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Encounters – identities in a tri-border region

Welcome to a short mental trip to an area, which has always been “Europe in a nutshell”, where people even today admit “to feel at home in several cultures”, or even that “there are three people inside you”.

I invite you to follow me to the tri-border region between Croatia, Serbia and Hungary, a region crossed by the rivers Danube, Sava, Drava and Tisa. For a long time about 20 different ethnic groups had lived together in this area naturally, without serious problems. Lots of them immigrated in the course of the 18th century and settled there as peasants, craftsmen, miners and merchants. They came from all parts of Europe. Italian, Spanish and Greek people as well as Austrian and German settlers (later they were called Danube Swabians), Slovaks, Czechs, Russians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians and many other groups. They lived side by side with Hungarian, Rumanian, Serbian, Croatian and Roma people.

The monarchs of the Habsburg Empire didn't attach great importance to the different religious nor ethnic identities of the newly settled groups. More relevant for the rulers had been their skills, their proficiencies and their manpower. The settlers should recultivate the fallow land, which had been ravaged and depopulated during the Habsburg-Ottoman wars. Extensive privileges had been provided to them for the first years of settlement, taxes and duties being raised later on.

All inhabitants of this area tried strongly to improve their economic conditions and to climb the social rank. They respected and tolerated the culture of the other ethnic groups. They appreciated their neighbours' language or were even able to speak it.

„I always knew exactly to whom I had to talk in what language.“ (Elisabeth.K, Osijek).

Certain identities were based on common religions or identical social status, ignoring ethnic boundaries. Usually local or even regional identity had been common in this area – until World War I which, due to the political incidents and consequences caused an abrupt break.

It's just that moment in the course of history, which marks the beginning of the double-exhibition *Encounters*. It starts presenting a series of historical photos, part of a collection acquired and elaborated by the Janus Pannonius Museums Pécs: *Multi-Ethnic Dimensions, Southern Hungary 1916-1920*. Béla Hernai, teacher and amateur photographer, started during World War I to portray the people living in his village Véménd. War becomes visible in the pictures through different signs: The bells are given their blessing, after having been taken down and before being melted into cannon balls. The war also becomes visible in those pictures of prisoners of war, in pictures of the many men in uniforms, with or without their relatives, in pictures of mothers and their children without their husbands or fathers.

However, this is only part of the Véménd reality between 1916 and 1920. Small children, youths, adults, families, even wedding parties had their portraits taken by Béla Hernai: many aspects make up the picture of the Véménd society. The portrayed all gather in the garden or the veranda of the teacher's house: Hungarians, Germans, Serbs, Jews and Roma. What has come down to us is the panorama of a multi-ethnic society, only moments before it ceased to exist.

What had happened meanwhile? Political ideologies, nationalisms and theoretical notion of homogenous states arose. Nationbuilders, inspired by theories of scientists (such as historians, ethnologists, anthropogeographers, biologists, racial researchers etc.) tried to set up boundaries based on ethnic categories. And politicians asked the inhabitants of Véménd and other villages to declare their own ethnic background for the first time – an option with which people never had been faced with before and therefore weren't accustomed to decide because of their common local identity: They all were Véménder. But politicians drew clear boundaries between those who were allowed to stay and those who had to leave (Serbs, Roma). During and after World War II, more Véménder got expelled (Danube Swabians, Jews).

Ninety years after Béla Hernai's photo documentation the second part of the exhibition, *You are now leaving the map!* creates a contemporary panorama of the German minority in the tri-border region between Hungary, Serbia and Croatia, by means of photos and interviews taken in 2008 by Sandra Kühnapfel and Joern Nuber. Photos of landscapes, villages, houses, interiors as well as portraits, shorts statements and longer stories of younger and elder Germans throw light on a multi-ethnic region in Southeastern Europe.

It is a time gap of ninety years, which separate the two exhibitions, but becomes irrelevant by means of their affinity in contents, underlined by the details of visualizing. The past is brought to mind, the present is given its own historical frame. The Véménder still have to face the consequences of two world wars in their village; the people who have been interviewed in the tri-border region in 2008, on the other hand, reflect upon these events in their own, very personal stories. They think about how they became a pawn in the hands of ideologists, nationalistic fanatics. They remember how multi-ethnic communities, whose members had been living together naturally until the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, suddenly fell apart. But at the same time, they tell us about how they developed their very own strategies to cope with these events.

For several reasons *Encounters* is not a "normal" exhibition of photographs. Obviously, the pictures are not displayed for their own sake. Different ways of hanging the pictures, the artistic alternation between two- and three-dimensional parts of the exhibition, interconnections between subjects of pictures and design elements, unexpected visual axes and vistas, unusual realities are kind of visual stumbling blocks to irritate the visitor in his perception. He does not only consume or receive. The unusual perspectives ask for modified perception and at the same time a different evaluation and classification of the perceived. What seemed familiar before suddenly becomes strange and the other way round. Even the visitors' orientation in the room is subjected to deception. Boundaries seem to dissolve, but reappear in another context!

Juggling with boundaries, this is where the entire exhibition is situated: between the poles of dissociation and overcoming distances, illustrating multi-ethnic co-existence from different perspectives. Showing both historical and recent pictures, it reflects upon the meaning of local and regional aspects in their relation to ethnic ascriptions given from outside. Concerning content as well as arrangements it encompasses the different aspects of limitation and dissolution, areas of tension between inclusion and exclusion,

between acceptance and dissociation,
ethnic and cultural concepts beyond political boundaries
and finally concepts of social spaces within a region, where minorities make up the
majority.

