

Violetta Rottler – János Sallai

When changes went into effect: Hungarians from Transylvania permitted to cross the Western border from 1985

Abstract

In the final years of socialism, Hungarians in Transylvania were going through the fires of adversity. Their circumstances were also enhanced by the significant tension at the time between the Romanian and Hungarian parties and government authorities. The circumstances of the Hungarians living in Romania were to be relieved by the strictly confidential action that permitted those being in Hungary legally to secretly travel on to Austria or Yugoslavia.

Keywords: border, border check, border force, traffic checkpoint, Romanian, Hungarian, border guard, passport controller

It has been thirty years in 2019 that we brought down the iron curtain, made a breach on the Berlin Wall and we permitted East German refugees to leave. In the last thirty years we commemorated the events repetitively, and on a five-year basis sometimes boisterously. In the meantime, we seemed to forget that 5 years prior to the dismantlement of the iron curtain, Hungarian individuals from Romania legally arriving in Hungary were permitted to leave secretly by our authorities, without any further action. At the same time, Romania let Transylvanian Saxons go to German Federal Republic (GFR) for a flat rate. Written proof was hardly found yet that was top secret, however, more professionals seemed to be aware about the suspicious release, and that secret was only disclosed after 2017. The executors were given orders only in words and even the contributing authorities could not be informed on the release of the Romanian citizens of Hungarian nationality. The Hungarian border adjacent with Romania was repeatedly redrawn in the last two centuries, as it was determined in international

contracts in 1888 (Sallai János, 2003, 51, 62-72.), 1920¹, 1940² and 1947³. As the rights for ethnic minorities were always breached, it also had an effect on the bilateral relations between the two states after the ruling of the new borders⁴, and the measures of local border traffic going into effect after the Romanian-Hungarian border was set in 1888, played a significant role up until Hungary and Romania joined the EU (Sallai - Grónás, 2005, 5.). Romania was regarded as an enemy during the First World War because of its membership in Little Entente, then both countries became German allies, although it did not mean they became friends. After the Second World War both countries changed friends and allies, became parts of the Soviet zone of influence and built socialism. The issues with ethnic minorities and the border were taboo topics in public in both socialist countries. A bilateral agreement on the local border traffic was in effect⁵ and the citizens of the neighbouring countries could visit each other's states but the asynchronicity in the relations could be felt (Sallai, 2000, 14.). It remained a question why these two amicable, allied⁶ countries waited 20 years so that their citizens could cross the adjacent border more easily than between the two world wars⁷, starting from the cross-border agreement in 1988. From as early as the 60s most Hungarian citizens could get their passports, therefore permission to travel into countries with friendly relations on easier terms, while travelling to Hungary for citizens of Hungarian nationalities in Romania had stringent criteria. The development of the two countries showed significant differences, regardless of being under the same roof. The author visited Romania in 1980 for the first time where he encountered huge poverty, lack of food and petrol at all times and in all places. Nothing could be more revealing than the fact that the party leaders from the two countries hardly ever met during their reigns for decades. However, one of

1 After the Treaty of Trianon.

2 After the second Vienna decision.

3 Act XVIII of 1947, in the subject of the enactment of the Paris peace treaty on 10 February 1947.

4 Decree Law 18 of 1964 of Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic.

5 Decree Law 43 of 1969 of Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic.

6 Both countries were founding members for the Warsaw Pact and Comecon.

7 By the Hungarian Government Regulation 7.934 M.E. in 1924 on the regulations signed with Romania on 16 April 1924 in Bucharest and its appendix (in Hungarian) „A kisebb határszéeli forgalom megkönnyítésére vonatkozó határozmányok” Main details: 1. The territorial scope is the same as it was discussed with the previous relations 2. The validity of the frontier card was 3 months which could have been extended 3. Settlements and administrative units that formed part of the Hungarian Border Districts were announced in 1927 by the P. Ü. M. Regulation 144.127/1927 4. Romanian administrative units were announced only in 1929 (The reason for the delay must have been the lack of agreement. It has to be noted here that no solution was found for solving the problems for those Hungarians living in deep Transylvania within the territorial scope. At the time visa regulations were in force between the two countries which was tackled flexibly by the Hungarian embassy of the time. 5. Similarly to the Czechoslovak relation, an individual regulation (115.941/1927 BM.) determined the rules of movement for the officials in charge at the joint border checkpoints.

