

Transylvania..

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Evening, late November, 1998. I stood on the platform of Budapest's Eastern Railway station. A once-proud edifice of marble, glass and grandeur undergoing an interminable restoration. Hungary's nouveau riche, breaking the speed limits in their newly acquired BMWs had nothing in common with the mass of their countrymen who still relied on the dilapidated train network for transport and no longer smiled at the thought that they had seen the end of communism. Climbing onto the train were peasant women in thick skirts and red, white headscarves. Worn men in ill-fitting suits, students in their cheapened versions of western fashions, the odd official with a discount briefcase. I did my shopping at the station, sausage, bread and beer, and settled down alone in my cabin. It was my first trip to Transylvania.

For the first few hours the train ran out across the great Hungarian plain. The mountain ranges that run east from Switzerland gradually peter out into hills, and the very last of those hills falls into the Danube at Budapest. It is called the Castle Hill and is crested by a redundant royal palace and a polyglot collection of overpriced restaurants. Standing on the top of that hill one looks down to see the Danube, the centre of Pest, the famous chain bridge, the towers of the Basilica, the grand hotels, the beginnings of the boulevards, the smog of distant housing, and everywhere flatness. Running south and east from Budapest I saw only fields, villages, the light from windows. By midnight we had reached the Romanian border.

The paramilitary border guards, first the Hungarians then the Romanians surged on board, waved torches, demanded passports, issued visas, struggled with English and disembarked. We rolled on. At station after station the Romanian flag, Blue, Yellow, Red, waved proudly, the station master in blue suit and peaked cap officiously emerged from his office, the odd person embarked, disembarked, was greeted. Out in the corridor one could hear conversation. Sometimes in the Hungarian I knew, more often in Romanian I didn't. They talked, drank, even sang to pass the time. I listened and watched as the hills reappeared, grew larger. Soon we were rolling through valleys and by five in the morning we had reached the Carpathian Mountains. I had the schedule, every stop in

my pocket and was already opening the door as the train came to a stop at my station. Heart bubbling with excitement I jumped down into the fresh-fallen snow. My friend was waiting, thank God, she had no phone. I had sent her a letter a week before, informed her I was coming and boarded the train before I got her answer. Seeing her there, I kissed her with more than usual relief. There were no taxis, no buses, no hotels, no-one else at the station.

From there we walked for an hour. Arrived at her village and met her father. He was about to head out into the mountains to chop wood but first he made coffee and poured out the home made brandy. A sizeable pour. Plum I remember. As is the national habit I drank it straight down. The second shot was just as large. By the third I was wobbly. Then the father left, the friend made breakfast, milk from the cow, bread from the neighbour, meat from a recent pig killing, and we ate, talked, watched the fire burn down, rested. That was my first morning in Transylvania.

The name Transylvania means across the forest. In Hungarian its name is Erdely and in Romanian Ardeal, both meaning the forested place. There is still plenty of thick forest in Transylvania; it covers the hills, climbs high up the mountains. Purchase whatever guidebook you wish on Transylvania and there, on the front cover, will be a view of a forest. But note that forests have only recently acquired such positive connotations. For much of history, forests were regarded as wild places where outlaws took refuge and spirits lurked. Times were tough indeed when people were reduced to foraging in the forests and the occupation of woodcutter was admired as much for its fearlessness as for its undoubted strength and skill. Armies always tried to avoid entering forests. Among the trees ambushes were easy, communication difficult, battle lines impossible to draw up. The Roman Empire lost an entire legion, the ninth to be precise, in the wooded wilds of Scotland and another three whole legions, some 20 000 men, to the Germans in the battle of the Teutoburg Forest. They never even tried to conquer Transylvania. From the west they reached the Danube, from the south the southern slopes of the Carpathians, beyond that only raids, myths and rumours.

