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ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS MENTALITIES IN TRANSYLVANIA DURING THE TIME OF NICOLAUS OLAHUS

Around 1536–1537, Nicolaus Olahus, in his work „Hungaria”, wrote: „This whole Hungarian Kingdom includes in our present time different nations — Hungarians, Germans, Bohemians, Slavs, Croatians, Saxons, Szeklers, Romanians, Serbs, Cumans, Iazygians, Ruthenians and, finally Turks — which all use different languages, except for certain names of things, which, because of the old habit and also of the mutual relations, prove to have a certain similarity and correspondence”¹. About the ethnic structure of Transylvania, its birthplace, the classical scholar was even more accurate: „There are four nations in it, [Transylvania] having different origins: the Hungarians, Szeklers, Saxons and Romanians, among whom the less disposed to the fights are considered to be the Saxons. The Hungarians and the Szeklers use the same language, except that the Szeklers have certain words peculiar to their people [...]. The Saxons are, as the rumour is, some Saxon settlers from Germany, brought here by Charles the Great; a proof for the truth [of this opinion] is the resemblance of the languages of the two peoples. The tradition says that the Romanians are some colonies of the Romans. The argument is the fact that they have many identical words with the speech of the Romans, people whose coins are to be found in great quantity in those places; beyond doubt, these are important evidences of the Roman oldness and domination here”². Concerning the faith of the Romanians, Olahus claims: „The Romanians are Christians, with the only difference that, following the Greeks in the proceeding of the Holy Spirit, they are also different from our church by some other more acceptable points”³.

It is important to determine what was the meaning given by Nicolaus Olahus to the term *natio* used in these fragments. In the first text, the enumeration of the thirteen „nations” and the relation established with the languages spoken by these „nations” show clearly the ethnic sense given to that term. Further reference to Transylvania is even more eloquent. The four nations of Transylvania, according to Olahus, cannot be equivalent to the estates, because the Romanians were not accepted as an entity among the estates. And even if Olahus, on purpose, places the Romanians among the estates, in order to show that for him the Romanians were equal to the other inhabitants of Transylvania, these „estates” of the great humanist have not a medieval meaning. The expression *quatuor diverso genere nationes* is beyond any doubt self-evident, because the term *genus*, *-eris* (= origin, source, people, family, descent, race, stock, species) includes the idea of origin, of ethnic character, and not the idea of a privileged group. That is why, the correct translation seems to be *four nations of different origin* or *four nations of different descent*. Otherwise, the ethnic sense given by Olahus to the word *nation* is more perceptible in the manner of characterizing the „four nations” by origin and language: the language of the Saxons is like the German language; the Romanian language proceeds from „the Roman speech”; the Saxons came from Germany, and the Romanians are „colonies of the Romans”; moreover, in the case of Romanians, he brings as a proof of oldness and continuity a numismatic evidence. In another text, and always in connection with the Romanians, religion appears as an ethnic feature: the Romanian nation is Christian, but Eastern Christian („they follow the Greeks in the proceeding of the Holly Spirit”). In other words, in all these cases, by using the term *natio(nationes)* Olahus designates ethnic groups and not privileged groups (in a political and social sense).

Is indeed Olahus an exception in comparison with his world, with the society of the 16-th century? Was he the only one able to see the society according to some ethnic terms? He could well be an exception, because by his understanding and culture, by his quality of important member of the European „republic of letters”, of the community of classical scholars, he was situated above the intellectual average of his time and he was able to distinguish the core from the formal aspects of things. On the other hand, during Olahus’ lifetime, when the autonomous principality of Transylvania was created, the system of the three recognized nations and of the four „received” (= officially accepted) re-

ligions was built. This system was more medieval than modern, because it classified and qualified the nations according to the existence or the non-existence of privileges. But the issue is more complicated. The 16-th century was, in many ways, a modern century. The Renaissance with the humanist ideology and the Reformation have changed the face of Europe, and the progress of the vernacular languages (in written form and especially by prints) has given new dimensions to national feeling during the 16-th century.