the rare occasions were the meetings in Nagyvárad and Debrecen in 1977, they did not have any output. An amendment of the local border traffic agreement⁸ might have been resulted from the discussion as of both countries determined the application of the local border traffic agreement within 20 kilometres from the border. At the same time, citizens could make visits 12 times, each with a 6-day duration stay. A previous regulation of the Ministry of Interior⁹ excluded Szatmárnémeti and Nagyvárad. In the 1980s more and more Romanian citizens of Hungarian nationality made defection and left their fatherland or simply came over with valid local traffic permissions or passports and did not return because of being impoverished as it was to see clearly at the time. Due to the travelling of the citizens of both countries, the liaison between relatives and some news that rarely emerged in the media, it was straight forward in Hungary that the leadership of the Ceaușescu¹⁰-led party dictatorship was seceded from the working crowds of Romania, tension grew constantly between the Romanian state administration and the people, supply difficulties swept across our neighbouring country. Rationing of essential food and petrol was in force if those were available, power supply faltered, there were pre-announced power cuts in certain periods during daytime. Romanian citizens, mostly with Hungarian and German¹¹ nationalities ended up in migrating to or settling down in their mother countries, but some moved to Western Europe. The Hungarian minority living in Transylvania was weighed down by the discrimination applied against them and the elimination of villages, as part of Ceaușescu's politics. Nothing could be more significant, the supreme political body of that time the inimical NATO dealt with the situation of the Hungarian minority in Romania and Transylvania. They wrote: *'Hungarians mostly criticize the Romanization of education, as it will not just minimize the employment of Hungarians in high skilled jobs but endangers the presence of the Hungarian culture in Transylvania. President Ceaușescu's national policy is the outcome of the Romanian nationalism which forms the core of its foreign policy as well as its domestic policy aiming the establishment of a highly centralized national state'* (Benkei, A). In the 1960s US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was also deeply concerned with the two countries and the reason and source of the tensions between them (Brzezinski, 1968). The border relations between Hungary and Romania were constrained by

8 Decree Law 31 of 1977 of Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic.

9 Interior Ministry Regulation 1 of 1970 (I.11.)

10 Nicolae Ceaușescu 26 January 1918, Târgoviște – 25 December 1989, General Secretary, the dictator of Romania from 1965 until his execution in 1989.

11 Romanian citizens with German (Saxon) nationality were bought by GFR on a flat rate therefore these people could travel to GFR to settle down. When the Saxon region was abandoned, Romanians could move in.

the previously accepted extradition agreement which stipulated that Romanian citizens crossing the border of Hungary illegally have to be returned to the Romanian border authorities and those people could anticipate imprisonment and flogging. The refusal of the Ceaușescu dictatorship is well illustrated as there were no illegal trespassers from Hungary to Romania but there were many from Romania to Hungary, not only Hungarians but Romanians as well who tried to cross the border, some of them at the crossing points. The legal border traffic between Romania and Hungary that time was showing a dynamic growth. Compared to the 1960s and 1970s, the Romanian-Hungarian border traffic grew by several millions. Likewise, the number of captured citizens of Romanian nationality crossing the border illegally also grew dynamically. While in the early 1980s it meant 2-300 detainees, this figure went up to nearly a thousand in 1987. In 1988 it exceeded seven thousand, of which a significant amount was captured at the Romanian-Hungarian border, while others were held captive either in the Western part of the country or at traffic check points (FEP in Hungarian)¹². The latter entered into Hungary legally but tried to travel on to Western Europe through Austria illegally. The relation between the political leaders of Hungary and Romania was uptight as they could only meet at national holidays and mandatory protocol visits, apart from the compulsory Comecon and Warsaw Pact top conferences. Measures (like the elimination of villages¹³) that deeply affected the Hungarians in Romania, was seriously noticed by the political leaders of Hungary. There was a very narrow chance to arrange the issue within the frameworks at the time, thus they decided not to check the territorial and temporal validity of passports for those who were heading for the West but let them go. *The leaders of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party were deeply concerned with the circumstances of Hungarians over the border but did not see any chance of raising pressure on the Romanian party to get any result* (Földes, 2007, 301.). A dissection about the interior affairs and foreign policy of Romania compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary in 1985 (same as above, 340.) marked a decline in the Hungarian-Romanian relations. That time it was publicly known that Romania had been forcefully and rapidly repaying its foreign debts with the consequences of decreasing standards of living, consumption was highly restricted which led to ever-growing tension in society. These were just added to the personality cult of the political leaders, Ceaușescu and his nationalist policy.¹⁴

12 FEP – in Hungarian – Traffic Control Point, today's border crossings.

13 Nicolae Ceaușescu head of party and state announced the formations of agricultural centres hence the elimination of villages commenced that hit the Hungarians settlements disproportionately.

