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) dignity, bourgeois respectability, social recognition and discipline. Apart from their rather liberal approach to religious matters (Gräser mocked Max Weber’s Protestant work ethics by being legendarily lazy, while Bicsérdy opted for the Oriental religions and especially for Zoroaster’s *Avesta*), both were town people, and both felt that they had some sort of particular, humanitarian mission to share. Both were Transylvanian, that is, more cosmopolitan than the rest of the especially rural-centered, historic parts of Romania.



ARTHUR GUSTAV "GUSTO" GRÄSER  
(1879–1958)

Both experienced a peculiar revolt against the values embodied by their fathers, but this was pretty common if we think about psychoanalysis, which was the revolutionary religion at that time when it came to matters of the soul. It would be therefore more important to say that both of them opted for nature to replace society, and that they conceived the human being in a larger, organic perspective, as part of a wider, cosmic order. Moreover, both felt, as Nietzsche said in his second *Untimely Meditation*, that the times of history are gone: that man must throw off the burdens of the past, in order to live an "enormous present," as Norman Mailer labeled this feeling, attributed by him to the hipster, in *The White Negro*.

When we come to the communitarian model of life Bicsérdy and Gräser had trusted, we realize that it was merely empirical rather than scientifically grounded. Gräser came to Monte Verità not only to find reclusion, but especially to

live a peculiar experience of the senses, shared by people floating all around the place in some sort of happy, sensorial dissemination. He was a rather solitary figure, who didn't like Monte Verità at first, as reported, retreating, in order to fulfill the personal program of an exemplary solitude, in a series of caves and improvised abodes, artistically adorned with ribbons, mystical symbols and other artistic oddities, where he actually managed to raise eight happy children, and to contain a cautiously dissatisfied wife.

On the contrary, Béla Bicsérdy shared the belief that a clean and organized bourgeois home is essential for a prophet to be trusted and believed. Even when he moved to Ada Kaleh island on the Danube, building a house and accommodating his family were his top priorities. Bicsérdy was family-centered, while for Gräser family was nothing more than a living unit very similar to a pack of happy wolves or a flock of birds. Bicsérdy also liked the stability provided by money, while Gräser was an errant saint and a beggar. He also had a superior sense of artistic sufferance, being repeatedly arrested for minor social crimes, related to his life as a hippy. A saint must experience the unfair malignity of the world—he used to say—if his goal remains redemption. By redemption Gräser didn't primarily understand *Imitatio Christi*, that is, *via negativa*, to live in such a way as to neutralize your instincts and your body, but—in the already mentioned Nietzschean terms—human elevation, artistic magnificence and charisma, that is, the access to the so-called “great gestures” (*Gebärde*) which characterize human superiority. “*Gebärde*, with its Nietzschean implications of splendor and magnificence, was a key word in the Schwabing-Ascona vocabulary”—Martin Green says in his seminal *Mountain of Truth*,<sup>1</sup> the best book written on the subject so far. “It suggests the exaltation of the body to a larger than physical dignity, it expresses a splendor of life that is at once sculptural and biological.”

*Splendor*, which is actually a term coming from the Renaissance, also means an artistic and sexual transfiguration of the body, as well as a peculiar effervescence of solar worship. As we remember, Nietzsche's Zarathustra worshipped the sun, and called himself a “midday man,” which meant an anti-Romantic attitude, because the midday man attains excellence by completely eliminating the inner and outer shadows of his being. Gusto Gräser had resolved his “Oedipus complex” by becoming a self-made artist, to the great sorrow of the old man who was a former student at Heidelberg and a well-respected judge in his rather small town of Kronstadt, and who really hoped that at least one of his sons—of whom he had three, Karl, Arthur and Ernst—would be a respected member of the local Protestant community. Luck had apparently left him, because Karl, who became an officer at the time Gusto reached Monte Verità, decided to drop his uniform in order to join his brother in Ascona.

