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Hans Bergel on Freedom and Attachment to Transylvania

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Introduction

THE TRANSYLVANIAN Saxon anti-communist dissident Hans Bergel (1925–2022) is a multifaceted intellectual figure—author, journalist, athlete, and musician. This study examines Bergel’s cultural and affective attachment to his native region following his imprisonment as a political detainee in socialist Romania. After his emigration to the Federal Republic of Germany in the late 1960s, Bergel emerged as a prominent advo-

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cate for human rights, particularly concerning the German minority living under the communist regime in Romania. Simultaneously, he persistently reflected upon his sense of belonging to Transylvania and, in a broader sense, to Romania as a homeland.

The central premise of this research posits that Bergel's reflections on his personal experiences and on the fate of the German community in Romania provide a crucial interpretive framework for the role of place attachment in shaping the Germans' decisions to either remain in or emigrate from Romania before and after 1989. A corpus of texts authored by or related to Hans Bergel serves as the empirical basis for this investigation. The research methodology involves an initial thematic content analysis to identify prevailing recurrent motifs, followed by a qualitative discourse analysis of the selected narrative materials.

Political Persecution of the Transylvanian German Community After 1918

TO GAIN a clearer understanding of the circumstances that led to the large-scale emigration of Romania's German minority during the 1980s and 1990s, we start with a short overview of some major historical and political events which ultimately contributed to this exodus.

The dismantling of the *Königsboden* (Royal Land) and the loss of their autonomy in 1867 did not lessen the desire for self-determination for the largest German community of Transylvania, the Saxons. As the restoration of their public-law-based autonomy was no longer a realistic prospect, the Saxons were compelled to create alternative structures that allowed for independent decision-making in the most vital spheres of their national life, making strategic use of the opportunities available within the civil legal framework.¹ Throughout the four decades of the Dual Monarchy, the primary objective of the Transylvanian Saxon elite was to develop the institutional infrastructure necessary to sustain this autonomy, while simultaneously countering the Hungarian government's measures aimed—explicitly or implicitly—at Magyarization.² From 1890 onwards, a shift toward reconciliation with the prevailing legal and political order took place. The Saxons agreed to cooperate with the Hungarian authorities, while placing nation-building and the modernization of Saxon society at the heart of their national program.³

After the First World War, seeing an opportunity to achieve their goals of reinforcing self-determination, the German ethnic group in Transylvania supported the unification with Romania.⁴ Although the principle of "full national freedom for all cohabiting peoples" was proclaimed among other pillars in the

formation of the new Romanian state, its practical implementation often encountered difficulties that, in many cases, seemed insurmountable.⁵ The newly unified Romanian state did not fulfil all the promises made to the minorities. Hence, instead of regaining the long-sought self-determination, the Saxon community experienced numerous severe losses as well. During the agrarian reform in Romania, initiated in 1921, the National Saxon University and the Evangelical Church lost a significant part of the lands they owned.⁶ Their multi-layered urban cultural and industrial heritage was deteriorated by the new urban population and the newly appointed non-German public officials and their modernization measures carried out in cities.⁷

Thus, after centuries of autonomy and self-determination, political developments that emerged in the mid-19th century on the European stage led to the restriction of their rights, and the German ethnic group in Transylvania faced various forms of repression across a wide range of areas and intensities. However, the oppressive policies of the years following the Second World War, and the persecutions experienced throughout the ensuing four decades of communism, marked a new level of intensity and gravity.⁸

Several studies have explored this topic in an effort to explain the massive emigration of the German community from Transylvania, focusing on key historical events that significantly shaped their fate. Among the most consequential were the disciplinary measures imposed on them after Romania changed sides during the war,⁹ and the widespread seizure of their land and properties beginning in 1945, which severely affected their livelihood—especially given that most of them were peasants.¹⁰ The expropriation was followed by the nationalization of industry and finance.¹¹ Other research highlights the climate of intimidation, abuse, and terror they endured at the hands of both authorities and segments of the civilian population.¹² The deportations to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union as part of the war reparations,¹³ as well as the forced relocation to the Bărăgan Plain in the 1950s¹⁴ further exemplify the hostile policies directed against the German minority.

These oppressive policies are often explained by the collective guilt ascribed to the German community based solely on their ethnic affiliation, holding them responsible for events, losses, and damages incurred during the Second World War.¹⁵ The historical catastrophes of national-socialism and of communism impacted in multiple negative ways the German ethnics in Romania.¹⁶ As targets of the Romanian government's anti-Nazi policy, the German minority lost its civil rights¹⁷ and was stripped of its recognition and rights as a national minority.¹⁸

After the extremely hostile policies of the 1940s, the institutional, economic, and cultural situation of the German minority began to gradually normalize from the 1950s onward—albeit under communist auspices.¹⁹ In December

1948 the German minority regained its legal status, and a few years later, the right to vote and to political representation. They were also allowed to publish their own newspapers and periodicals, although these functioned as instruments of the Communist Party, and books or the theatre were subject to censorship.²⁰

The intellectual elite—regardless of ethnicity—who did not align with the new ideology or fought against it, were harassed, arrested, and sent to prison or forced labor camps. Many members of the German community were among those affected by these repressive measures throughout the four decades of the communist regime.²¹ The pressure on minorities increased after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and in 1958/59 major political trials against the Germans/Saxons took place, the more publicized ones being the Black Church Trial and the Trial of the German Writers (including Hans Bergel).