The recorded history of the place begins only with the arriving Hungarians. A nomadic horde traversing the steppe, possibly related to the Uighurs of China, breaking away from the Finns and Estonians who went north and leaving scattered remnants of the

original horde across Russia, the Hungarians poured into the Carpathian basin during the last centuries of the first millennium AD.

The ancient chroniclers claimed the Hungarians arrived in 895 precisely and even marked the exact entry spot. Later historians changed the date to 896 AD, just to ensure that the millennial celebrations were completed on time, but still missed the salient point. The Hungarians arrived as defeated warriors, driven off the steppe where good grazing was rare and only the meanest flourished. Just as all the other nations of Europe had earlier lost the battle for the steppe and sought refuge in Europe, so too the Hungarians, earlier vanquished now became the victors. They found the peoples of the Carpathian basin impossibly complacent, secure within their vast mountain fortress, and promptly conquered them. The Slavs were driven out or, in the case of the Slovaks and Ruthenians, almost permanently subdued. Other peoples, like the Avars, were simply swallowed up by the Hungarians and disappeared and the mighty Magyar Horde spread its power across the entire Carpathian basin. And indeed beyond!

Initially they raided as far as Switzerland and northern Italy. Seized booty, people, as brutal as the Vikings and almost as mobile. By the time the western powers had raised their armies the Hungarians were gone – hit and run on a thousand mile scale. In the winter the Hungarians returned to their Carpathian base, in the summers they left their wives and children and brought fear back to Western Europe. In the churches, the people prayed, “God protect us from the Hungarians!”. Then in 955, at the battle of Lechfeld, feudal German might, knights in thick armour, foot-soldiers bound by oath, kinship and their faith in their Christ, finally caught up with the Hungarians and crushed them. That evening when the battle was over, the German warriors raised their lord Otto on their shields and proclaimed him emperor and he looked out over the pride of the Hungarian horde, strewn wide across the battlefield.

Lechfeld alone didn't end the Hungarian raids, Hungarian society was already changing, becoming more settled, but it mattered, like the battle of Poitiers mattered in 732 when the Franks crushed the advancing Arabs with their hammers and Lepanto mattered in 1571 when Christian sailors sank the Ottoman fleet with their cannon. A single moment that highlighted a deeper trend. On Christmas day of the year 1000, the Hungarian King Vajk changed his name to Steven, his religion from pagan to Christian,

his country from tribal land to feudal state and the royal writ became law in all of Transylvania.

And as Hungary changed, so changed the Hungarians in Transylvania. They called themselves the Székely and were, according to legend, one of the seven tribes that comprised the Hungarian horde. Recent research suggests that the Székelys are merely the descendents of border guards and refugees and perhaps it is only their home in the mountains, the peculiarities of regional isolation, their profound cultural insularity that has marked them as different. Their faces are no different from other Hungarian faces, perhaps a little more rugged. Dark hair, thick moustaches, a strong accent, an obsession with hospitality. It was with the Székelys that I lived in Transylvania and I admired them from the first moment.

The Romanians came to Transylvania later. Their own national myth claims that they are the descendants of the Roman legionaries who took refuge in the Transylvanian forests after the empire collapsed. Indeed the Romanian language was deliberately codified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be as close to the Italian language as possible. There are Romanians today who still conduct archaeological digs in search of the old Roman settlements. All they find is dirt and fragments. Far more likely is that the Romanians were shepherds, related to the Albanians, wandering their sheep across the mountains, settling on both sides of the Carpathians. Their priests read Greek, embraced eastern orthodoxy, looked to Byzantium. By the 13th century they begin to feature in the documents of the Hungarian Kingdom, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century they made up the majority of the population of Transylvania.