14 'Romanian politics sees the Hungarian minority as they potentially endanger the territorial unity of the country. They are forcing the assimilation of the Hungarians, to confine the Hungarian consciousness.

The tension led to the increasing number of illegal border trespassing by citizens of Hungarian, Saxon and Romanian nationality. The situation was aggravated by the crisis at the Hungarian-Romanian border, therefore *Hungarian tourists were implicated in a stricter border check. This seriousness had already been unmistakable by 1984 when 2790 Hungarian citizens were forced to return back to Hungary between April and 1st December due to possessing unpermitted press materials, books, etc. In the first five months of 1985 this number went up to nearly 1500* (Földes, 2007, 354.). The number of people resettled in Hungary also showed a constant growth.¹⁵

The poor Romanian-Hungarian relation affected the internal affairs in Hungary. This was also supported by statements from some of the top party leaders. Patriotic People's Front leader, Imre Pozsgai¹⁶ also pointed out the absurdity of the ethnic minorities living in Romania and the theory of Roman continuity. Pál Losonczi raised his voice with more power in his election campaign of 1985 saying: *'we protest against the constant ripping up the old sores of the past, like we do against fantasy weaves and the falsification of history, clearly or impliedly* (Népszabadság, 31. May 1985). Losonczi highlighted the following at the end of his campaign speech regarding neighbourhood and policy on ethnic minorities: *'equal rights, native tongue, the protection of rights, equal financial and culture standards.'* (Földes, i.m. 346.) The circumstances of Hungarians living over the boarder became common in daily political conversations and it got apparent that the Hungarian political leaders did not sweep the questions under the rug, due to the pressure from the renascent opposition at the time. Confrontation, however, was avoided with Romania due to their belonging to the same camp, but the times were changing. Romania was then one of the remainders of the Stalin-like dictatorships among the countries in the Warsaw Pact and Comecon. At the same time in Europe, the spirit of perestroika and glasnost was taking over and their effects were obvious in everyday life and administration. A glaring example for this is the circular letter¹⁷, written in the spirit of changes in one copy only, qualified as *'Top secret, highly important'* by the Ministry of Interior, Border Force Headquarters, and which introduced a specific procedure for Romanian¹⁸ citizens from 15 July 1985 (Határőrségi iratok. XIX-B-10). The rules were different to the ones that were in effect for foreigners: *'certain*

15 1983: 540 persons; 1984: 887 persons; 1985: 1166 persons.

16 *'Hungary believes that only good neighbourship, the strengthening of the community with our brother nations has to be followed, not the self-justification certified by the falsification of history, casting up old grievance, be they old or believed'* Source (in Hungarian): Minutes titled Az MSZMP XIII. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve (Budapest, 1985, 418.).

17 Circular letters were one of the written measures of military administration at the time.

18 The word Romanian had to be interpreted as Hungarian.

Romanian citizens',¹⁹ travelling to Hungary with valid passports and intended to travel on via Ferihegy Checkpoint or West-South Checkpoints but did not have permission to enter in Yugoslavia, Austria or any other Western country, were checked according to the procedure in force and after the data entry they had to be permitted to leave Hungary by the passport control officer²⁰. Only the top leaders of particular districts of the country, the checkpoints and the reconnaissance were involved in to handle the progress and to avoid hitches. The passport control officers were only given the most essential information needed to perform their duties. Only personal data and passport numbers were collected from the Romanian citizens who were permitted to leave the country. After the data entry the passport control officer stamped '*Permitted to leave*' on the data form and forwarded it to the officer in charge of the particular checkpoint. These forms were collected by the officer in charge and forwarded in a sealed envelope to the head of the reconnaissance of the district as of the internal regulations. From each district then were sent to the Head of the Department of Reconnaissance of the Border Forces who collected and stored them in a separated folder. This was not applicable to those Romanian citizens who were captured while carrying out non-permitted crossing as of the introduction (at the Western and Southern borders). Following their capture, they always had to be returned to the Romanian authorities, by the permission of the Head of the Department of Reconnaissance of the Border Forces, according to the practice in force, as soon as possible. The circular letter also contained the following instructions to follow: *'the information on the Romanian citizens captured at the adjacent border for non-permitted crossing shall be forwarded to the Romanian border force authorities only if required and slowly* (Határőrségi iratok. XIX-B-10). At the same time (in opposition to the international agreement in force) no citizens of other socialist countries were involved in such process by the authorities of Hungary. Besides the illegal border crossing, there was the category of trespassing unintentionally. As the regulation in force reads²¹: *Those who cross the border unintentionally or beyond his or her control, have to be returned to the place of departure unless he or she, after crossing the border, committed a*

19 It had to be interpreted as Hungarians, as of oral command.

20 It has to be noted that in many cases some of these leavers were refused to enter Austria and was returned by the Austrian authorities then those were instructed to go rather down from the border and later tried to leave via the green border, for example north of Hegyeshalom, or to the south where the border was equipped with the electronic Security System.