During the 1970s, Romania's political climate was marked by an intolerant and repressive policy aimed at the forced assimilation of ethnic minorities.²² The resumption of diplomatic relations between Romania and what was at that time the Federal Republic of Germany, known also as West Germany, in 1969 led to an increase in the number of citizens granted permission to emigrate.²³ Individuals who expressed a desire to emigrate were subjected to various forms of harassment by the authorities.²⁴ Those who left the country illegally faced even harsher consequences: not only were all their possessions confiscated, but their relatives who remained behind were also subjected to severe abuse. Several historical studies tackle these topics, applying oral history in addressing the perception of local Romanian communities²⁵ regarding the experiences of their neighbors in the 1940s and 1950s, and the collective memory of the decimated German communities.²⁶ The events of the 1940s are a sensitive topic for both the Romanian and the German population of Transylvania. Most are cautious when speaking about the war, the political orientation during the interwar period, the relations with the other ethnic groups, and their behavior during the events right after World War II.²⁷ Published recollections are a significant source,²⁸ alongside the Securitate Archives.²⁹

The exodus of Romania's German ethnic group did not cease after 1989, either.³⁰ The traumatic experiences following World War II—including forced relocations and deportations—undermined the social fabric of the community and significantly contributed to its disintegration. The confiscation of property and assets, political repression, and the separation of countless families after World War II³¹ further accelerated the departure. The erosion of economic and social stability, coupled with a deep loss of trust in the Romanian government, fueled large-scale emigration to West Germany.³² Even after 1989, feelings of fear, isolation, and mistrust persisted,³³ making what Göckler-Timoșenco described as the “exit of the Germans from Romanian history” an irreversible reality.³⁴

“The Fundamental Theme of My Life: Freedom”

HANS BERGEL’S turbulent life exemplifies the turmoil of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century: minority status, political oppression, forced labor and exile—and above all the endurance of personal convictions, literature, confident identity, and the pursuit of freedom despite all hardships. If we regard Hans Bergel as a lens through which to examine the relationship with, and the fate of, the German community in Romania, we must consider the principles of freedom and humanity, which underpin his approach to culture, writing, and life:

*[Freedom] is the first condition for a person’s cultural capacity, which they understand as a permanent and inevitable challenge . . .*³⁵

*Freedom—not to be confused with lack of attachment!—is the alpha and omega of every culture. In the 20th century, we had to learn from the great dictatorships—communism and national socialism—what kind of illusions a forcibly imposed concept of culture can produce.*³⁶

The topic of freedom in the life and work of Hans Bergel cannot be fully examined without reference to the short story *The Prince and the Minstrel*. While the student Bergel had previously demonstrated acts of defiance—both against the educational demands of the German Youth between 1942 and 1944, and against deportation to the Soviet Union (through evasion and concealment)—in this narrative, published in 1957, he recounts the minstrel’s resistance to Prince Gabriel Báthory. Although the plot unfolds in the 17th century (complete title: *The Prince and the Minstrel: A Tale from 17th-Century Transylvania/Fürst und Lautenschläger: Eine Erzählung aus dem Siebenbürgen des 17. Jahrhunderts*) the notion of defiance is transposed into Bergel’s stance toward socialism. The minstrel refuses to glorify the prince, and upon the prince’s retreat from besieged Braşov, he sings the lied “Et saß e klie wäld Vijjeltchen”/ “Es saß ein klein wild Vögelein”/ “There once was a little wild bird,” where the little bird is the fleeting image of freedom itself.³⁷ The meaning of this short story was disclosed to the Securitate by Eginald Schlattner, leading to Bergel’s imprisonment—ironically, for a story that had initially received an award.³⁸

Freedom is considered by Bergel the highest value and the golden thread of his life: freedom for the man he was and for the writer,³⁹ and this creed influences his emotional link during communist Romania: “Since they took our freedom, they destroyed our connection with the homeland.”⁴⁰

He observes that communist thinking is foreign to the notion of freedom and of humanism. Bergel’s personal narratives emphasize this idea:

*What could an ethnic minority . . . a small one of about 250,000 Germans in Transylvania, a bit more in Banat, do other than adapt to the dictatorship? Of course, there were people who opposed it.*⁴¹

*This story expresses the fundamental theme of my life: freedom—sometimes, with all the dramatic consequences for the course of my life.*⁴²