Arthur, born on 16 February 1879, changed his name into “Gusto,” “because he felt gusto: he took pleasure in life,”<sup>2</sup> being known later, for a short

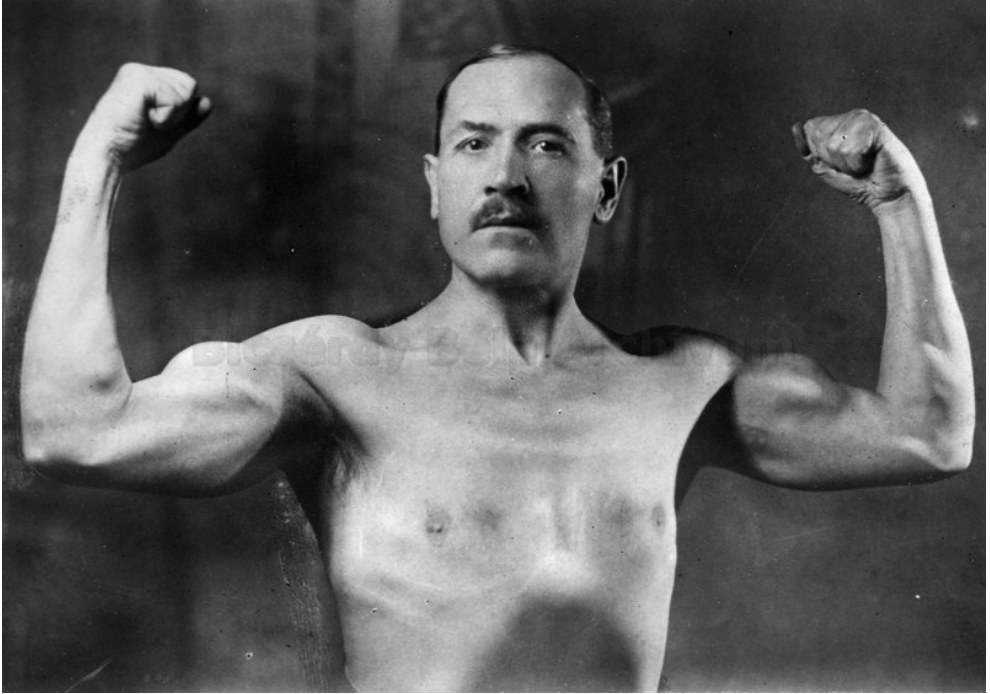
period of time, as Arthur Siebenbürger. He was awarded the 1<sup>st</sup> prize in wood-carving at the 1896 Millennium Exhibition in Budapest, and thus he officially got his license as an artist. Two years later he joined the painter Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach as an apprentice, living in the Himmelhof colony of artists outside Vienna, also known for the members' sexual liberalism and nudism, as well as for their interest in *ars combinatoria* type sciences and theosophy.

Among the seven members who founded the Monte Verità community in Ascona we find Ferdinand Brune, who came from Graz with a vivid interest in theosophy. The others were Gusto Gräser, Henri Oedenkoven (from Antwerp) and his wife Ida Hofmann (from Montenegro), the latter's sister, Jenny, Karl Gräser (a lieutenant at that time, Gusto's brother), and Lotte Hattemer, who came from Berlin. They met in Munich in 1900, acknowledged that they were fed up with human society and with civilization and decided to withdraw from the world, by founding a commune of people belonging to nature (*Naturmenschen*) amid the mild slopes of Ascona, in Switzerland.

The pattern wasn't exactly Fourier's "falansterian" communal retreat, understood as a working community, but it resembled Thoreau's immersion in nature from *Walden*, which implied recapturing the lost cosmic energies through simplicity and solitude. A further, anarchist ingredient boosted the technique, coming on behalf of the Tolstoyans, akin to the Croydon Brotherhood in England, which had founded a Tolstoyan community in Purleigh, Essex, in 1896.

