

Editorial Programs in Transition: Post-Socialist Era Hungarian Publishing Houses in Romania

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Abstract: *Tradition continued to be an important, though controversial issue of Hungarian book publishing in Romania following the 1989 changes from socialist to market economy and from dictatorship into democracy. While before 1989 the Hungarian publishing scene was largely dominated by one publishing house, Kriterion, during a period of transition it gradually diversified both structurally and in the way of editorial programs. Cultural traditions, the quality as well as the quantity of available manuscripts and the reading public's expectations on the one hand, and financial and logistical circumstances on the other were some of the main factors that determined editorial programs in the transitional era. Pre-1989 Kriterion's editorial program seems to have been a benchmark for the budding publishing houses in many respects; however, there are also a number of positive/negative divergences. My paper examines the extent to which, after the regime change, Hungarian publishing houses in Romania continue and/or break the traditions established by former editorial boards, also, it presents the circumstances that influenced editorial programs in the new era.*

Key words: *publishing; editorial programs; tradition; transition; post-socialist era.*

Introduction

Transylvanian Hungarians have a significant book publishing tradition which, according to literary historian Gyula Dávid, was characterized by conscious planning from the very beginning (Dávid, 2003b, 205). His works on the subject also point out the fact that, following the 1989 changes, there was a transitional period from 1992–94 during which socialist era publishing houses transformed themselves into a publishing system operating under market economy conditions (Dávid, 2003a, 288). My paper examines the extent to which, after the regime change, Hungarian publishing houses in Romania continue and/or break the traditions established by former editorial boards, also, it presents the circumstances that influenced editorial programs in the new era.

In my research, I have used four primary sources (2 studies, 1 interview and a newspaper article). The interview (Rostás, 1990) was conducted in 1990 with Gyula H. Szabó, freshly appointed director of the legendary minority-language Kriterion Publishing House (reborn after the regime change), while the authors of the two studies are



cultural anthropologist A. Zoltán Bíró and Gyula Dávid (Bíró, 2005; Dávid, 2000). Similarly, the article in question was authored by Gyula Dávid (Dávid, 1994).

Although most Hungarians in Romania live in Transylvania, I will use the term ‘Hungarian publishing houses in Romania’ as opposed to ‘Transylvanian Hungarian publishing houses’, because some of the Hungarian institutions, including the head offices of Kriterion Publishing House, were for some time situated in Bucharest.

At the start of my research, I had a hypothesis rooted in the views circulating in the Hungarian community in Romania: after 1989, publishers followed the example of the prestigious Kriterion Publishing House. However, the sources listed above proved the overall picture to be much more controversial than that.

Hungarian book publishing in Romania before 1989

In the Romanian Socialist Republic of the eighties, book publishing was divided among publishing houses on thematic criteria. This system was first established in 1969, when the last major reorganization of Romanian publishing was accomplished. All publishing houses were included in a centralized body with headquarters in Bucharest (Editorial Directorate-General). There was one publishing house for science books, another for art books etc., all with headquarters in Bucharest. In addition, there were 4 regional publishing houses in major cities of Romania, and there was Kriterion, the minority-language publishing house. Besides Kriterion, originally, many other publishing houses included Hungarian publications in their portfolio. However, by 1989, most of them had gradually given up publishing in Hungarian language, the social-political context of the era being the following: “the Romanian politics towards the [ethnic] minorities supported a tendency of homogenization” (Kányádi, 2004, 67).

The publication profile of Kriterion was very complex, the house publishing in 9 languages including Hungarian. Beside the multiplicity of languages and literatures, Kriterion also promoted social sciences, history, philosophy, ethnology, linguistics, art history, cultural history, science history and music, most of them integrated in a collection (Kányádi, 2004, 67).

In his epilogue to charismatic Kriterion director Géza Domokos’s memoir *Igevár* [Word Castle], former Kriterion book editor Péter Egyed names as the publishing house’s greatest strength its “systematic and well-elaborated [institutional] cultural policy”, at the core of which stood “enrolling well-known and reputed specialists in various editorial bodies and boards” (Egyed, 2000, 216), e.g. Imre Mikó, editor of *Téka* collection.¹ Another key to the success of the institution was competent organization. Géza Domokos was “the right man in the right place”, Péter Egyed says. “He was a personification of the institution and identified with its targets and ethos.” (Egyed, 2000, 217)

¹ All the quotes in this paper have been translated from Hungarian by the Author, except for the quote cited from Kányádi, 2004.



Moreover, Géza Domokos was influential in the sphere of the Romanian Communist Party. Péter Egyed stated that he was a real lobbyist politically and economically speaking (Egyed, 2000, 219).