His understanding of freedom is within a hierarchy where security is not really appreciated. On the contrary: “Fundamentally, Aristotle’s clear statement still holds true: He who prefers security over freedom makes himself a slave.”⁴³

In a society changed by censorship and political repression, Bergel is a defender of his fellow citizens’ shared memory. Bergel felt that the lack of economic, political, and cultural freedom threatened to erase ethnic and personal identities. Heritage was suppressed or rewritten, as required by ideology, under the authoritarian communist regimes of Romania. In his historical fiction, he criticizes the communist regime, and uses writing as a survival mechanism and to outline his personal trauma. Narratives bring back treasured memories of the good days, but also the trauma inflicted by political persecution. His fiction is both a refuge and resistance against ideological control and a life under the harsh reality of surveillance, because the surveillance system of the Securitate (secret police) infiltrated every layer of life.

In the same vein, he ponders about the role of individual agency versus ethnic (i.e., the ethnic Other) or regional origin. According to Bergel, personal choice is not dependent on culture and ethnicity:

*I have come to understand, once and for all, that in a borderline situation the decision always lies with the individual. One’s origin means nothing.*⁴⁴

*It was my personal decision to oppose communism. It was a decision—though I only later fully realized it—that was deeply connected to my sense of dignity and pride.*⁴⁵

According to Bergel, dictatorship shapes people’s lives as a dance in chains, and this can create solidarity based on humanism—valuing people for themselves as supreme values—and the hope for freedom and a dignified life. Freedom opposes communist terror and its cold cruelty. He sees communism as a system of lies, an ideology that crushes the individual, their choices and hopes. Bergel fought against dictatorship and against the idea that there is communism with a human face, the very reason for his imprisonment: “I was condemned and imprisoned due to my inability to appreciate communism as the ideal solution to human problems and as . . . heaven on earth.”⁴⁶

He also mentioned his awareness of the internal distortion of the human being inflicted by communism. Bergel reflects upon his fear that dictatorship could

deform him internally and assesses the significance of inner freedom for those who lost their external freedom.⁴⁷ He distinguishes between these types of freedom and places them into a hierarchy according to which he led his life:

*Of course, the loss of physical freedom is a substantial change in a person's life. But the one who does not allow his inner, spiritual, and moral freedom to be taken away becomes intangible. He will always be the one who, for the sake of freedom, also has the courage to revolt. In communism, among the political prisoners from all professions and social classes, I encountered this capacity for inner freedom.*⁴⁸

Against this background, he fought for freedom and human dignity and felt that Transylvania belonged to its people and history. Bergel tries to find historical reasons for valuing freedom: “a geographical space of transition, invasions, and conquests like no other in Europe, with freedom becoming the most precious good in the consciousness of its inhabitants.”⁴⁹

For Bergel, freedom also means rejecting any type of ideology. Bergel perceives the feeling of freedom and the rhetoric of freedom as a universal language which transcends any identity peculiarities and ideologies. According to Bergel, while ideologies are exclusionary, freedom offers a very humane, complex, and inclusive vision of life:

*Every ideology, at some point, forces people to disconnect their conscience, feelings, and sense of humanity. How can you have a meaningful conversation with such people? To every argument, they will respond with prefabricated ideological theses.*⁵⁰

He identifies a way to maintain one's freedom, and we thus come to understand his rejection of any ideology: “A person must use their own reason in every circumstance; only by doing so can they preserve their freedom.”⁵¹

Bergel underlines that the direct personal experience of history should not be questioned, but rather trusted, which he complains is difficult for those who gave up their freedom of thought for love of an ideology. The truthfulness of personal experience is emphasized by Bergel against the knowledge or expertise of those who claim to know without any direct experience. This idea is brought up by Bergel especially when he writes about the communist dictatorship and his emigration experience:

During visits in 1968 to the editorial offices of West German media, I was shocked by the lack of information and, even more so, by the know-it-all attitude; both literally left me speechless. I won't name names, but even a writer who at the time was famous beyond Germany tried to explain to me, in a long one-on-one conversation in Berlin,

*the “socialism” of the Eastern countries—even though, unlike me, he had not experienced a single half hour of it in body or spirit.*⁵²

*The cultural affairs officer of a major German city . . . let me know—in a tone of bewilderment—that he did not quite understand the reason behind my stance in the East and my politically motivated imprisonments under the communist regime—he himself, on appropriate occasions, had advocated for certain communist principles.*⁵³

*Others will write in more detail and more accurately about these things. Without having been there. Informing themselves from books and documents. They will know better, without our tangled and disturbing testimony.*⁵⁴

He describes childhood as the age of freedom, made visible through play, devoid of any ideology:

*Playing involves discipline, self-control, teamwork, reaction speed, a wealth of creative ideas, the joy of acting, courage, and balance. Above all, however, games protect against any ideology and, consequently, any radicalism. Because games, by their nature, cannot be ideologized. Thus, they are the expression of that freedom which seeks to be the testimony of the highest proof of responsibility, through the respect of rules.*⁵⁵

