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Christoph Klein. *Anvertraute Pfunde: Gustav Adolf Klein und die HermannstÖ¤dter allgemeine Sparkassa.* KÖ¶ln: BÖ¶hlau Verlag, 1995. viii + 262 pp. 58,- DM (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-09594-9.

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A Transylvanian Banker's Life

This book consists of two parts. The first, 159 pages long, is a biography of Gustav Adolf Klein (1902-1989), written by his son, a Lutheran pastor. The second 83-page section, entitled *Dokumentation*, consists of a bibliography and some samples of Klein's journalistic writings on various political and economic topics. A collection of family photographs and various other illustrations completes the volume. On the basis of this description, it would be easy to dismiss the book as a typical example of the genre *Provinzliteratur*. Many sons write such memoirs about their fathers as a labor of love, intending the readership to consist mostly of relatives, friends, and professional associates. Who else could possibly be interested in the career of a small-town banker, no matter how prominent he may have been as a leader of the Transylvanian community?

There is, of course, a more generous way of classifying this type of writing, namely as a *Zeitdokument*. As such, this highly personal, quite well-researched account derives its interest from the fact that Klein's active life spanned three phases in Transylvania's twentieth-century history: the absorption of the formerly Hungarian area into Romania after World War I; the brief interlude of Nazi attempts at *Gleichschaltung* and *Heimholung* of the Siebenbuerger Sachsen during World War II; and the period of "socialist construction" under the Romanian People's Republic, during which the German minority led a tenuous and often dangerous existence. As a result of events during the latter two phases, the German ethnic group in Transylvania and the Banat shrank steadily, from about 300,000 in the 1930s to 100,000 at the time of Ceausescu's fall. Since then, emigration, mostly to Germany, has reduced their number to no more than 25,000.

It certainly would be inappropriate to evaluate a work like this biography by the usual criteria for scholarly writing. Rather, it may be considered a complement to the collection of memoirs, accounts, and reports published by the (former) German *Bundesministerium fuer Vertriebene, Fluechtlinge und Kriegsgeschaedigte.*[1] Consequently, I shall restrict myself to an examination of the significance of Klein's story and that of the *Hermannstaedter allgemeine Sparkassa.*

Gustav Adolf Klein's association with the *Sparkassa* began in 1925. The son and grandson of socially prominent Lutheran pastors, he had pursued legal and economic studies at the *Hochschule fuer Welthandel* in Vienna, at the University of Klausenburg (Cluj), and finally at the University of Marburg/Lahn. There he wrote a dissertation on "Die Grundbesitzreform in Siebenbuergen im Rahmen der grossrumaenischen Agrarpolitik" and was awarded the *Doktor of Philosophie* degree in 1924. One gets some flavor of the dissertation's arguments from the published articles Klein extracted from it, several of which are included in the *Dokumentation* section appended to the book. He attacks the attitude of the "rumaenische Element" of Transylvania's population, who behave as though "die Rumaenen nun ueber alles, was sich hier fand, ueber Boden, Haeuser und Menschen

Herren geworden seien." And he argues that the Romanian government's criteria for land reform, appropriate as these may have been for the large estates of Wallachia, were not only inapplicable in the Transylvanian context but would actually destroy existing economic and social structures. According to Klein, the reason why land reform was being pushed actually had nothing to do with the existing size distribution of property; instead its goal was to remedy the "ethnically unjust" structure of ownership. It is not surprising that these arguments quickly established the young academic as an opinion leader among the German minority.

Klein's professional progress at the *Sparkassa* was swift. By 1928 he had risen to the rank of *Direktionssekretaer*, executive secretary to the *Generaldirektor*. In the meantime, he also continued the study of law at Cluj, obtaining a doctorate in 1930 and subsequently being admitted to the Romanian bar association. The topic of his second dissertation, "Das Pressewesen in Rumaenien aufgrund der Verfassung von 1923," obviously reflected a desire not to ruffle any ethnic feathers. It is a sign of his rapid rise to distinction that in 1931, at the age of 29, he was invited to apply for the directorship of the *Bistritzer Sparkassa*, an opportunity he turned down.

In the meantime, of course, the Great Depression had seriously undermined the Hermannstadt bank's strength, putting its very existence at risk. Whether it was the victim only of general economic conditions or whether it had overextended itself during the heady 1920s is not entirely clear. The account of subsequent events is murky as well. We must remind ourselves that its author is a pastor, not a financial expert. In any event, the *Sparkassa* sought and found financial help in the form of bail-out credits from German and Austrian financial institutions, under conditions that involved the transfer of roughly one-quarter of the shares to the creditors. By 1937, the bank had recovered sufficiently to repay these credits and to repurchase the shares. Klein, who by then had become *Direktor*, obviously was responsible for having managed to maintain the *Sparkassa* as an independent business during these difficult years and for returning it to financial health by the time it celebrated its hundredth anniversary. In part, this health was apparently attributable to his ability to maintain business connections with the former creditor institutions. These would later come back to haunt him.