Following the 1989 events, a new social system with a market economy gradually developed. As stated above, according to Gyula Dávid, there was a transitional period from 1992–94. Cultural anthropologist A. Zoltán Bíró's diagnosis of scientific publishing applies to the whole of the trade. He says that "Hungarian-language scholarly publishing following 1989, in a just few months' matter, included multiple actors, became eclectic and almost impossible to form a comprehensive view of. Overnight, centralized control of book publishing and censorship was gone, the legal and administrative environment changed and there was nothing to stop one from founding institutions or publishing books." (Bíró, 2005, 38)

In 1993, 172 Hungarian books were published in Romania by 45 private and 4 state-owned publishing houses or other entities (some of them without a trade license) (Dávid, 1994, 3).

Influencing factors

But what exactly were the external parameters that influenced book publishing in the new era?

In one of his memoirs, *Esély* [Chance], former Kriterion director Géza Domokos underlined that, after the regime change, the publishing house faced a number of new and unthought-of situations, probably a wider range of opportunities but at the same time a lot of problems: state-owned publishing houses (including Kriterion) lost their monopolistic position as private publishers started their businesses; on the other hand, the shelves of the bookstores filled with books from Hungary, superior both in their content and execution (Domokos, 1996, 56).

The *Romániai Magyar Irodalmi Lexikon* [Dictionary of Hungarian Literature in Romania] (RoMIL, 1994) lists among the factors that influenced post-1989 book publishing the following: typographies, harrowed by financial and workforce difficulties, yield to the increasing demand for other types of press products and decrease the number of books to be printed; paper and fuel prices see an unprecedented hike and, finally, publishing houses, formerly belonging to the centralized Publishing Directorate-General, become independent. Yet another important factor is the demise of the formerly state-owned book distribution system. At the same time, the ever-increasing book prices are accompanied by the impoverishment of the reading public (RoMIL, 1994, 223).

Other influencing factors, according to various specialists, were the bill regulating sponsorship and external boards of experts giving formal opinion on the quality of publishing projects. A. Zoltán Bíró deems financing a key factor influencing post-1989 editorial programs (Bíró, 2005, 39–40). Gyula Dávid concludes that general inflation and



the constant rising of typographic and paper prices were a crucial obstacle in the way of the publishing houses developing a profile of their own (Dávid, 1994, 4).

The old and new *Kriterion*

After the regime change, *Kriterion* published some of the previously censored manuscripts. These books had belly bands with “Forbidden books liberated” printed on them. In a 1990 interview, referring to the 50 censored manuscripts waiting to be published, freshly appointed director Gyula H. Szabó says: “On the other hand, this 50-title «plug» might be a catch.” (Rostás, 1990a, 3)

The reborn *Kriterion* recognized the pre-1989 editorial style to be what their audience expected, but at the same time what made the publishing house special – these are the exact words that Gyula H. Szabó used in an interview barely a year after the regime change (Rostás, 1990a, 3). The interview conducted with him by Zoltán Rostás and published in a weekly (*A Hét*) sheds light on the circumstances and dilemmas of setting up an editorial program in the new system. Being in a monopolistic position in the socialist period, H. Szabó feels, was more of a drawback. He points out the beneficial effect competition (posed by the freshly founded private publishing houses) has on quality. They have to choose between publishing manuscripts from before 1989 which sometimes were written with certain degrees of compromise or addressing market requirements. Rather than publishing large and prestige-targeted tomes, H. Szabó urges for coming out with “brisk, easy-to-read” books. The moral maxim of respect to tradition is overwritten by the urge to fulfill the expectations of the age, the “openness”, as Rostás calls it. Titles to be published should be chosen based on values. Editorial agenda should be decided by the book editors instead of a larger editorial board, paying a lot of attention to “press response” (Rostás, 1990b, 3).

Rostás utters some criticism of the editorial program of the old *Kriterion*, saying it avoided publishing works “foreign to the paradigms propelled in domestic ethnic minority cultures”, and even before the changes what they did was in certain respects outdated (Rostás, 1990b, 3). He warns the director of the after-the-changes *Kriterion* to “avoid paternalism, the excessive influence of charismatic persons” for fear ethnic minority culture might be harmed (Rostás, 1990b, 3).

“Structural dilettantism?”

In his 2005 study *Tudományos könyvkiadás Erdélyben 1989 után* [Scholarly publishing in Transylvania following 1989], A. Zoltán Bíró argues that the ethnic minority identification process impacted the publication of scientific literature in a way that had a major role in forming post-1989 book publishing practices.

According to him, the main points of the pre-1989 Hungarian editorial program of *Kriterion* were the preponderance of sociographical and ethnographical descriptions, a preference for cultural history works, pertaining to public education and non-fiction



rather than science, a call for collecting and publishing data rather than analyses and the importance of a philosophical and ethical interpretation of minority existence, all this triggered by the minority identification needs (Bíró, 2005, 36).

It would be wrong to assume this distortion was only characteristic to the pre-1989 era. A. Zoltán Bíró says that, following the 1989 changes, a very powerful ethnical rehabilitation process started in the Hungarian community in Romania, whose central feature was the intensification of minority identification. "...Scholarly publications continuously feature a number of distinct topics, unnecessarily over-represented as compared to other subjects." (Bíró, 2005, 37) He decries the fact that Hungarian research bodies did not connect to the Romanian institutional network (Bíró, 2005, 38), a criticism that also applies to publishing houses, although some publishing houses continue to publish in more than one language.