Freedom has been won through sacrifice and is thus invaluable to Romanian democracy. Bergel feels responsible for Romania, despite his mixed feelings, showing thus his attachment to the place:

*But could I feel contentment toward a country with which I share a painful love? No, I rather feel sorrow when I see the wounds communism inflicted upon this land. I wish I could help.*⁵⁶

*You can’t play with democracy. It’s such a serious thing that . . . you have to take it seriously. You have to take seriously this way of coexisting, because we don’t have a better one.*⁵⁷

*And when I see the developments in Romania today, I am horrified by how politicians are mocking this democratic system . . . earned with so many sacrifices, with so much suffering. And you’ve made it . . . you’ve escaped the dictatorship, and then to do such things with the freedom you won or regained, it’s a tragedy . . . I can’t sleep when I think about these things.*⁵⁸

Bergel criticizes the loyalty to any kind of ideology because it means suspending individual rationality. According to him, ideological extremes led to fear, moral compromise, and even collapse; they ignored the moral complexity of people and their universal desire for individual freedom. He criticizes communism for the use of violence in order to cause internal deformities to individuals, according to its ideology.

“I Have Always Been Forced to Write in Order to Survive”

THE PURSUIT of freedom is powerfully expressed in Hans Bergel’s writing, which, in itself, constitutes an act of freedom⁵⁹ and a form of catharsis, and therefore the highest value he holds. Writing helped him cope with a harsh or unfair reality:

*My intent was one: to express in words my revolt against tyranny so as not to suffocate, to give voice to my anger against the oppressors so as not to collapse morally.*⁶⁰

Bergel draws on an ethnic minority experience within the Romanian communist regime. His writings ignored socialist realism, and had a deeply humanist approach to themes like moral courage and spiritual freedom. He had multiple identities that were reflected in his writing: Transylvanian Saxon, Romanian German-language writer, and political dissident under the Soviet occupation and the Romanian communist regimes of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu, with their repressive political and cultural apparatus.

In communist Romania, he felt that he was internally exiled. As a form of rebellion, he wrote and spoke against ideological conformity and against any system of control. To break through censorship and fear, Bergel used historical settings and criticized the communist regime. Also, in many of his writings, the style is autobiographical, thus answering his wish to write with honesty, based on personal experience. Bergel reflects on the role that freedom and resistance through writing had in his life and in defining his personality and identity:

*I am, above all, the product of a natural predisposition, but at the same time, the result of a rebellion against any form of dictatorship. I have remained this way until today, even in the so-called “free society” that, in its own way, promotes the spiritual elimination of those who think differently.*⁶¹

*For me, it was decisive during that period that I met people willing to pay the highest price for freedom; never before had I encountered such people.*⁶²

Through writing, Bergel makes sense of his place in the world. His description of the relationship with his writing shows that this activity was a tool for survival: “I have always been forced to write in order to survive: my life is my writing—or it is nothing.”⁶³

Bergel’s novels have an autobiographical source of inspiration; therefore, he feels open, honest, and confident in his writing. Bergel himself comments on his

literary work, as it emphasizes his focus on the Transylvanian region: “I am the author with the most Transylvanian-themed works. My most passionate political and essayistic writings have addressed Transylvanian issues.”⁶⁴

His resistance literature is influenced by his values, convictions, and personality:

*Writing against one’s knowledge and conscience is something I have always considered despicable and disgraceful. If a confrontation was necessary, I rarely avoided it. Forced by political realities and my own moral convictions, I stood, regardless of personal consequences, against one of the two major totalitarian systems of the 20th century—communism.*⁶⁵

In his literature, Bergel describes the complex feelings he has for his homeland, due to his experience of dictatorship and imprisonment:

*Now I want to be in that place, where they sought to crush my pride and tear me apart from myself, where they stole and then destroyed my attachment to the land of my childhood, the sense of my roots, the first dreams and fascinations, the first satisfactions and revelations. Where I was expelled, like every one of those like me, from everything we were—without being allowed to leave. Where they sank their fangs into us like vampires and where they forced us to see with what sadism they strangled our love, with every breath, everything we had planted with the strength of our lives in our native soil and what we once were . . . And I want to look them in the eye, in the place where for years they tried to kill my soul and mind, through stone catacombs and swampy camps.*⁶⁶

Bergel’s Emotional Attachment to Places: “I Am Where I Am Not. Not Where I Am”

HANS BERGEL’S attachment to Transylvania and Romania entails both geographical and emotional landscapes. Among the elements engendering bonds to places, Bergel mentions the importance of the nature and landscapes of Transylvania, of the family material assets and its genealogy as proof of his roots in the region, and of his multiple cultural belonging. Our findings are in line with previous research that showed that territorial identities at the local and regional levels are maintained through place attachment practices (i.e., of remembering and permanently constructing representations about places and regions), and these reinforce individual feelings of belonging, and also strengthen place and regional identities themselves.⁶⁷