21 Decree Law 18 of 1964 of Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic, on the announcement of the contract between the Government of the Hungarian People's Republic and the Government of the Romanian People's Republic on the operation and cooperation on border issues, signed on 13 June, 1963.

criminal act or offence that is ordered to be assessed and punished by the state where the perpetrator was captured.’ (Same as above, Article 44)

The above marked was confirmed by the Circular letter and instructed the district headquarters in Orosháza and Nyírbátor to return the citizens crossing the border unintentionally to the Romanian authorities at short notice. The situation demanded the staff in charge at border points to be highly accurate, tactful and discreet, as well as *‘not to create sensation’*, to show enhanced alertness and obtain information – at least with regards to Romania. All cases at the Romanian-Hungarian border that were accidentally out of the ordinary or agreements (like harassment of travellers on the way to Hungary) had to be reported over the telegram device. For carrying out the measures determined in the Circular letter and for the interest of the Romanian-Hungarian international relations, the duties *‘shall be executed with the strict application of confidentiality and conspiracy. The affected Romanian authorities and citizens must not be made aware or realize of any part of our procedure.’* (Határőrségi iratok. XIX-B-10). Information could have been stored and forwarded only in sealed envelope, with FAO addressing, as of the rules demanded. The circular letter was not allowed to be copied. The leaders of the particular department, the district commanders, chiefs of staff, the chief and the deputy of the reconnaissance department, checkpoint executives, the commanders and deputy commanders at checkpoints, checkpoint officials in charge and passport control officials were only aware of the above. The latter ones only in scope which was essential to carry out their duties as it was determined in paragraph I/1. of the Circular letter. The Circular letter had been in force for about a month when a Romanian citizen with Hungarian nationality in Budapest thought of attempting to leave Hungary through Austria. What happened next? Here is a reminiscence of an authentic participant who was able to get to Austria from Romania through Hegyeshalom:

‘I entered Hungary from Romania in my Trabant on 1st August 1985. I was accompanied by my mother who had become widow not long before. We had to get out from Romania as were being persecuted by Securitate.’

I heard at home that nearly a week before two married couples had managed to leave Hungary through Austria, but no one knew how they did it. (Emphasis SJ). We were quite decided about it that we would set off and leave for good.

I was looking for opportunities, asking questions, contacted others abroad but unfortunately did not obtain any information on how we could ‘escape’. The ‘little window’ in our passports permitted us to enter Hungary-Czechoslovakia-GDR-Poland only.

Without any prior information, only following my instinct I turned left after Mosonmagyaróvár in the evening of 15 August 1985. The border officer with nearly five-six hundred metres before Hegyeshalom check point spotted us, ordered us to pull over as seeing the Romanian registration plate. He asked what we did there. We replied: 'We are lost, we were heading to Pozsony but ended up here.' 'You must turn back here, Rajka is over there.'

'Could not we visit Vienna by night, if we are here?' 'I see, so you wish to enter Austria?' 'Yes, as we ended up here, we would visit Vienna then we will return to Pozsony then we will continue towards GDR.'

The phone started to ring in the office behind. 'Comrade Lieutenant, I am reporting, nothing special. Well, yes, here are two Romanians, lost their way, would go to Pozsony but now they are asking if they could go over to Austria. Yes, yes, a family, or rather a mother and her son. Yes, they are speaking in Hungarian. Yes, I am letting them know...'

Then he turned to me saying yes, we shall go to the checkpoint. 'Who should we look for there?' 'You have already been being waited.'

We were instructed to use the diplomats' lane, two officials promptly appeared, one of them took our passports, and the other stayed with us till the end. 'Well, where to? Where to?' 'Look, we would have liked to go to Pozsony but we lost our way therefore I thought, as we are here, we would like to have a look at Vienna then after we will go back to Pozsony... 'Lady, tell me what is the destination of your trip? Pozsony, then GDR, then we are planning our return through Poland.' 'Lady, look into my eyes: the destination of your trip?'

I did not dare to say a word.

Won't it be Germany accidentally? Isn't it GFR?' 'Look, Sir, you are well aware of it, if you let us go now, of course we will end up there, in West Germany.' 'Well, now you are talking, a couple of minutes and you can leave.'