The Reformation, which created disturbances in Transylvania for scores of years on end, helped the three nations to build up new foundations for themselves. The danger of rejecting the three new religions — the Calvinist, the Lutheran, and the Unitarian — was not serious or passed quickly and between 1564–1572 they were recognized as acceptable and justified. The 1572 Diet forbade any further religious innovation. The four *receptae* religions were the religions of the three nations, that is of the Hungarians, the Szeklers and the Saxons. The Greek Orthodox religion, the religion of the Romanians, was left out. The political and religious system of the Principality was now completed and it gave a strong impetus to the national sense of the nation, which received new religious grounds too.⁴ And so, in Transylvania or in reference to Transylvania, the term *nation* had a social-political meaning, but also an ethnic one. Sometimes, it is very difficult to separate the two meanings. Among the humanists from the 15-th and 16-th centuries (Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Antonio Bonfini, Johannes Lebel, Georg Reicherstorffer, Johann Hertel, Anton Verantius and others), the basic elements for defining the nations of Transylvania were language, origin and religion. For example, as Olahus did, they described the Romanians as being the descendants of the Romans, as speaking a Romance language and as having a Christian-Orthodox faith.⁵ This was the level of the classical scholars, of the cultural elite, a level which expresses a theoretical vision of reality. The practical perception of the Transylvanian society is not so generous, because everyday life was more complicated and because the presence or the absence of privileges was the most important thing in the public life.

For instance, even in 1523, Thomory Pál, the archbishop of Kalocsa and former commander of the Făgăraș (Fogaras) castle advised the Saxons from Sibiu (Hermannstadt, Nagyszeben) to use the judicial means in order to solve their conflict with the Romanians. But the high prelate reminded the leaders from Sibiu an old principle: „... With the

only difference that you must give preference to the Saxon in comparison with the Romanian, as it was during our time; otherwise, this country will soon reach equality, if you would appreciate in the same proportion the interest of a Catholic with the interest of a Romanian"⁶.

This is not an isolate case or a particular situation, because the Transylvanian Diets used the same principle. In the regulations for the carrying into effect of the 28-th article of the Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely) Diet, in 1552 (regarding the tracking and punishing of malefactors), a text sounds like this: „The Romanian shall not be allowed to denounce (or hand over) a Hungarian or a Saxon, but a Hungarian or a Saxon shall be able to denounce a Romanian"⁷. According to the decision of the 1554 Diet, any Hungarian peasant could not be sentenced after the evidence of three people of good faith (witnesses), since for that it was necessary to present the true and public testimony of seven people of good faith; but the Romanian peasant could be punished by presenting the testimony of three people.⁸ In 1555, another Diet, in the 20-th article, makes even clearer provisions for such a case: „Also, the Christian peasant can be arrested as a result of the testimony of seven Christians and the Romanian [can be arrested] as a result of the testimony of three Christians, seven Romanian witnesses being necessary for a Romanian"⁹. It is obvious that such official decisions fortified the national feelings and guided people to ethnic attitudes. When the army of Petru Rareş, prince of Moldavia, was in Transylvania, Peter Perembsky, the Polish secretary of the queen Isabella, notes: „Some Romanians have a great part of the country and they would join him [Petru Rareş] easily, because they have the same language."ⁿ In 1552, the nobles of Hunedoara (Hunyad) county made complaints that, as a result of the plunder practiced by the men of general Castaldo, the Romanians situated around Deva district passed in a great number to Wallachia.¹¹

Being in such a situation, aggravated by wars and by the Habsburg pressure, the Transylvanian estates were obliged to act. In 1542, twice in the same year, „the union of the three nations” (*unio trium nationum*) was reinforced in order to counteract the plans of Petru Rareş and „to repair” what the spoilt.¹² The Habsburgs represented also a danger because they could have changed the old order of the Principality. That is why, the Diet of Cluj (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg), in 1542, asked king Ferdinand to appoint in official positions in Transylvania only Hungarians and not strangers: *non extraneos, sed Hungaros constituere dignetur*.¹³

The 1551 Diet formulates a more imperative and more precise request, with an ethnic connotation: „We also ask his majesty to accept to raise the voivode of Transylvania *ex natione Hungarica*¹⁴. It is obvious that the term *natio*, even in the official documents, had acquired an ethnic significance, since *the Hungarian nation* had taken the place of *the nobles' nation*. It is also clear that the Hungarian nation had priority even in comparison with the Saxons and the Szeklers within the framework of the political system of the Principality.