“My Heart Melts When I See the Făgăraș Mountains”

CHILDHOOD AND life in the countryside meant learning to love nature: “years of communion with nature and its creatures, years I wouldn’t trade for anything in the world.”⁶⁸ Transylvania is both the place of the golden age of childhood and the wound of the later years of his youth and adulthood. Most of all, his nostalgia is built on the memories of his childhood and youth, of the place where his children were born. Childhood and youth in Transylvania, the cultural and spiritual geography of the region, shaped him and Bergel felt that his roots and home were in that region:⁶⁹

If you ask me: Where is your homeland? I wouldn’t say Munich, or Gröbenzell, or Transylvania, or Bucharest . . . I’d say the Făgăraș Mountains. That’s where I’m at home. There isn’t . . . let me exaggerate a little . . . a rock that I don’t know, even to this day. Every time I pass through there . . . This July, I was in Brașov again, a splendid day from Sibiu airport to Brașov . . . My heart melts when I see the Făgăraș Mountains. I would move right now to a cabin there. I knew all the cabin keepers, I knew absolutely everything, every peak, every valley, the forests, I knew it all.”⁷⁰

His love for the country transpires from a discussion he has with his mother, and he writes about it:

in a state of helplessness, I asked my mother if she could tell me what beauty is. She looked at me thoughtfully and said: “Beauty is what a person looks at with love, and the things we do with love become beautiful as well.”⁷¹

Family Material Heritage and Roots: “Time Is Our Ultimate Judge”

WRITING ABOUT emigration, Hans Bergel remembers his attachment to an object that symbolized all material things that had been lost during his family’s history in Transylvania: the Viennese pendulum clock, a material proof of his origins:

In our family, I was the first to manage to emigrate from our unfortunate country and reach the West. One by one, the others came as well, until, around 1970, we were able to celebrate the reunification of the family in Munich. The only thing missing from our circle was the pendulum clock from the year 1821.”⁷²

The clock was the only item from my childhood that survived the following decades, the socialist disposessions, and the general impoverishment . . . The law had prevented it from being taken out of the country, because it was, as my sister ex-

plained to me, “national heritage,” even though a distant ancestor had bought it privately in Vienna, without any state involvement, and had brought it as a gift to his wife in the Grand Principality of Transylvania.⁷³

As a protest against the communist dictatorship, he remembers his wish to have the pendulum clock and his mother’s efforts to eventually get it out of Romania:

I had lost everything, but everything in the country in the southeast, devastated by dictatorship, which is why my desire to once again have nearby at least a pendulum clock meant a delayed protest against the humiliations to which we were subjected.⁷⁴

This object is not only a symbol of time and its power over people’s lives, but also a reminder of a childhood that Bergel perceives as his golden age:

Whenever I stand in front of it, it teaches me that time is our ultimate judge. And its unshakable balance restores to me something of the security that a person only has in childhood.⁷⁵

Family Genealogy and Roots: “Didn’t My Ancestors Live on These Lands?”

PONDERING ABOUT his roots, Hans Bergel considers that his yearly visits are palpable proof of his enduring connection:

my deep roots in the Romanian lands to this day. And I go there every year once, twice, three times.⁷⁶

I can’t detach myself from Romania, because that is where my roots are.⁷⁷

His place attachment is based on family roots: “And I ask myself: didn’t my ancestors live on these lands? Aren’t their graves found in the soil of these territories? And haven’t my three children been born here?”⁷⁸

Home is where his roots are. Thus, genealogy—or historical identification through house/home, family, and community—means an “extension of the self”:⁷⁹

During some of these journeys, I have felt an almost painful longing to put down roots, to belong somewhere. Perhaps that is a form of searching for home—a consequence of losing a homeland that can never truly be regained. As I understand it, a person can only have a limited number of true homelands. I did not leave Transylvania voluntarily. But has anyone in this century ever asked us about the vulnerability of our sense of home?⁸⁰

Bergel even self-identifies as a writer in exile, clarifying what this means for him home and away, and the reasons for feeling at home when in Transylvania:

*All my life, I will carry within me the songs and dances, the languages, the tears and the laughter, the history and the faces of these people, even though I no longer live among them. From this perspective, I am a writer in exile.*⁸¹

*Many times, I miss Romania—it is still the homeland of my soul.*⁸²

*My heart is bound to Romania.*⁸³

Moreover, he felt the Romanian Revolution was also his revolution and travelled to Romania to participate in that event:

*I left Munich for Bucharest without stopping, only twice to get gas . . . Why am I telling you this? It's a symptom of the depth of my connection to the places I come from. With this behavior, with this act of revolution, I must go, because it's also my revolution. I could have said: "What do I care? Let them kill each other." The fact is that something pushed me! I couldn't stop!*⁸⁴

This sense of his roots, which Bergel holds to, is strong in locals; it gives them a rooted sense of place and topophilia,⁸⁵ based on multiple material and symbolic ties that bind them to a certain area which is significant for their personal identity.⁸⁶

Bergel's Humanism and His Multiple Cultural Belonging: "I Am a Cultural Border Crosser"

HIS MULTIFACETED cultural affiliations and strong sense of identity enable Hans Bergel to conceive of European identity as a highly significant marker of people's cultural identity, without overshadowing or diminishing their regional peculiarities and attachment. Both levels of this hierarchy of territorial attachment and identity can exist simultaneously.