A prominent member of this community was John Coleman Kenworthy, who wrote the anti-capitalist Bible of the new lifestyle, entitled *The Anatomy of Misery*. Freely inspired by Marx, Kenworthy equated the new technological, greedy capitalism with the dawn of the pure, nature-centered human being, but, respecting the ideas of the epoch, he was also aware that man had become too frail to fight the technological monster in a face-to-face battle. David's sling when confronting Goliath was a good symbol of human dignity, but it was futile to believe that it could be reenacted. "It is impossible to fight the system with its own weapons," Kenworthy declared in *The Anatomy of Misery*, "one cannot touch pitch without being defiled." Accordingly, the *Naturmenschen* did not dream of a huge, universal revolution capable to fight and defeat the malignant System, but they believed in the exemplary force of the many, tiny local revolutions, functioning as exhibits capable to convert people by convincing them that a simpler, nature-centered existence is by all means manageable.

Most of them were anarchists deep down within their souls; but they also knew that the times of direct confrontation were over. As it would happen later in the counterculture of the 1960s, the newly founded organic communities had no intention to directly fight the system, but to challenge it by establishing an alternative reality. The great Tolstoy had already pioneered the idea that



BÉLA BICSÉRDY (1872–1951)

the Tolstoyans were Christians too, but “Christians outside the Church.” A big consequence concerning the understanding of power came out of this, because this was the moment when people started to perceive cultural legitimacy in the terms of the tension existing between the official canon and the subversive canons coded by the adjacent subcultures.

**B**ÉLA BICSÉRDY, who is far less known in the Western world than the Gräasers, also heralded the necessity to transcend the frailties of the human body by means of a powerful, spiritual enlightenment. We usually believe that man is good *because* he is ontologically so, since ontology is rooted in nature. But for Bicsérdy nature was only the starting point, not the goal; the target was to go beyond nature, to transcend one’s ontological premises, as Jesus had done it through self-sacrifice, crucifixion and ascension. Accordingly, Bicsérdy was an active prophet, wandering around to preach, to collect followers and disciples, to spread and disseminate his ideas, while Gräser was especially passive, living in his cave unnoticed and waiting for the believers to come to him.

The vegetarian Master was accidentally born on the 20 March 1872 in Pest, but he was raised in Făgăraș, a Southern Transylvanian town located in between

Hermannstadt (Sibiu) and Kronstadt (Braşov), where he also graduated, becoming a functionary of the state whose task was to supervise taxes. As a tax clerk he was posted to the north-western border of nowadays Romania, where he was contaminated by syphilis at the age of 21. After he realized that no doctor could cure his illness, in spite of visiting several European health institutions, Bicsérđy decided to take life into his own hands, by turning into a radical vegetarian and by doing hard physical training everyday, which provided him with tremendous strength and made him, as it has been recorded, one of the strongest people in Europe. At that time, the standard was the circus acrobat; well, Bicsérđy challenged a few of them to direct combat, being always the victor. He was proud to walk around in shorts in winter, and he set five world records in weightlifting, the most notable of them happening in 1922, in Cluj (at the age of 50!), when he bench-pressed 188 kilos. His energy was overwhelming; for instance, he spoke for 50 or even 60 hours uninterruptedly during his conferences. Some people from the audience went home, took a nap, and came back, only to find that the Master was still there, more energetic than ever.

Bicsérđy's central myth was life, while his arch-enemies were fatigue and death. His seminal book was entitled *A halál legyőzése*, which means *Defeating Death* (1924). It was sold in several thousand copies, mainly through direct subscription, by the author who promised everlasting vigor to the future vegetarians and a life which would go well beyond the age of 800. The Master served as a vivid example for at least several of his promises. His outstanding physical endeavors were achieved at the ages of 45 and 50. After becoming a vegetarian, he never fell ill, his hair loss stopped and he got back several of his lost teeth. Moreover, he was twice bitten by vipers while wandering in the Făgăraş Mountains, managing to neutralize the venom by overheating his body as if it was surrounded by an aura. Going to the marketplace, he easily lifted huge barrels of grain, making the peasants believe that he was possessed by the Devil.