But there were still other peoples that came into this land of forested mountains. German settlers, invited in by wise Hungarian kings, who gained the generic name of Saxons and, coming from the feudal, prosperous west, founded a series of towns that gave Transylvania its German name of Siebenburgen, or land of the seven towns. Hard working and prosperous, miners and merchants, they carved out an economic and political autonomy that lasted over seven centuries. One could still find these speakers of hochdeutsche scattered across the territory in the 1980s, though their numbers were drastically diminished by the communist Romanian regime's willingness to sell exit visas to the Saxons for West German deutschmarks. In the old Saxon towns, Schässburg,

Kronstadt, Hermannstadt, the solid walls, the stolid houses would have made one think of Bavaria if the paint had not been peeling. In their villages, they built walls around their cemeteries, still used the old German script on their gravestones, built up a store of history and memory, survived. Now, however, their churches are closed, their houses abandoned and no-one is left to recount their history. There is no more Siebenburgen.

Then there were the Jews who came and left across the centuries. Waves of intolerance followed by waves of fresh immigration. It was, for example, from the north Transylvanian town of Szatmar that the rabbinical court moved en masse to Brooklyn New York and became a centre of Hassidic Judaism in the United States. But there was so much more.

By sheer chance I had once wandered into a concert by a Hungarian folk music group, given in the grounds of the hotel where I happened to be staying. Cocktails had been offered on the terrace and the waiters bustled constantly, weighed down by endless canapés but it was the music that I heard in that garden that caught me and holds me still. The female singer spoke of, sang of, the lost Jewish music of Transylvania which her group of musicians had sought to piece back together, from the memories of old Gypsy musicians who had never learned to read music but only ever played as their fathers had played before them. It was those Transylvanian gypsies who had caught glimpses of the pre-war Jewish wedding bands, the music of the great feasts, the laments of the cemeteries and it was those old gypsies who offered up their memories to the folk revivalists. There were, there are, no Jewish musicians left in Transylvania. The heart bleeds tears to hear such music.

In every Transylvanian town one could still find the synagogue. Shut away, locked up. Windows broken. The occasional attempt at a museum. The Star of David woven into the padlocked iron gates. Out in the villages the Jews were the middle classes. The butchers and the bakers, tinkers, tailors and candlestick makers. And without them, rural life always seemed as if something was missing.

Everywhere however there were still gypsies. They had their own encampments on the edges of villages, filled the bars, boarded the trains, flagged down the busses, provided the necessary scapegoat, added the necessary amount of sound, colour and uncertainty. I saw gypsy children make their way barefooted through the snow; old

gypsies roll their cigarettes from discarded newspaper. I saw gypsies as dark as Africans and just as beautiful. The last people to migrate into Europe and the only people to come without violence, the gypsies made their way across the steppe from India and gradually entered Europe from the 12th century onwards. Scarcely populated Transylvania was as attractive to them as it was to the militarized Székely, the Saxon settlers and the Romanian shepherds. A new wilderness, a new life. Medieval Europe's very own (forgotten) America.

The next wave of visitors was less welcome. The mighty Ottoman Empire rolled north across the Balkans and crested the peaks of the Carpathian Mountains. Not without either resistance or more myth making. Vladimir the Dragon, or Vlad Dracul as he is known in his native Romanian, and earned his noble title to the south in Moldavia but he earned his reputation in the Transylvanian mountains, inspiring his fellow Christian warriors and impaling on stakes his Ottoman prisoners. Eventually the Hungarian crown grew suspicious of Vlad's antics and imprisoned and murdered him in Budapest. His story could have served as a pertinent warning tale without the literary embellishments of Bram Stoker who transformed the patron saint of Romanians in Transylvania into the terrifying Dracula. After all, as the last Hungarian ruling dynasty ferociously repressed peasant discontent, wrestled with the self-interests of the nobility and plotted how to rid itself of men like Vlad Dracul, the Ottoman Empire rolled onwards and northwards and in 1526 on the battlefield of Mohacs the Hungarian king, the archbishop of the land, seven bishops, the cream of the nobility and 50 thousand of their soldiers lay fallen and awaiting burial.