*Because I realized early on that evaluating people based on nationality is nonsense, even a lie, I became a European. But never would it occur to me to forget that I am German. One can very well be a citizen of the world without giving up one's national identity and heritage.*⁸⁷

*The national region offers a unique color, but not the substantial human background, which is transregional.*⁸⁸

Does the love of Braşovians for their hometown of Braşov and the Transylvanian region have different emotional roots than that of Bretons for their homeland in the

*peninsula made of granite, schist, and sandstone, or of the Italians from Puglia for their native land, consisting of the 600 km-long Adriatic coast and the limestone terraces known as the “murge”?*⁸⁹

When Bergel writes about his roots, about what makes him come back again and again to his homeland, he acknowledges his belonging to two cultures: he is both a German ethnic and a Transylvanian Saxon. Bergel lives in-between these two cultures. His cultural heritage is not a cage, but a gift, a lens through which he sees and understands the world. Thus, his place attachment is a cultural one, to Romania:

*Despite more than 30 years of absence and all my decades of travels around the world, my roots are and will remain firmly planted in the lands to the north and south of the Carpathians, by the Danube, the Black Sea, and in Moldova. My personality is and will remain marked, until the end of my life, by the cultural imprint of these regions. I want to clarify that I only realized these things once I was already far from Romania and, as I grow older, I become more and more aware of this.*⁹⁰

*This does not change the fact that, by birth, by my mother tongue, by my education and culture, I am German. I have long been aware of that, in this regard, I represent a special case. Day by day, I face the dilemmas of this double cultural belonging and, equally, the creative tensions that arise from it.*⁹¹

Bergel also explains why he is not emotionally attached to Western Europe, to its places and culture:

*The idea is that we are—roughly—young enough to change internally until about the age of 40, still capable of taking root in a new environment, flexible enough to experience a new homeland . . . So I came to the new land of Central/Western Europe too late. Of course, I adapted at an intellectual level. But to detach myself emotionally from the life I had lived until then—I hesitated, and ultimately, the more I got to know my new surroundings, the less I wanted to.*⁹²

In the same vein, Bergel does not feel a part of Germany, but rather an outsider:

*I am a child of a centuries-long historical experience, which I am not at all willing or inclined to forget for the sake of Western naivety, because in these matters, I do not float as an individual in an airless and bloodless space of supposedly tolerant ideologies, but I rather think and speak from experience in dealing with brutal realities. And so it happens—and I am not the only one!—that although I hold a German passport, in this regard, I live as a stranger among Germans.*⁹³

Nevertheless, developing a new attachment was possible. However, it was not to Germany, but to his family (to his second wife):

*I can imagine it. But practically speaking, it is impossible. In the nearly 30 years I have lived in Germany, bonds and roots have developed that not only bind me, but for which I am also grateful.*⁹⁴

The past haunts Bergel with both its bright memories and dark wounds, a reason why he feels he is always wandering between two worlds. Bergel acts as a bridge between his Transylvanian Saxon ethnic identity and the national one (i.e., Romanian), between the Romanian and the German culture, between the oppressed Romanian society and the free one of West Germany. He used fiction to mediate between all these.

*I am a cultural border crosser, moving between Western and Southeastern European cultures. I carry both within me, I am deeply connected to both, and at the same time, I am able to observe and understand both from an external perspective. I could not function in any other way.*⁹⁵

Bergel feels as the “son of two countries”:

*Alongside my German culture, I lived and grew up with Romanian culture. And I never saw, at any moment in my life, due to my parental home, the Romanian culture as an adversary or a threat. I saw it as an addition, an annex, a corrective to the culture I was born into, being German.*⁹⁶

Cultural belonging is nuanced and enriching for Bergel:

*Day by day, I face the dilemma of this double cultural belonging.*⁹⁷

*I have never perceived the German and Romanian identities as contradictory, but rather as two different facets of the same cultural will: as European forms of our shared cultural existence.*⁹⁸

Having multiple cultural roots, Bergel feels fortunate and accomplished: “With a strong, genuine connection to the German language, I see myself as a South-eastern European.”⁹⁹

As a result, Bergel embodies cultural hybridity, but emphasizes that his homeland is where his heart lingers, what he longs for, not the place of his exile: “I am / where I am not. / Not / where I am.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, his place attachment, due to a profound understanding of European and Romanian culture, is even stronger, making Bergel a humanist:

