

The Variety of 17th Century Europe

KRISZTINA KALÓ

EUROPICA VARIETAS OR A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE VARIOUS THINGS SEEN AND HEARD
BY MÁRTON SZEPSI CSOMBOR, KASSA, PRINTED BY JÁNOS FESTUS, 1620. ENGLISH
TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION BY BERNARD ADAMS, PREFACE BY WENDY
BRACEWELL, BUDAPEST, CORVINA, 2014, 196 PAGES, ISBN 978 963 13 621 52.

The year of 2018 will be the 400th anniversary of a most significant peregrination made by a young schoolmaster, Márton Csombor, born in Szepsi, Hungary, in 1595. His 700-mile long journey is noteworthy, though he was neither the first nor the only one from the territory of Hungary who set off to see Europe in times when travelling was not easy at all. In fact, Márton Szepsi Csombor followed a long tradition. One of the earliest connections between the Kingdom of Hungary and Western Europe was Saint Margaret of Scotland, who was born and grew up in Hungary along with her two siblings and returned to her home country in 1057. We have records of Nicholaus de Hungaria, who went to Anglia to study in “Oxenaforda” under the patronage of Richard Ist (the Lionheart) in the late 12th century, and we also know about the friendship between Gualterius Mapes (Walter Map) and Lukács, archbishop of Eger, later that of Esztergom, forged during their studies at the Sorbonne approximately in the same period. Studying in London, Paris, Bologna, Wittenberg, Heidelberg, Prague, Vienna, Cracovie etc. was not a rarity, though it was always considered to be a privilege.

Szepsi Csombor belonged to the great peregrination generation of the 17th century. Born in one of the most important reformed congregations of Northern Hungary and having studied in the best schools of the region and in Transylvania (Szepsi, Késmárk/Kežmarok, Kassa/Košice, Gönc and Nagybánya/Baia Mare), he wrote a supplication pleading for pardon for his sins paraphrasing a verse of Psalm 25, and at the age of twenty-one left for Dancka (Gdańsk, Poland) to spend the following academic year there. In a year he set off to see a diverse Europe and returned to his home country in August 1618. It is not surprising that he did not whole-heartedly become a headmaster in Kassa in December 1618, as he was evidently preoccupied with putting down and editing his fresh memories of the journey. And this is, in fact, why he stands out from his forerunners: two years later the first travelogue in Hungarian was published to disseminate the knowledge and experience that Csombor gathered. Since then, a number of editions were issued,

however we would not pretend it being a wildly-read piece of work in Hungarian. Due to its demanding style it is heavy-going reading for a regular contemporary reader. As its readership must consist of literary gourmands and lovers of travel, the English translator must be an experienced one with good background knowledge both in European culture and the old Hungarian language. Only very few translators could overcome the difficulties of translating this inspiring and appealing text into English and Bernard Adams is probably one of the most experienced ones when it comes to old Hungarian. His classical culture and knowledge of Latin allow him to render texts which would be an utter failure for an ordinary translator.

The edition has a very engaging cover with a decorous illustration of Cassovia (Kassa, Košice) and a very pleasant layout in a yellowish colour. The reader is provided with an accurate preface by Wendy Bracewell, professor at UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), London, which is in fact a foretaste inciting the reader to go further with Csombor's fascinating travel book. Whoever wants a thorough background to the birth of the original book, needs only to read Bernard Adams Introduction and notes, which shed light on all the details the reader needs to know before and during the reading. We see that as with many other works, Bernard Adams is not a mere translator but a scholar who cares about transferring knowledge just as Csombor did.

We all have a fair idea of what Europe is like today but we evidently know a lot less about what it was like four hundred years ago. What geographical pattern did Europe show in the 17th century? How could people travel? How did the different nations and people of different religions live in separate countries and within the same country? What customs and traditions did they observe? What cultural history were they proud of? What sights and monuments did contemporaries consider worth mentioning? One of the ways to extend our knowledge in the field is to read contemporary writings among which *Europica varietas* by Márton Szepsi Csombor (1595–1622) is an outstanding work from several points of view. This short but dense volume gives us a charming picture of old Europe, which had the same cultural and linguistic diversity that we are proud of today. Csombor leads us from Poland to Silesia through Prussia, Holland, Anglia, Gallia and the Czech Lands. Peregrination, as a rule, is a tough journey but young Szepsi Csombor had little money anyway, so he travelled mainly on foot, which is said to be the best way to see and to experience different cultures and to meet local people. Csombor adds to his accounts whatever he learnt about a country previously, this is how his descriptions become vivid, a deep source of information for his contemporaries and entertaining reports and portrayal for us. The fact that here and there even Adams had difficulties in rendering Szepsi Csombor's notes in English shows the intricacy of the text. If the publishing house had paid more attention to proofreading, the

translation would not only be stylistically faithful but also more accurate in certain parts. But even with that, the translation as a whole is a very enjoyable and fluent reading – a lot smoother in modern English than in old Hungarian, and probably a very informative work for those who wonder what our old continent was like four centuries ago.