I was surprised to find almost nothing in the way of Dracula tourism in Transylvania. There were no Dracula postcards, or key chains, t-shirts and coffee cups. There was a house that he had supposedly lived in Cluj which proudly called itself the Dracula House, though I have no idea how it made any money from its name, for it appeared to be a private dwelling and the front door of the house was securely locked. A better place to visit would be Dracula's castle, Castle Bran. The setting of the castle is spectacular. Isolated, perched on a hill, vast and imposing. It is precisely how a castle should be. Unfortunately, there is no museum there to commemorate the Dracula legend

and last I heard the castle had been returned by the state to its former owner, now resident in New York, who promptly put it up for sale.

The shortage of tourist sites encouraged one budding entrepreneur to suggest building a Dracula them park. And why not? A Gulag theme park was successfully set up in Latvia, where visitors get to ride around on cattle trucks and experience first hand the pleasures of the Soviet penal system which caused the deaths of some twenty million people. Compared to such morbidity, a Dracula theme park appears restrained although the proposal was still rejected by the relevant Romanian authorities. Perhaps the entrepreneur forgot the first rule of Romanian business – always know who to bribe.

If I could design a Transylvanian theme park, I would include in it not only Dracula but also exhibits on the great nobles of Transylvania, the Bethlens, Bathoris and Telekis, who made a deal with the Ottoman Empire and avoided the fate of their ethnic cousins on the bloody plains of Mohacs. Those Székely nobles bowed down before the Sultan and paid him the required taxes and in return the Sultan recognized Transylvania's independence, her autonomy within his empire and the right to make its own laws and rule its own affairs. As a result Transylvania became legally and culturally detached from the rest of Hungary, and indeed the rest of Europe. Few tourists visited, few observers understood its unique position, diplomats saw no need to make deals with its leaders, merchants no reason to trouble themselves with its products, theologians no reason to probe this distant land in search of its peculiar religious tolerance. The land of forests and mountains had begun to become “a faraway place of which we know nothing”.

Of course that did not mean Transylvania was not influenced by developments elsewhere in Europe, The reformation made its presence felt there, just as it made its presence felt everywhere that Christians gathered. Indeed Transylvania became a bastion of Calvinism, its stern message finding a lasting echo among the Székely mountain dwellers. But so too did Catholicism retain a firm foothold. In the village where I stayed, every house was crowned by a cross, the entire village attended mass, and a neighbouring valley is the site of the best attended pilgrimage held anywhere in South East Europe. And there was more. The Saxon Germans embraced Lutheranism, Anabaptists sought refuge there, the Romanians remained, largely, Orthodox, the Uniate Church with its papal-sanctioned blend of Orthodoxy and Catholicism gained adherents, while it can be

argued that it was a group of Székelys who founded the Unitarian Church that has now spread out across the globe. And there is still more. An entire Jewish community converted to its own variation of Christianity and renamed its village Bethlehem. And from across the Ottoman Empire traders, travellers and the religions of the east arrived. Armenians, Bulgarians, Serbs and Muslims each with their own variation of the one true faith. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Transylvania was arguably the most religiously diverse and tolerant territory in Europe.

And some of that diversity was still there when I came to Transylvania. Above every village rose the church tower, and I grew adept at guessing the denomination of the church and thereby the village from the style of its architecture. And what joy it was to find the churches crowded. On Sunday the men put on their suits, the women their embroidered skirts, their flower strewn dresses. Whereas folk culture was elsewhere a state-sponsored affair dished out more often than not for the tourists. In Transylvania it still meant something. Old women, wore nothing but black for the first year of their widowhood and then, when the time of mourning had elapsed, and there were no more tears to fall, they brought out the all the colours of the clothing they had put away in the large painted wooden boxes one found in every bedroom in lieu of wardrobes.

Of course the young did things different. Listened to pop music, learned to use the internet, bought jeans, fake-label T-shirts. But they too filled the churches, stood when there was no place to sit, knelt when everyone knelt, sang as only those not yet made idle by piped-in entertainment know how to sing. Faith still spread its rich tapestry across Transylvania.