Bicsérđy started to preach the benefits of vegetarianism in 1921, in Sibiu, the early experience being later expanded in order to become a mass hysteria, never experienced in Transylvania before. Huge crowds waited for hours to take part in his sermons, amidst crashed doors and broken windows. The police closed entire streets to contain the frantic mob. The Master seemed to be alien to the slightest sign of fatigue, speaking for 60 hours in a row about the necessity to return to nature and to ingest "life" instead of "death," which enters the body when you eat previously slaughtered animals. He was always calm and logical when speaking, entertaining the crowd with strictly rational arguments. Unlike other preachers, he never reached the ecstatic level of enlightened irrationality, suggesting that you do not need a special, trans-rational faculty in order to be enlightened and to return to the sure path of truth.

Again unlike Gräser, Bicsérdy was Gutenberg's disciple; he trusted the written letter as a tool of propaganda. When he came to learn that his prophetic substance has attained a proper level of spiritual maturation, Bicsérdy, who had not been a devoted scholar at the beginning of his career, started to write books frantically and to continuously improve his existing manuscripts and versions, so that an early book of, let's say, 240 pages was expanded within two or three years in order to become a thick tome of 700 or 800 pages. Bicsérdy was practically unstoppable when it came to writing, editing and selling out the products of his brain: he printed many thousands of copies of books, leaflets and excerpts, he sent them by mail all over the world (not for free, obviously...), which means that his belief in the force of the written letter was equaled only by his huge ego and by the belief that four apples a day and a clever fast can heal all the sorrows of civilization. He was a practical, not a speculative reader and writer, which means that he was not attracted by the philosophical or moral depths of the books he used to recommend. For him, each book was good insofar as it functioned as a recipe, as a practical guide to a better lifestyle.

Martin Green quotes the dancer Rudolf Laban, an inhabitant of Monte Verità, the inventor of modern dancing, full of dissonances and of broken chains of nervous, nevertheless beautiful choreography, who used to speak about the "festive being" of each person. ("A person's proper aim, in my view, is his own festive being.") From 1913, Laban moved his "dance farm" up to the hills of Monte Verità, urging its members to reach perfection by engaging in collective bodily performances, abusively suspected of organized pornography by the locals living in the valley. Bicsérdy also believed in the healing value of the "festive being." For instance, he solemnly announced that his transfiguration occurred on Christmas Eve 1912, within the effervescence of the feast. It was the precise moment when he had become, through vegetarian wisdom and endurance, the third embodiment of the immemorial Messiah, following Zoroaster and Christ.

He did so by activating his mystic aura, the so-called *feruer*. Derived from the Persian concept of *farvashi* (or *fravashi*), *feruer* was conceived by Bicsérdy as a spiritual veil, covering the body of the few who merited to be elected. The historian of religions Friedrich Creuzer, who studied the concept in a book published in 1810,<sup>3</sup> demonstrated that the understanding of *farvashi* in Persian mysticism is different from the significance of the ideal paradigm in Plato's system of thinking, because *feruer* functions as an intensity attached to each being, which can be activated through specific techniques of bodily and spiritual purification. *Feruer* is the reminiscence of the cosmic fire inherent to all beings; therefore Bicsérdy insisted that the body must reach a certain level of incandescence in order to be healed. By eating vegetables and fruits—that is, "life"—one may sustain the incandescence, whilst by ingesting "death"—slaughtered animals—the heat is dissipated.

The scholarly paradox of Bicsérdy's teaching consists in its lack of interest in classical Hinduism or Buddhism, which might be explained by the Master's special fidelity to the existing world. That is: no Nirvana, no detachment, but the ethics of staying within the world, in order to activate its potencies of healing.

**Y**OU PROBABLY remember Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, which is a novel dominated by the fictional hypothesis of an Anti-Buddha. Hesse visited Monte Verità several times, being also the author of a widely quoted text over there, "Artists and Psychoanalysis," written in 1918, after he left the sanatorium for mental conditions where he had been cured by one of Carl Gustav Jung's followers, the psychoanalyst Dr. Robert B. Lang. In this essay Hesse states that persons who have already activated their artistic dimension or are evidently in search of it have specific needs, and therefore they cannot be judged on the grounds of the common rules. The novel *Siddhartha* features a fictional confrontation between the enlightened Buddha and the young Siddhartha, his visitor, who does not want to become Buddha. There is an inner paradox in what you are preaching, Siddhartha says to Buddha. On the one hand, you say that the world is perfection, as every creature is perfectly harmonized with all the others. And then you preach the propensity for Nirvana, the necessity to leave the world by going beyond it. If the world is perfection, how can you explain that humans can reach their excellence only by stepping out of this perfection?