I think, I should not describe our excitement and state of mind...

In the meantime, he is looking at my newly renewed Trabant amazed, as I have built in a lot of gadgets. 'What are these buttons for? It turned out, he also has a Trabant...'

'Sir, can we really go over?' 'Yes, take it easy, we have also let another family from Transylvania go. Everything will be all right'. 'Sir, please write me down your name, address, I will gift you the Trabant.'

I was astounded by his response. 'No, lady, forget my face, forget that you were here, there will be no trace of it in your passport. You will need this Trabant even more there, especially in the beginning.'

This lasted for about ten minutes, while some other border officers were passing us by, saw the Romanian registration, they knew exactly what was going on.

*They were smiling at us, encouraging us. 'Well, you are going out, going out?' 'Get lucky in the new life!' 'We got our passports back, no stamp, and no sign of our visit there. Barrier up, we rolled into Austria.'*²²

The instructions set out in the Circular Letter were presumably applied as there was no sign of any event occurred by the measures either Romanian complaint or international list. Because of its top secret category, we still do not know as of today who and how many could cross the Border of Hungary, we have only estimated data that mentions 3.500 persons. We cannot know either if there were agents among them or any Romanian citizen without Hungarian background, because it was not only Hungarians who wanted to leave Romania. In terms of the data it can be annoying that among them, who were permitted to leave at the time, there might have been Saxons from Transylvania to settle down in GFR (Gyarmati, 2009, 39-63.). Parallel with the above, the number of Romanian citizens with Hungarian nationality to settle down increased, as well as the numbers of those people who entered Hungary legally but without willing to return to Romania. The increase must have been highly motivated by the growing tension on the side of the Romanian dictatorship, Hungarian TV and radio broadcasts, bilingual signs were terminated, and Hungarian book releases were withheld. However, the Romanian authorities did not report anything on the positive discrimination by the measures of the Hungarian authorities, but they experienced a constantly growing number of legal and illegal leavers as their deep border surveillance was strengthened near Hungary, installed different technical appliances and introduced a comprehensive check on the railway lines and roads. As it was experienced by the representatives of the Hungarian Border Forces, that the previous *'mild climate became more formal, the mandatory meetings did not help the Hungarian party in its work.'* (Szabó - Bakondi, 1993, 46.)

Following the circular letter entering into force, not only the number of the legally permitted incoming travellers increased continuously, but also of those who settled down in Hungary. According to a press conference held in the middle of 1988, the figures of 1986 were doubled in 1987, from 3284 to 6499. (In Hungarian: Magyar Hírlap, 29 January 1988) At the commanders' meeting of the Border Forces on 13 March 1987, Jenő Földesi deputy Interior Minister commented the current situation and anticipations. *'We can say, comrades, that there are calm breezes blowing from the North, a part of the East and the South. There is no such wind that would divert the attention of the Border Forces, either*

22 Excerpt from the interview with the Romanian citizen of Hungarian nationality who crossed the border under the mission.

would or could influence it. It has only been influenced by; comrades, progress, tendency, the growing traffic at the border, compared to the previous seasons.’ (Sallai, 2012, 40.) I believe, the then Interior Undersecretary pictured the winds of changes well and that determined the performance of the Border Forces in the time of the system change. It was all made possible by the policy of the new Soviet secretary general, Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985 that led to an individual decision in Hungary to dismantle the iron curtain. At the same time, the confidentiality of permissions of Hungarian nationals to leave had to be secured as it was not worth underestimating the alertness of the Romanian secret service (Bottoni - Stefano, 2013, 79–118.). The temporal scope of the ‘Circular letter’ was terminated by the revolution in Romania in December 1989²³ and subsequently Romanian citizens could travel more freely, hence those with Hungarian nationality and there were no need for further positive discriminative measures to perform. At the same time the progress pictured above, the situation of the Hungarians living in Romania, their escaping to Hungary catalysed the preparations for Hungary to join the Geneva Conventions in 1989.

These lines are not a summary: ‘Leaking out of the Romanian citizens was a highly organized, top secret and centralized operation about which all knew who were affected but only to that extent which was necessary. Border force officials, soldiers were all aware of what was happening, they acknowledged the importance of the operation and complied with the conspiracy fully. During my research I spoke to several border force officials who told that nobody had seen any written orders, they followed only oral commands. The significance and the conspiracy for the operations were so imprinting that nobody would like to talk about it, even today.’²⁴

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23 This revolution terminated Ceaușescu’s unlimited power and dictatorship.

24 Excerpt from the interview with the Romanian citizen of Hungarian nationality who crossed the border under the mission.

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