



Margittai Gábor, *Tiltott kastély. Erdélyi történelmi családok a jóvátétel útvesztőiben* (Budapest: Scolar Kiadó, 2017), 254 p.

Only a few authors and art historians can say that their work has had consequences that were surprising even to themselves. Years ago, Gábor Margittai remarked bitterly to the director of Asinara National Park, Pierpaolo Congiatu, in his book titled 'Ghost Soldiers of Donkey Island', that "it is really saddening that Hungarians have no interest at all" in the story of the suffering of soldiers taken prisoner by Serbs in the first months of World War I, who were dragged to the island of Asinara. Nowadays, however, he can report a

substantially changed approach to this topic. After the publication of his above-mentioned book, as well as the presentation of his documentary film 'Prisoners of Donkey Island,' produced together with Anita Major, and the connecting exhibition that travels the Carpathian Basin, Asinara has become a pilgrimage destination for Hungarian tourists. The island was visited by the defence minister and the president of the republic, demonstrating that the Hungarian state acknowledges the island with support.

Gábor Margittai's book, 'Forbidden Castle', surely will not convince the Romanian state to uphold the law of restitution that was legislated in the early 1990s after prodding by the competent authorities of the European Union, and not to obstruct by various pretences and tricks the return of the properties confiscated by dictatorial methods. The book consists of eight chapters and is a situational assessment and long picture record spanning through four years (2012-2016), enriched with photographs. These photos show castles, fortresses and mansions in their old glory. These structures are ruins today, some of which have been resurrected.

In his book, Gábor Margittai takes several Transylvanian families into account and introduces them by telling the stories of their suffering under the communist dictatorship. Their class "was guilty in a Central Europe turned to communism not only because they had traditions, wealth and history-making ideas, but also because they were Hungarian. They were double minorities: social and ethnic. If anything, this was a way to guarantee sporadic minority life, from which one can reach the surface only by a miracle. The Transylvanian aristocracy became cruelly persecuted members of the 'privileged' order in a

single spring dawn.” It was the spring of 1949 when, after the hellish whistle signalling the rise of communist power, the Transylvanian aristocracy was dispossessed of everything they had and were made homeless. Of course, this was a targeted strike on the culture, economic viability and spirit of the ethnicity they represented.

Several members of the historic Transylvanian families which are presented by Margittai had emigrated abroad (e.g., to Hungary, the West, or America). However, they returned to the land of their ancestors, trusting in the strength and credibility of the restitution law, to take possession of a part of the properties—castles, mansions, woods, ploughlands and pastures—confiscated after 1945. As an example of the struggles initiated by the spirit of this law, we meet, among others, the Teleki family of (Felső)Marosújvár (Uioara de Sus, Ocna Mureş). Their Calvary is described most picturesquely by Earl Ádám Teleki, whose “only egregious crime was that he had been born a Transylvanian nobleman.” Although in 1945 they could not find any incriminatory details on him, despite searching with a microscope, in the Áron Márton lawsuit in 1949 he was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment. In 1956 he was set free by amnesty, but in 1961 he was imprisoned again on nonsensical charges. It seems that his inhumane harassment caused Marosújvár to be struck by a curse: “On the morning of December 22, 2010, with enormous roaring and rumbling, the ground opened up in the centre of Marosújvár and the tarmac split in front of the Orthodox church. The building of the financial authority and several dwelling houses were damaged, and the crater, which was filled with saltwater, swallowed the shopping mall—and the future of Marosújvár with it.” Since then, the town has been sinking 3-4 cm every year. Naturally, the cause was the inexpert administration of the salt-processing facility during the time of socialist salt production, which valued quantity above all else. Compared to the town, the Teleki castle, even in its ruined condition, retains a better image. (We cannot say the same about the remnants of the Calvinist church, which was transformed into a sheep barn).

Regarding the past and present of the Bethlen family’s castle in Keresd (Criş, Kreisch), the following can be read in the book by Gábor Margittai (which can be considered an investigative work): “It was inhabited by the family from the 15th century—or even before that—up to the day of nationalisation. During these 600 years, every piece of portraiture, brocade, peasants’ jug and mortar remained in its place. The Renaissance and Turkish salons were shining in their full splendour; the ‘golden palace’ and the ‘daytime tower bastion’ stood; there were the tiled stoves, covered with green and yellow glaze; and the snake writhed with pride on the Bethlen coat-of-arms carved into the door frames. In one word, Keresd exuded sensual respect for the past. But then the castle, long hidden, was found. That day, trucks arrived in the

yard, and the village people and newcomers tore the past out of the walls. They took and shredded everything they could, and what they could not take they heaped up and burnt. Gábor Bethlen could save only one book from the library: a first edition, leather-covered copy of Transylvanian History by Farkas Bethlen.” According to the restitution law, every furnishing of the ravaged castle must be returned to its lawful owners.

