

Return to Transylvania (2010)

Since I cycled through Transylvania in 1992 and 1993, Romania has joined the European Union. Most of the distinctive, triangular, communist era Dacia cars have finally fallen apart and been replaced with the same European and Japanese models that we see in the UK. There are no longer queues for petrol. International shops and restaurants, such as Carrefour, McDonalds and Pizza Hut, have appeared in the towns.

But, in the countryside, some things have not changed. Tractors are still rare. Horses and carts are the main means of local transport. Horses are used for ploughing. Many villagers farm small strips of land. There are wells in gardens and pumps in village lanes. Women carry buckets of water back to their homes. Geese and ducks waddle along unpaved village streets.

The Saxon villages with their sturdy colour washed houses and large fortified churches look unchanged – but they are almost deserted. Most of the “Saxons” have “gone back” to Germany, a country which their ancestors left some 800 years ago. As *Auslandsdeutsche* ("Germans abroad"), they have the right to German citizenship. According to Wikipedia, the number of German speakers in Romania declined from 745,421 in 1930 to 60,088 in 2002. There must be far fewer now.

They were not really Saxons, but came originally from areas around Luxembourg and the Mosel Valley – and the few who remain still speak an old fashioned German dialect similar to Luxembourgish. They were persuaded to migrate in the twelfth and thirteenth century to protect the south eastern reaches of the Hungarian Empire from attacks by Turks and Tartars. After the Mongol invasion of 1241-42 devastated much of the Kingdom of Hungary, they built fortified towns and churches inside the circle of the Carpathian Mountains. Many of the village churches are still surrounded by high walls and their towers have machicolations through which boiling oil or pitch could be poured on attackers. In the village of Prejmer, there is a 30 metre tunnel through the curtain wall into the inner courtyard containing the church. Inside the wall, there are three storeys of wooden walkways with hundreds of storerooms which provided secure accommodation for villages in times of danger. They may be medieval fortifications, but the risk of attack remained until just over two centuries ago. The last Tartar invasion took place in 1788.

Many of the Saxons fought for the remains of the Austro-Hungarian Empire against Romania in the First World War and for Romania (and the other German allies) against the Soviet Union in the Second World War. As a result many were exiled to labour camps in the Ukraine and Siberia in the late 1940s. Indeed, many of the village war memorials have three sections, 1914 to 1919 (when Romania recovered Transylvania), 1941 to 1945 and 1945 to 1949 (exile to the Soviet Union).

The churches were built in a Gothic style which would not be out of place in northern Europe, and like their compatriots back in Germany, most of the

Saxons converted to Lutheranism in the 16th century. Now, most village churches are locked and rarely, if ever, used. Despite efforts by the European Union and the Mihai Eminescu Trust, some are falling into disrepair. In Feldioara (Marienburg), the large square tower has huge, vertical cracks. We could not find the old lady who kept the keys. One villager said that most of the Saxons have left in the last twenty years. Although she was half German, half Romanian, she had lost contact with them. They are scattered across Germany and rarely come back. She remembered her German grandmother taking her to Christmas services when the church was packed. Now, there is a congregation of only ten or twenty. The church is too cold and damp and so services are conducted in parishioners' homes by a pastor who visits once a month.

The church in Maierus (Nussbach) was still being maintained. Signs proclaimed European Union aid, but there was no way into the immaculately kept cemetery which I had visited in 1992. In Rupea, the church roof was still just about intact, but there were no doors or glass in the windows and the floor of the nave was no more than rubble. There were large structural cracks in the adjoining tower. In Bunesti (Bodendorf), the Wagner family kept the large key to the church. The church has large external cracks, and inside, masonry has fallen from the tracery on the ceiling. The pale green paint of the galleries was peeling and the gold star above the Baroque altar was covered in dust. It was many years since any service had been held. In Saschiz (Keisd) the steeply sloping roof of the church was being retiled, but, opposite, the imposing German Evangelical School, built in 1908, was derelict. The gate to the church at Agnita (Agnetheln), where I had seen children listening to the story of Abraham and the Children of Israel in German, was locked. Some Roma gardeners sheltering from the rain showed me a hole in the fence, but the church itself was bolted and deserted.

There is something very melancholy about these under populated villages and neglected churches, especially in the rain on cold, grey, autumn days. Centuries of culture have all but disappeared, leaving the buildings of a bygone era and a few museums - but perhaps that is progress. Who would argue for the oppression of the Ceausescu years which preserved these villages in aspic or for the feudal tyranny of the Hungarian Empire which brought them into being in the first place?