Gradually, however, the divisions of religion gave way to divisions of language and nation. By the 1680s the Habsburgs had recaptured Transylvania from the Ottomans though they kept it as a distinct province much to the fury of the Hungarians who felt dismembered. That was not the only cause of the division between the House of Habsburg and the Hungarians. Today, the heir to the throne, Otto von Habsburg is regarded as a great defender of Hungary, and his son Gyorgy, resident just outside Budapest, is a frequent guest on the trashier Hungarian TV shows. Then, the bitterness between king and country swelled, subsided and swelled again. Leopold was hated, Maria Teresa adored, her son Joseph despised and as for Franz Jozef, one of his more

suggestive nick-names was simply 'the hangman'. The Habsburgs ruled, the Hungarians revolted and one of their demands was always that Transylvania should be reunited with the rest of Hungary, a demand that the German Saxons and the Romanians viewed with equal apprehension.

I had come to Transylvania, above all else, to see the old estate where the Prime Minister I was researching, Count István Bethlen, had been born. There is nothing tangible that a historian gains from visiting such places, no great fact that might suddenly be discovered. Archives and libraries are where a historian gets his footnotes, not traipsing round old gardens, city streets or the remnants of once great houses. Yet a good work of history is more than just its footnotes. Somewhere among the studied sentences the author must also offer up a sense of the past he is discussing. And it was for that sense that I had come to Transylvania.

Count Bethlen's old house was, of course, in the village of Bethlen, a still purely Hungarian island in the Romanian ethnic sea. It was a solidly built, suitably large house, with thick white-washed walls, a front entrance wide enough to fit a carriage through, internal courtyard, low sloping red roof and entirely deserted. It was, so I had been informed, converted by the Romanian communist government into an orphanage. And in the rear garden there still stood, incongruously, a rusting basketball hoop. But now the orphanage had been abandoned, the old house locked up, no one left even to send unwelcome visitors away. What, however, struck me above all about the Count's old house was smack in the middle of the village. It was quite impossible to avoid it or ignore it. Rather than being hidden away, cut off, detached, the house and all who lived there were part and parcel of the village. No wonder Count Bethlen had played with the barefooted village boys as a child, he must have heard them calling from his bedroom.

It was the proximity of count to peasant, ethnicity to ethnicity, that made revolutionary violence so shocking. And it was not the only shock. Modernity arrived in the form of factories, railways and the new urban workforce. The city fathers of the old Transylvanian capital Torda thought the arrival of the railway would damage their vineyards and refused to allow a line to be built through their town. The place, still only reachable by an intermittent bus service, declined into irrelevance. Other towns sprung up to take its place, grew larger, provided wealth and amusements to the new Transylvanian

bourgeoisie. And from 1867, as a consequence of a rapprochement between Habsburg ruler and his Hungarian subjects Transylvania was re-united with Hungarian. After all, the roads and plans for train lines ran north towards Budapest, only one traversed the mountains south into the new Romanian state.

Not everything was of course modern. Most roads were unpaved, most peasants still learned how to go hungry. I know of one case from about 1900 where law students were still preparing for their exams with the help of a law code dating from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Yet for the Hungarian Székelys and the German Saxons this was a golden age. First ranked citizens enjoying a 50 year economic boom. Only the Romanians, the majority of the population in Transylvania but a minority in the newly united royal Hungary, were treated sometimes with brutality, much more often with contempt.

In 1918, Austria-Hungary lost the war, the Romanian state was among the winners, and among her spoils was Transylvania. In the space of months the old Hungarian nobles fled from their houses and the Romanian shepherd became the new gendarme, the mayor, the ruler of the land. Count Bethlen, the focus of my doctoral research, fled Transylvania for the safety of Budapest in November 1918. Reminiscing about those terrible days, he noted that all across the land the great old houses had been set on fire. It seemed, he noted, as if the whole of Transylvania was burning.