When Béla HERNAI started to portray the inhabitants of Véménd, today's boundaries did not exist. Ninety years later, and after at least three wars having hit the region, these boundaries have become political reality – a reality however, which does not coincide with the daily experience of the people living in this region. Their conception of space is a different one. It is a vivid conception, that has evolved from a lived experience and that is vehemently opposed to political ideologies, nationalisms and theoretical notions of homogenous states. Everyday life, the neighbours side by side, does not fit with the official concepts.

“So what you are? You do not only talk German, but you talk all kinds of languages.”(Anna M., Apatin)

Despite all kind of adverse political influences, arbitrary demarcations, political persecutions and sanctions, the people living in this area, they all have found and kept their way of multi-ethnic co-existence, continuously redefined until today. Likewise they feel at home in several cultures, cultures they appreciate and would not exchange for a life anywhere else.

“I live in two cultures, German and Hungarian. Both cultures are important to me.” (Joseph M., Villány)

What we encounter here is a set of notions which exist as a part of lived experience which basically question the fragile ideological system of constructions and reconstructions of national history and identity. A process to be observed intensively after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire, after World War II and most recently after the Balkan wars of the nineties.

To visualize multi-ethnic co-existence within the exhibition, we used certain elements for communication and contact in contrast to symbols of individual delimitation. We designed a street with median strip, crossing a village with a row of houses, typical for this area, typical colouring and typical fences. Fences which help to maintain private spaces and personal identities on the one hand, fences which allow for chats with the neighbour, for his way of life, for his system of values, on the other hand. This is why the gates are open – open for dialogue. Sitting on the very typical benches in the courtyard you can even listen to the interviews – the technique hidden in wooden boxes. Cables, wound around insulators, are connecting the houses from telegraph poles along the street

The exhibition does not intend to introduce the tri-border region, but rather focuses on its inhabitants, who have staked off their living space in a different fashion than prescribed by today's political map.

“I am really thankful to my parents for bringing me up in a way that I can talk to anyone without prejudices.” (Elisabeth K., Osijek).

Now and then, the people living there offer ways of living together, that are not restricted to this area. Being a practicable rather than a shining or even idealized example it may point out the huge chances and possibilities of multiple identities in contemporary societies. What is at stake is a living inter-regional way of life in a

Europe of regions which – hopefully – will care less about politically determined boundaries in the future.

“People did not become more open and more tolerant because of a law! The law only regulated things.” (Renata T., Osijek)

But within this context one more aspect should be reflected: What about the role of those scientists, who then analysed society, who described the different groups, focussing their differences, trying to deduce principles of structure, introducing some ethnic drawers within a kind of “social cupboard”? It even occurred that in favour of more distinct results they had pointed out some differences and boundaries, which didn't exist in that way.

After those studies had been published, their contents were often picked up by popular-science journals. And not infrequently nationalist propaganda campaigns were based on their theories. Of course the people living in the researched areas also got a hold of those publications, which caused a process of feedback. People approved of the author's perspectives without any doubts - due to the authority of printed words.

During my field studies in Vojvodina last summer, I asked a lady to talk about the Danubeswabian culture of her village. She immediately referred to a monograph, published 40 years ago, but recently put onto a website. This book would completely reply to all my questions, nothing more to add by her!

Does the internet finally supersede ethnological fieldwork, personal interviews and the different forms of documentation? I think it does not! On the contrary! More than ever it's important to observe and to question the dynamics of keeping and switching identities within the actual political and social contexts.

In addition to that it's our turn to be aware of the evident influence which cultural institutions such as museums use to have, acting as multipliers within this domain. Lots of museums pretend to establish or strengthen ethnic identity. When defining one ethnic group they have to be delimited against other groups. Selecting facts and aspects, the reality presented in an exhibition inevitably differs from the every day life outside.

Making exhibitions, publishing books, planning events we should always be conscious of those diverse interdependencies between reality and exhibited or even published reality. We should try to dissolve boundaries, revise certain statements and clear out drawers filled with different ascriptions. But especially the principle of dialogue is the most important one to act in the field as well as in the museum. Only through an ongoing dialogue we can approach to the multiperspectives of reality within a permanent process. Finally I would like to give you an example, organized within the *Encounters'* exhibition:

To start an active dialogue with the visitors, we realized the picture initiative *Bring an object*, taking up elements of the historical photos: Béla Hernai mostly took pictures of the Véménders with an object in their hands. Something that met their community's expectations, an object that underlined their personality, their culture, their region. Within the context of the exhibition the picture initiative is supposed to highlight the extent to which different cultures are connected today. Cultural artefacts

can help us pave the way towards other cultures: someone's favourite music, their favourite football club, their favourite author. They can establish relations which finally become part of one's own identity.

Current visitors of the exhibition are welcome to have their picture taken with a personal object representing a culture different from their own or the one they used to live in. The personal story behind this object is to be written down, mirroring the object's relation to its owner. The photographs, together with the stories, create a sort of bridge: Diverse relationships and connections between different cultures become directly comprehensible and understandable. They inspire visitors to develop an in-depth look at the world outside their own environment. They cause the visitor to reflect on the other and the otherness, relating to his own identity, his personal concept of space. And the pictures and the object stories become part of an ever-growing touring exhibition.