Contrary to the viewpoints of Gyula Dávid and Gyula H. Szabó, A. Zoltán Bíró says that, although new publishing houses and journals sprung up immediately after the regime change, there was not a significant amount of ready-written works waiting to be published, also, there were few research scientists and therefore potential authors. "That is why, in the 90s, Hungarian book publishing in Romania was dominated by mediocrity or, worse, professional amateurishness." (Bíró, 2005, 38)

All this could be considered as a natural consequence of the social transition, A. Zoltán Bíró says. A more serious problem he thinks is that "in the present ... inconsistent and unfocused editorial practice, the social parameters of scholarly publishing get impalpably dissolved..." (Bíró, 2005, 38) "The best of the initiatives are grounded on the structural dilettantism of the (...) whole system. Every one of the actors could be called well-meaning (...) however, the system (...) is fundamentally counterproductive." (Bíró, 2005, 39) When examining bodies publishing scientific literature, he found that, more often than not, they have no editorial program whatsoever, with the exception of a few scientific bodies with publishing activity, and a few publishers which include scientific publications in their portfolio: their editorial program is defined by what is being funded. However, they rarely care about the scientific value of their publications (Bíró, 2005, 39–42).

Gyula Dávid, in his study, backs him up in this respect: what a publishing house publishes these years largely depends on what they get financing for and what they can sell (Dávid, 1994, 4).

Institutional agenda

What are the Hungarian books published between 1989–1994 like? All the previously mentioned factors affect them. Let us get a glimpse of the editorial programs of the transition through a selection of publishing houses.

First, here are some older publishers: Kriterion continues to be the most important Hungarian publishing house in Romania, and, at this time, is still state-owned. Much of



its publications are organized into collections. Some of them have been inherited from the pre-1989 period of the publishing house, like *Forrás*, an iconic collection of fiction (Dávid, 1994, 3; Dávid, 2000, 134–135).

Another old, state-owned publishing house that continued to work into the 1990s was *Dacia*, a mixed language Romanian-Hungarian-German publishing house in Cluj which also had a couple of notable collections like *Tanulók Könyvtára* [Students' Library], publishing works of classics. *Dacia* started a new collection called *Kalandregény Klasszikusai* [Action Novel Classics] (Dávid, 1994, 3). This latest attempt proves the publishing house tried to adapt its editorial program to what it thought were market requirements. From 1998 on, *Dacia* stopped publishing in Hungarian (Dávid, 2000, 130).

According to Gyula Dávid, “2 or 3 years are not enough for a private publishing house to form their own profile” (Dávid, 1994, 4). It is therefore praiseworthy if some private publishers managed to form a clear-cut editorial profile, even though for some reason or other, they were forced to close after a couple of years. This was the case with the Oradea-based *Literator* or, as it was sometimes spelled, *Literatus* publishing house. It made an editorial program based on local intellectual and spiritual values, which it successfully relayed (Dávid, 1994, 4; Dávid, 2000, 134).

Other small publishing houses ventured into setting up an ambitious editorial program and even launched collections, like *Nis Publishers* in Cluj, which came out with *Erdélyi Kiskönyvtár* [Transylvanian Library] (Dávid, 1994, 4).

But let's have a closer look at the editorial program of some publishing houses founded in the years of transition that developed into the most important publishers of the following decades.

Mentor Publishers in *Târgu Mureș* started out as the publishing house of the prestigious *Látó* literary journal and had therefore a well carved-out editorial program aiming to publish domestic Hungarian fiction in the first place (Dávid, 2000, 132).

Similarly, the prestigious Cluj journal for social sciences, *Korunk*, broadened its span with a publishing house of its own. *Komp-Press* first published a city guide to Cluj and, in the years afterwards, volumes of studies and memoirs (Dávid, 2000, 136).

CE-Koinónia Publishers, also seated in Cluj, targeted a well-defined circle with its selection of books on Christianity and especially Reformation. Its portfolio included protestant religious books, Puritan writers and memoirs (Dávid, 2000, 136–137).

Conclusion

Tradition continued to be an important, though controversial issue of Hungarian book publishing in Romania following the 1989 changes from socialist to market economy and from dictatorship into democracy. While before 1989 the Hungarian publishing scene was largely dominated by one publishing house, *Kriterion*, during a period of transition it gradually diversified both structurally and in the way of editorial programs.



Cultural traditions, the quality as well as the quantity of available manuscripts and the reading public's expectations on the one hand, and financial and logistical circumstances (mostly difficulties, though, in a few respects, beneficial developments as well) on the other were some of the main factors that determined editorial programs in the transitional era. Pre-1989 *Kriterion's* editorial program seems to have been a benchmark for the budding publishing houses in many respects, e.g., the preference for organizing the publications into collections, the thematic fields they cultivated etc; however, there are also a number of positive/negative divergences like, with some publishers, thematic diversification, but also diminishing professional exactness.

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