As we saw in the case of peasants, among nobles there were also ethnic differences. The social categories were not considered anymore as entities or blocs, because peasants, burgers or nobles had ethnic features reflected in everyday life. For example, the Italian Jesuit and chancellor of the University of Cluj, Antonio Posevino, noticed that the Romanian nobles, even when they stood out clearly during the wars, they were not honoured and rewarded in the same way as the Hungarian nobles.¹⁵ This mentality is visible in the case of Stephen Voivode (Mâzgă) too (a candidate for the throne of Moldavia, wandering in Transylvania and being in the service of the Habsburg emperor); he asked in 1577 for an estate situated around the Arduđ (Erdőd) castle „whose serfs must be of Romanian faith and language”. The prince received at last such a property, but only for a short time, because, according to the explanation of the authorities, he belonged „to the Romanian nation” (*ex natione Volachica*), he was an alien, he didn't speak Hungarian and German and he didn't know the local laws and customs.¹⁶

Therefore, we can consider that during the 16-th century, when Nicolaus Olahus lived, people understood social realities and acted corresponding to some ethnic terms too. The ethno-linguistic and religious elements of the Transylvanian „nations” became stronger and stronger. This fact doesn't mean that *the nations* were not privileged groups anymore; on the contrary, their privileges consolidated and were specified according to the new conditions of the Principality. But „the nation of the nobles” is often considered as „the Hungarian nation”; sometimes, certain institutions make a difference between the Hungarian and the Romanian nobles. The Romanian peasants are treated by the law in a different manner in comparison with the other peasants. The ethnic differentiation penetrates deeply into the public mentality, it becomes more prominent and it gives birth to certain attitudes. The ethnic sentiment is not present only as a part of the estates or of the social cathe-

gories, but as a part of the whole society. In Transylvania, even the land had a „national” quality: *Fundus Regius* was considered as *the Saxon Land*, *Sedes Siculorum* were called Székelyföld (= *the Szekler Land*) and the counties (or the land of the nobles) became, under certain circumstances, *the Hungarian Land*. Some small regions, where the Romanians could preserve their own institutions, were named in the documents *districtus Valachorum*.

The Orthodox faith was synonymus with the Romanian faith or with *the Romanian law* and instead of the word orthodox the term *Romanian* is used very often. The term *Christianus* was in many cases opposite to *Valachus* as a sign of the fact that *Romanian* was synonymus with *orthodox* and that *orthodox* or *Romanian* was considered something other than *Christian*.

Within the framework of this mentality, modern and medieval at the same time, Nicolaus Olahus was and was not an exception. He noticed the national differences, but he didn't accept the discrimination. He wanted to see only the ideal aspect of the reality. That is why, the great humanist placed the four nations of Transylvania at the same level. According to Olahus' correction of reality, the Romanians are found in a natural way among „the nations”, among the Christians and among the dignified people of the region. Nicolaus Olahus repeatedly confirmed his statement concerning the Roman origin of the Romanian people, of their descent from the Roman colonies and of the Latinity of the language. He never described the Romanians as inferior. A Romanian by birth, a famous classical scholar, he prided himself with the Roman origin of his people. The diploma of 1548, by which emperor Ferdinand raised Olahus to the nobility again, praised the Roman origin and the virtues of the Romanian people, which defended Christianity and gave birth to many great captains, among whom Iancu de Hunedoara (Hunyadi János), the father of the illustrious king Matthias. Olahus himself, the emperor's chancellor, worded the text of the diploma.¹⁷