*it is quite possible that, from the outside, but with deep roots embedded in these regions, I may be more aware of this than many Romanians. Romania's European vocation makes me feel even closer to its people and landscapes.*¹⁰¹

*Culture is a spiritual space of cohabitation, whose gems require our lucid creative spirit, our dedication, and care: it is the guarantee of our humanity, if we don't want to lose ourselves entirely in inhumanity.*¹⁰²

Both his writing and life are characterized by permanent crossings of cultural borders. Beside rejecting ideological absolutism, Bergel challenges cultural essentialism. He is ready to embrace the complexity of mixed cultural identities, due to his experience of living in varied cultural, political, and economic contexts. He perceives his engagement with different and multiple cultural worlds as enriching and transformative, enabling his cultural and emotional openness and fluency. His neither-here-nor-there emphasizes the complex grammar of his plural belonging, as his identity is a relational one, not one featuring purity. He perceives his hybridity as a strength and his exile as a space of creation, open to new attachment, not only loss.

He fights against any dehumanization that comes with nationalist and ideological totalizing systems. Advocating for a humanist approach to life, Bergel resists the communist regime. He sets humanity before communist ideology and narrow nationalism. His voicing of humanist values is a subversive act against totalitarianism. Setting the dignity and value of the human being above any type of dogma is a radical act. Thus, his humanism appears dangerous, subversive, and elitist because it puts the individual above the state. Such a humanist defiance transpires from Bergel's writing: "Mature cultures culminate and always meet in the idea of humanity; everything else is provincialism."¹⁰³

The communist world was a fractured one, shaped by authoritarianism and trauma. This authoritarian system refuses to practice empathy towards the Other and to acknowledge the complexity of the human being and of the world. Bergel defies such ideological certainty. Under totalitarianism, he is bearing witness to how ideology makes both victims and collaborators. Through writing, he creates alternative meaningful spaces of survival under oppression. This way, Bergel resists political oppression and totalitarian simplification. For him, language is a space of free expression. He is committed to moral responsibility and to freedom, both in the way he lives and in his writing. Later, by remembering and keeping alive the memory of communist repression, he continues his resistance.

For Bergel, humanism is a significant European value. Moreover, due to this, in his writings he recognizes the whole in a part of it, Europe in any region, and thus also in Transylvania. The places and the people of Transylvania represent the continent through their culture and affective relationships with other places due to similar or common historical experiences. Therefore, Bergel feels emotionally

connected to both Europe and its regions, through direct physical experiences, and especially through culture:

*I see Europe as a shared protective umbrella under which we all—Romanians, Germans, Irish, and others—are guaranteed the freedom to live and preserve what we have inherited from our history, culture, and language. The greatness of European cultures lies in their richness of regional expressions and diversity. To blend them into a uniform mass would mean the spiritual death of Europe and the end of the Europe in which, despite everything, we still feel at home.*¹⁰⁴

As such, for Bergel, the homeland is a material place, as much as an internal experience. His personal identity, given by culture and space, conditions his attachment:

*According to birth, mother tongue, and education, I am of course German. But the older I get, the stronger I hear from within the voice of my Transylvanian roots.*¹⁰⁵
*I left Transylvania when I was 43 years old. And by “bond,” I mean that degree of imprinting by one’s origins that becomes a part of one’s personality.*¹⁰⁶

The unique cultural diversity of Transylvania is colored by his experiences. This multicultural region presented itself as an advantage in the shaping of Hans Bergel, it influenced in a positive way his interactions within Romania and other countries: “From Transylvania, I took with me, first and foremost, the ability—learned over centuries—to perceive other peoples and cultures.”¹⁰⁷ The Transylvania of his golden age is one of ethnic tolerance:

*As I grow older, I ask myself: “Am I German? Was my education German?” However, I realize that I am radically different from the Germans who live here, in Germany. So, what am I? I only know that I come from a place where multiculturalism was something natural. I would go out into the street, and my neighbor was Romanian. A few houses away, there lived a Hungarian family. I won’t even mention the Roma, there were quite a few of them on the outskirts of the village. This multicultural, multiethnic space meant—looking back—a gain for me, a wealth of inspiration. I believe that this is precisely why I never had problems encountering other cultures, different from my own.*¹⁰⁸

His cultural background is determined by his upbringing in a multicultural environment:

The multi-faceted cultural and ethnic conglomerate in which I lived until I was 43 shaped a spirituality in me that, alongside my German upbringing, was also

*influenced by elements of Latin culture from the Romanians, as well as Slavic and Hungarian ways of being. The religious culture of the Jews in the spirit of the Torah and several other influences also played a role.*¹⁰⁹

Longing for Transylvanian Experiences: “I Can Return and Relive the Feeling That I Have a Homeland”

BERGEL VALUES his cultural in-betweenness as a gift, while multiple belonging and the tension it creates only adds to his personal drama and is a source of creativity in writing. His internal crisis is steeped in his attachment to places and a homeland, and in the related emotional turmoil and grief. He recognizes and reflects on the depth of his attachment to Transylvania and Romania, and understands what triggered his feelings for places, this region, and for the homeland. However, amid personal suffering, Bergel sees the larger historical drama of the Transylvanian Saxons and of Romanians under communism. Through writing, he can contain part of his personal distress. This transition from feelings to reflective lucidity has a therapeutic role, as Bergel comes to terms with the complexity of his emotions.