It is peculiar that the nationalised castles, fortresses and mansions suffered the most in the decades following the change in the political system because of their uncertain legal status. Several of them have been eroded to their foundations during this period—only the chimney springs up as a reminding exclamation mark. The return of the castle generally causes only trouble to its owner if he is not given his former woods, ploughlands and vineyards back. From the ruins, the former buildings can be resurrected only by a huge amount of money, the basis of which could be the agricultural income from the connected land estates. Gábor Margittai mentions several examples of this. Earl Béla Haller is a French-Italian language teacher in the Farkas Bolyai Theoretical Lyceum in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș, Neumarkt am Mieresch), while other members of the family, such as furniture factory worker Jenő Haller, have likewise had to take up trades. Haller was forced to sell Küküllővár (which was, it should be noted, in relatively good condition) to a rich entrepreneur from Constanța, who created a Dracula-themed tourist spectacle and wine-tasting venue among the walls of the castle. The former owner and the author could visit the castle only by great effort—it would have been easier had they dressed as French tourists.

The odd fate of Haller Castle in Küküllővár (Cetatea de Baltă, Kokelburg) is counterpointed by the exemplary renovation of the village’s Calvinist church. Endre Barabás, who was called for duty from the Mezőség, says, as described by Gábor Margittai: “He would not be a sporadic minority pastor of a crumbling sporadic minority church of a sporadic congregation, but the centre of a sustainable, developable community and its house, which would attract Hungarians from all over the world...”

Gábor Margittai dedicated two chapters, Mikeses of Uzon (Ozun)—Prisoners of the Housing Estate and Apors of Altörja (Turia de Jos)—The Master, to the presentation of the aristocracy of Székely Land. To the question of whom to consider a Székely Land nobleman, historian Kinga S. Tüdős, a former student of Eötvös College who returned to her motherland in the Ceaușescu period, answers this: “In the contemporary Hungarian historiography—where the Székely history has gained more and more importance—it is more and more often discussed that the castle lords of Székely Land are not the equivalent of a castle lord in a county of Transylvania, for example, a Bánffy or Bethlen. Even the concept of the castle is relative since it

is frequently actually a chateau. But we can agree that if the base area of the building is more than 300–400 metres squared, it was built of stone or brick, the rooms of the lord and mistress are separated, there are land estates connected to it, and there are mansions in the estate centre, then the rightful owners should be considered Székely Land noblemen.”

Gábor Margittai presents such a nobleman in the person of Baron Csaba Apor, who has renovated his castle, which presents unique murals, and has managed the farmland energetically. However, the property was confiscated when he was in his nineties after the collective fell into bankruptcy. He stated in one of his writings at the turn of the millennium: “We must ensure our future and the future of our successors. This future must be grounded here, where we were born and where we like living. For this, the creation of a financial base is essential. We cannot give up anything that was our rightful property, because that is the basis of our lives.”

Gábor Margittai presents many people of wonderful character: museum director Zoltán Soós, Countess Anikó Bethlen, Countess Borbála Mikes, Mária Kónya and the history teacher of the Bethlen College in Nagyenyed (Aiud, Straßburg am Mieresch), among others. The long list of names can be ended with Gemma Teleki, “who, when Sáromberke was taken away from them and she no longer had to deal with the nuisances of a castle with many rooms—which was the home of African explorer Sámuel Teleki—moved to the top of a cabinet and slept there for a few years.” When Ildikó Marosi, studying the history of the family, asked her why she did not move in with her daughter in Vienna, she answered: “I would rather work for a gardener than become a dependent in the shadow of Schönbrunn.”

Farkas Bánffy graduated from the Transportation Engineering Faculty of the Technological University of Budapest as a professional in industrial and transportation logistics. What convinced him to take possession, as the rightful owner, of the fully ruined castle of Fugad (Ciuguzel) and launch a lawsuit for the connecting woods and ploughlands? It was the summer dance camp of Magyarlapád (Lopadea Nouă). As Gábor Margittai writes: “At first he only visited the summer dance camp of Magyarlapád, then he became a frequenter, and after that the leader of the camp. He organized the local dance group and went on tour to several countries with the village youth. By this, he has not only created an opportunity for them to escape from their closed small minority lives and see the world, but he has encouraged their parents, who were brought up in the Ceauşescu period, to believe that their traditions hold a serious and marketable value.” That is, they have come to believe in the worth of remaining Hungarian.

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