But Nicolaus Olahus was in fact a *Hungarus*, a good citizen of his country. He made, perhaps, for Hungary more than his contemporaries. He held the highest offices, those of Primate of Hungary and regent of Hungary (naturally, of Habsburg Hungary) and he was at one time the most important political and religious personality in the regions of the country which were not under the Turkish domination. At the same time, as a humanist and a scholar, Olahus was a *homo Europaeus*. He traveled almost everywhere in Europe, he wrote in Latin about Hungary,

he was a member of the European scholarly élite, he founded new schools in Slovakia and he spoke many languages. It is true that he never denied his name of Olahus (= *Romanian*), although this fact was sometimes unpleasant for him. As it happens almost always, he had enemies too. When Olahus died, Francis Forgách, bishop of Oradea (Várad), in his work „Magyar história”, stressed the lowly origin and the Romanian birth of the great humanist, who was condemned because he reached, though unworthy, to the general indignation, the highest offices.¹⁸ These were not very delicate words for a bishop, who was obliged to obey and to respect Olahus as his superior. It is not difficult to notice here Forgách's hate was caused not only by Olahus' brilliant career, but also by Olahus' origin.

We have here the best evidences of the importance of national feelings in certain social backgrounds, from where these feelings radiate continuously. Actually, during the decline of the Middle Ages, it was natural for the modern element of nation to prevail and to find concerning this national sentiment both understanding and rejection. It is very important for a historian to see the real level of the national and religious tolerance in Transylvania. It was an important fact that the three new religions were officially accepted by the Diet, but, beyond this official plan, a complex world lived. In this world, beside a certain amount of generosity and understanding, existed also a certain amount of discrimination, prejudice, pride and humiliation. All these sentiments and attitudes, good or bad, are very human and we have no reason to consider the century of Olahus as an ideal one.

NOTES

¹ Nicolaus Olahus, *Hungaria et Atila sive de originibus gentis regni Hungariae...*, edited by Fr. Kollarius. Vienna, 1763, p. 90. For an idealized situation of the multinational kingdom of Hungary, see J. Szűcs, *The Peoples of Medieval Hungary*, in „Ethnicity and Society in Hungary”, edited by F. Glatz. Budapest, 1990. p. 11–20.

² N. Olahus, op. cit., p. 61.

³ Ibidem, p. 59.

⁴ D. Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum or the Political Struggle of the Romanians in Transylvania during the 18-th Century*, Bucharest, 1971. p. 72.

⁵ See Maria Holban, *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. I, București, 1968 and A. Armbruster, *Dacoromano-Saxonica. Cronicari români despre sași. Români în cronică săsească*, București, 1980.

⁶ Hurmazaki, *Documente*, vol. XV/1, p. 275, nr. 500; N. Iorga, *Istoria românilor din Ardeal și Ungaria*, vol. I, București, 1915. p. 131.

⁷ D. Prodan, op. cit., p. 80.

⁸ Hurmuzaki, op. cit., vol. II/5. p. 206–207. nr. 90.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 227, nr. 115.

¹⁰ Ibidem, vol. II/4. p. 306–307, nr. 171.

¹¹ See the historical year book „A Hunyad megyei Történelmi és Régészeti Társulat Évkönyve”, 1896–1898, nr. IX, p. 41–42.

¹² N. Iorga, op. cit., p. 149.

¹³ Hurmuzaki, op. cit., vol. II/4. p. 297, nr. 164.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 662, nr. 424.

¹⁵ A. Veress, *Fontes rerum Transilvanicarum*, vol. III, Budapest, 1913. p. 64.

¹⁶ D. Prodan, *Iobăgia în Transilvania în sec. XVI*, vol. II, București, 1968, p. 321–322.

¹⁷ Al. Tonk, *Diplomele de înnobilitare ale lui Nicolaus Olahus. Unele probleme privind genealogia familiei Olahus*, in „Revista arhivelor”, 1969(XII), nr. 1. p. 21–31. See also D. Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum...*, p. 77.

¹⁸ Gyimesi Forgách F., *Magyar históriája (1540–1572)*, in „Monumenta Hungariae Historica”, II, Scriptores, XVI, Pest, 1866, p. 254: „Archiepiscopus ex sordissimo loco et Valacho patre natus, ad summum locum aliorum odio evectus, locumtenentiam et regium sigillum retinere studebat. Haec enim omnia summa officia tenebat cum gravi omnium offensione, quod multorum dignitates et loca indigne occuparet”. See also D. Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum...*, p. 77.