His oscillation between two worlds (Germany and Romania) is marked by feelings of happiness each time he visits Romania.¹¹⁰ Through travelling and experiencing formerly significant places, the emotional bonds are reinforced.¹¹¹ The reasons for his visits, quite frequent after 1989, are his fascination with Transylvania, its culture that is part of his identity, and his memories that make Bergel prone to longing for more direct and sensory experiences of the native region:

*The fascination of meeting the Other in a multinational space like Transylvania—the old Terra Ultrasilvana—a fascination that has followed me since childhood.*¹¹²

*I can imagine the historical dimension of the meeting land, Transylvania, in a profoundly sensory and direct manner.*¹¹³

*Of course, it's not just the writer's thirst for knowledge that constantly draws me to the subject of Transylvania. Absolutely not. At least as intensely, I feel the nostalgic moment of the emotional connection with a land from which I come—my deep affection, my love for this land and its people. Is there anyone in the world who can completely detach themselves from their origins, so that they no longer mean anything to them? I personally cannot, and do not want such a thing. What happens in Transylvania continues to be at least a part of my inner fate.*¹¹⁴

He is happy when in Transylvania and wants to repeat the experience as often as possible. However, despite the joy of returning during visits, he made no firm decision to return to Romania:

*The most important thing seems to me—if I may be sentimental—my emotional connection with the country, a connection that justifies me in considering it, without any doubt, my own country.*¹¹⁵

*The Romanians alongside whom I grew up here and who embrace me whenever we meet again make me feel an indescribable happiness, as they prove to me that after the three political trials and imprisonments in cells and camps, after being expelled from this country, I can return and relive the feeling that I have a homeland.*¹¹⁶

Considering his bonds to nature, family, objects, and cultures, his attachment to the homeland is first a regional attachment:

*A writer who left his native land, Transylvania, more than three decades ago—because freedom was more important to him than anything else—continues to turn his gaze upon his former homeland, its present, its historical situations, its people and its places. Why is that? One possible answer to this question is, without a doubt, the following: there, “out in the wide world,” he made the discovery that the world is, in fact, everywhere, within everyone.*¹¹⁷

*Since I was allowed, starting in 1989–1990, to cross the border again into South-eastern Europe, Transylvania has revealed itself to me in all its glory and suffering during my annual journeys, as honest with its past and present as it once was. And I cannot imagine my life without immersing myself in the mysteries of this land.*¹¹⁸

Conclusions

THE FINDINGS indicate that Hans Bergel embodies the complex and ambivalent emotional landscape characteristic of emigrants and exiles who experience a conflicted relationship with both their homeland and their adoptive country. His experience of cultural rupture, induced by the communist ideology and political persecution, transforms the notion of “home” into a paradoxical space of both attachment and suffering. In exile, Romania and Transylvania persist not as lost geographies but as enduring presences within memory and longing, which Bergel reconfigures through his literary and journalistic production. Furthermore, his conception of humanism transcends cultural boundaries, embracing diversity and the complexity of human experience. For Bergel,

humanism constitutes a lived ethical practice, expressed through his resistance to all forms of dehumanization, particularly those arising from ideological coercion or the reduction of individual emotional complexity.



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Abstract

Hans Bergel on Freedom and Attachment to Transylvania

The Transylvanian Saxon anti-communist dissident Hans Bergel was a genuine polymath—writer, journalist, athlete, and musician. This study investigates Bergel's cultural and emotional relationship with his native region after he was a political detainee in socialist Romania. Following emigration to Federal Republic of Germany in the late 1960s, he acted as a defender of human rights for the German minority in communist Romania. At the same time, the writer continued to discuss his sense of belonging to Transylvania—and, more broadly, to Romania as a homeland. The central hypothesis of our research posits that Hans Bergel's perspective on matters concerning his life and that of the German ethnic group in Romania constitutes a key framework for interpreting the role of person–place bonds in the Germans' decision to remain or leave the country before and after 1989. A corpus of texts written by or concerning Hans Bergel was examined. Thematic content analysis was first conducted to identify dominant recurrent themes, followed by a qualitative discourse analysis of these narrative materials. The results reveal that Hans Bergel personifies the multifaceted and contradictory emotional landscape characteristic of expatriates and exiles who navigate a complex attachment to both their native homeland and their adoptive country.

Keywords

Transylvanian Saxons, Romania, home, belonging, emigration