The challenge resounded to Nietzsche's understanding of the mission of the so-called "Zarathustrians," who are the special beings whose existence determines the quality of an epoch or that of a generation. Nietzsche stated that the universe in itself has no capacity to activate its Dionysian energy but by the intervention of an "opener," who opens the valve or lifts the lid of the boiling water, thus freeing the repressed energy. The "opener" must stay inside the world, not outside it. His power is not a moral one—guided by duty or limitations—, but it belongs to the vast realm of cosmic artistry. So aesthetics becomes the precise faculty which indicates that certain people managed to surpass the subtle threshold which marks the border between expressing and being expressed, between the will to create—which is human—and the never ending creative impersonality of the cosmic play.

Gusto Gräser happily quoted Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, who said that the decay of Christian civilization originated in Christ's decision to ascend to the heavens, instead of staying with his flock here, on earth. "Jesus preached no beyond," Gräser used to say to his listeners, during his open-air lectures held in Ascona. "Be ye happy. Just dare to live. Instinct is nature." The idea went up in time, permeated the counterculture of the Sixties, and later evolved in Peter Lamborn Wilson's (a.k.a. Hakim Bey's) idea of the TAZ, the Temporary Autonomous Zone, heralded in a book published in 1991. Rooted in the political syn-



tax of the good old anarchists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hakim Bey's idea suggests that by using violence in their aim to exercise full control over the masses, the political regimes necessarily generate the wish to establish "temporary autonomous zones" (TAZs), whose aim is to elude formal, centralized structures of control. You remember Tocqueville with his *Democracy in America*: the real power of a political system is measured by its will to raise dissidents...



## Notes

1. Martin Green, *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins. Ascona 1900–1920* (Hanover–London: University Press of New England, 1986), 33.
2. *Ibid.*, 53.
3. Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker besonders der Griechen* (Leipzig–Darmstadt: Carl Wilhelm Leske, 1810), 203.

## Abstract

### Utopian Thinking in Transylvania: German and Hungarian Case Studies

The paper intends to recall two Transylvanian personalities from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who triggered—each of them in his personal, specific way—lifestyle and social revolutions within a typical bourgeois community embedded in cautiousness and conformity. The protagonist of the quiet revolution was the “Wanderprediger” Gustav (Gusto) Gräser (1879–1958), “the Gandhi of the Western World” (as he was remembered), who is generally considered the “proto-hippy” of Europe. Born in Kronstadt (now Braşov), around 1900 he joined Henri Oedenkoven, his wife Ida Hofmann and a few other pacifists in order to establish the Monte Verità hippy community near Ascona, in Switzerland, also visited by prominent intellectuals like Hermann Hesse. The initiator of the noisy revolution was Béla Bicsérdy (1872–1951), who spent the first half of his life in Făgăraş, which happens to be the native town of the presenter. Struck by syphilis in the early years of his professional career, Bicsérdy decided to overcome the disease by taking up radical vegetarianism and by preaching the necessity of a spiritual asceticism, freely decanted from Zoroaster's *Avesta*. His lectures, attended by hundreds of frantic followers, ended up in a huge mass hysteria in Transylvania and in Hungary, aimed at “defeating Death,” as one of Bicsérdy's books heralded. The Master (as he called himself) illustrated his bodily transformation by setting weightlifting world records at the age of 50, he edited books and leaflets in endless rows of several thousand copies (all sold out), and managed to promote his campaigns in a truly Hollywood style, before moving to Ada Kaleh island in the middle of the Danube (where he founded a vegetarian community), and later to the United States, where he nevertheless died before reaching the age of 800, a vague upper limit he had promised to his ecstatic disciples.

## Keywords

utopian thinking, practical utopia, Monte Verità, Ascona, Gusto Gräser, vegetarianism, Béla Bicsérdy, Transylvania