From then on Transylvania became a part of the Greater Romanian State, a slice of territorial war booty larger than the now shrunken Hungary. Its mountains had reached the edge of old Hungary, now they were the central spine of the new Romania.

For the Hungarians, both in Transylvania and Hungary proper, this loss remains a wound that has not healed. The popular name for this loss is one word, Trianon, after the French palace where the post-war peace treaty was signed and the map of Eastern Europe forever altered. And that name, Trianon, still rankles. Through the 1920s and 30s every school day in Hungary began with a prayer for the return of the lost territories including Transylvania. It began, "I believe in One God, I believe in One Homeland. I believe in the eternal justice of God. I believe in the resurrection of Hungary." Under the communist regime, with its odes to internationalism and contempt for the past, hostility to Trianon was repressed, but the loss of some 3 million Transylvanian Hungarians, when in post-war Hungary there were only 8 million Hungarians, could not be entirely forgotten. And

even now the memories of Transylvania in Hungary are everywhere. In Budapest's city park, there is a delightful reconstruction of an ancient castle, the original castle stands of course in Transylvania. In every Hungarian town of any size, there are streets named after Transylvanian towns, statues to Transylvanian heroes, physical reminders of just what was lost. Refugees fled Transylvania with their bitterness, populist politicians poured their own particularly noxious oils on the fire. The politician I studied, Count Bethlen, fled Transylvania in 1918 and went on to become Prime Minister of Hungary three years later. Should we be surprised that he waged an unrelenting campaign to get his home, his land, his history back and in so doing only added to the bitterness that constantly deforms the very thing which he desired.

As for the Romanians, 1918 marked a rebirth. One in every four Romanians lived in Transylvania and the reunion of the nation meant a new chance to prosper. Schooling was expanded, universities established, the Orthodox church experienced a renaissance, fresh domes popped up across the countryside. Land was redistributed from Hungarian Count to Romanian peasant, The bureaucracy was thoroughly purged and romanized. Before the Romanian was beaten by the gendarme, now he was the gendarme. Then the moment passed and the old problems made their reappearance. Corruption flourished, Transylvania was neglected, poverty endured. And when the Great Depression hit Europe not only the stock markets suffered. The authorities fired in the crowds and the radical right, pointing its finger at the Jews prospered. After all, who else was there left to blame. The sullen Hungarian minority? A few hundred thousand Saxons, clinging to their towns, their villages? The second-class gypsies, devoid of organization? The Jews were the only possible target, suitably omnipresent, suitably different. Iuliu Maniu, the grand old man of Transylvanian politics flirted with anti-Semitism, Octavian Goga, the great historian of Transylvania, embraced anti-Semitism and Cornelius Codreanu, the most charismatic politician Romania has ever produced, good looking, psyscopathic, built what he termed a Legionary movement of anti-Jewish warriors, and he based the movement in Transylvania. Only the imposition of military dictatorship saved Romania from the impending bloodbath.

Briefly, from 1940 to 1945 while Romania got her military dictatorship, Hungary briefly got half Transylvania back. The revision of the border was a consequence of Nazi

German mediation and the fact that Hungary had almost from the first thrown in her lot with Hitler on the grounds that only he could change the hated Trianon treaty. Oddly the division of Transylvania that occurred in 1940 was also, at least in ethnic terms, a good deal. Both the Hungarians and Romanians were equally dissatisfied with the new border that cut through the valleys, divided the forests and ripped apart the essential unity of the place and when both sides are unhappy that's normally a sign that a fair deal has been struck.

After 1945, however, the new Europe had no time for Hitler's territorial adjustments, irrespective of their wisdom. Transylvania was put back together and placed once again under Romanian rule. Only the Jews appeared to be missing. For a while Transylvania was granted a carefully monitored political autonomy then even that was stripped away as the government in Bucharest embarked on fresh efforts to Romanize the place. Inhabitants of other regions of Romania were encouraged to move to Transylvania and brought with them monolingualism, cultural insularity and a hostility to foreigners that is always most strongly felt in the places where foreigners are largely absent. Hungarian and German schools existed but it was the Romanian language that was extolled, promoted and required for any serious occupation.

Strange then to find Transylvanians who could barely speak or more often read a word of Romanian. One of my friend's relatives, the barber of the village, who cut his neighbour's hair in the corner of their kitchens appeared to know as much Romanian as I did though he's lived the entire seventy years of his life in that part of Romania they called Transylvania. These Hungarians held onto their language as if it was the one thing they had left to hold on to. Children emigrated, the workplace was closed, prices rose, the land grew poorer. And yet at the end of mass, they sang the Hungarian national anthem, the anthem of a foreign country. And when I heard them sing, I heard their nation.

Nationalism is a corpse that refuses to be buried. Sophisticated political scientists denounce it as a destructive morass of myth and nonsense and proclaim its demise with unabashed regularity. Surely, such observers conclude, people will come to their senses and realize that their class, gender, or raw humanity binds them closer than malleable languages, shifting borders and misleading history textbooks. History, however, tells a different story. Was not Martin Luther a classic German nationalist? And did not

Shakespeare make his Henry V Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'. And what of the nation state? Has its time passed? Or should we instead note the desire of Scots and Welsh to break from Britain, Catalans and Basques to break from Spain, Slovaks to break from Czechs, Montenegrins and Kosovars to break from Serbia; all reinforcing the vital point that the nation still moves the masses. Just as faith still moves the masses. And why not? People are more than just a logical series of rational choices. Perhaps they just find myth and nonsense more attractive than the binds of class, gender and raw humanity.

Ceausescu, the last communist dictator of Romania, had no time for nationalism though he knew how to play to the nationalist gallery when he needed to. His own particular creed was communism, a cold-hearted antidote to both nationalism and the vagaries of village life. His attention turned to Transylvania. Plans were made, an initial 300 villages were scheduled for destruction, new towns would be built, replete with the requisite number of apartment buildings each with their concrete panels and paper-thin walls. Transylvania would finally be urbanized, modernized, Romanian-ized. Then in December 1989 the crowds came out onto streets, called for the end to the dictatorship, and at eight minutes past noon, on December 22, a helicopter whisked Ceausescu from the roof of his monstrous palace, within three days he and his repulsive wife were court martialled, found guilty and shot. And the very first place where the crowds had gathered to demand the dictator's downfall was Timisoara, a town on the western edge of Transylvania.

With Ceausescu's death the plans for the elimination of the villages were shelved. The new leaders of Romania had neither the mania for urbanization nor the sheer megalomania of their predecessor. They were more interested in bringing Romania into Europe and becoming absurdly rich. The Transylvanian village was left to prosper or wither on its own merits. Choosing neither option, the villages I visited seemed to have fallen into stasis. To step into them was to step back into history. Even the faces seemed unchanging. Old eyes, old hands, old habits.

I cannot say I remember everything from those weeks I spent in Transylvania, but I remember moments. The sharpness of the air that made me gasp when I first stepped outside each morning. The way the moon on certain nights can light up a valley like a

floodlight. The smell of outdoor toilets. Falling up to my neck in a snow drift. Suddenly realizing how much effort is needed to heat water for bathing. The way the whole family slept in the living room except the children who curled up round the stove in the kitchen. I remember mince wrapped in cabbage, the size of the sausages, the warmth of milk fresh from a cow, the way a pig screams when its throat is cut. I remember listening to an old man explain that it was only the tenth of the month and he had already spent every last penny of his pension. I remember the size of a peasant's hands, the way the old women's backs stooped, I remember the kindness. I remember that the beer was kept cool in the well and pulled out for breakfast. I remember that no matter how cold it was one always took off one's gloves before shaking hands. I remember the village intellectual, a young man, a poet, with his books in his bedroom and an obsession with pictures. I remember spending long evenings listening, watching. I still remember....It is from moments like these that memories are woven.