Since the early 1930s, another kind of trouble for the bank was brewing–the growing Nazi influence on both the German ethnic group and, eventually, on the Romanian economy in general. After some innocuous beginnings, the outbreak of World War II provided Berlin with the opportunity to exert full pressure. The quarrelsome local Nazi factions were disbanded and a single organization created, the *Deutsche Volksgruppe in Rumaenien*. In 1940, Marshall Antonescu was prevailed upon to promulgate a *Volksgruppengesetz*, which recognized the *Volksgruppe* as a legal entity under public law, with the NSDAP as its "nationaler Willenstraeger." Nevertheless, the peculiarities of the Transylvanian situtation (including the region's geographic separation from the Reich) meant that the Nazis failed to establish the kind of complete *Gleichschaltung* they had achieved in contiguous areas; therefore, other groupings did manage to retain some independence. The author makes clear, however, that even the dissidents appreciated the granting of those *Volksgruppenrechte* for which they had argued since 1919 (p. 64). Conversely, Romanians undoubtedly regarded the provision of the new law, which explicitly granted the Nazi party the right to fly the swastika flag, as a symbol of their nation's diminished sovereignty over its own territory.

As early as 1933, Klein had decided to distance himself from the Nazi movement, "aus Gruenden der Vernunft und der Menschenwuerde", as he explained in a letter to his wife (p. 66). Throughout the subsequent decade, he resisted the *Volksgruppe* leadership's efforts to gain control over the German sector of Transylvania's economy. With financial institutions as the obvious key target of these efforts, guarding the independence of the *Sparkassa* became his major goal. Whatever his feelings toward the "movement," he was a businessman first and foremost, and he realized that turning the business into a political instrument would undermine its traditional role in the community. Eventually, like so many well-meaning people in similar situations, he seemed to have concluded that he could no longer pursue his goal from the outside. Therefore, in 1942, he consented to taking on the leadership of the *Wirtschaftsgruppe Banken und Versicherungen* in the *Volksgruppe's* economic office.

The author's account of how effectively his father managed to use his new position is murky at best. The issues at stake are obscured by the dropping of dozens of names, all of which no doubt evoke specific recollections and reactions among older *Siebenbuerger* readers, but which leave the outsider very much in the dark. What followed, in any event, were Nazi attempts to gain control of the *Sparkassa* by a variety of tactics, including resort to the influence of the bank's former German creditors, a merger of the Hermannstadt bank with that of Kronstadt

(Brasov), and efforts to replace the existing management through the manipulation of votes at shareholder meetings. As a consequence of the April 1943 meeting, for which the *Volksgruppe* apparently had rallied a majority of votes, the "loyalist" shareholders, as the author calls them, found themselves pushed aside. We may take it as a sign of a residuum of independence that their lawsuit, which claimed formal violations of statutes at the meeting in question, was actually decided in their favor by the court. In these and other Nazi machinations, the Viennese *Bankhaus Nicolai* (the "aryanized" Rothschild bank) apparently played a dubious role.

In the end, the Nazi interests won out, but at this point it hardly mattered. In April 1944, the Party *Kreisleiter* issued a decree dismissing Gustav Adolf Klein and certain other members of the board of supervisors, as well as eliminating him from membership in all "voelkischen Verbaenden und Veranstaltungen." Specifically, Klein was accused of having obstructed the participation of German capital in the *Sparkassa* and therefore of having behaved in a "reichsschaedigend" manner. (As we shall see shortly, he was later accused by the Romanian government of having done exactly the opposite). All of these controversies became moot in August of 1944, when Romania left the Axis forces and signed an armistice with the Allies. According to the author, the *Hermannstaedter Sparkassa* deserves credit for having been the only German institution in Romania to have actively and publicly resisted the *Volksgruppe* leadership's power grab (p. 78).

In early September, Russian troops occupied Hermannstadt and took over the bank buildings. Nazi officials were arrested and deported, German citizens interned. Eventually the *Sparkassa* was allowed to reopen, under the supervision of a Romanian-appointed *Aufsichtsverwalter* (commissioner). By 1945, management had succeeded in reestablishing some degree of normal business. Nevertheless, there loomed the threat of "special measures" against all those institutions allegedly controlled by foreigners or suspected of having pursued policies detrimental to Romania's economic interests. It is not surprising, therefore, that at the April 1945 annual meeting the Director General (Klein) made a special point of emphasizing that 98 percent of the bank's shares were owned by Romanian citizens. In the meantime both Soviet and Romanian authorities had begun a thorough examination of the institution's ownership records as well as an audit to determine the ownership of accounts. In the course of these, the bail-out operations by German banks and the continuing business ties with them aroused special suspicion.

In 1947, Eugen Lucian, newly appointed inspector of the CASBI (*Casa de Administrare si Supraveghere a Bunurilor Inamice*, Financial Office for the Administration and Supervision of Enemy Property) undertook to find out the extent to which bank shares were held by "camoufleurs," that is, by Romanian citizens or institutions acting as strawmen for foreign owners. Even the various Lutheran church bodies were accused of having served as conduits for clandestine German investments. In addition, Lucian raised the question whether the 1937 share repurchase from the creditors had actually taken place or whether it was a scheme to conceal permanent German ownership of part of the bank's capital. It would seem an easy matter for management to reconstruct the nature of these and other transactions from its own files, especially since the persons involved were still in leading positions. As it turned out, however, there was considerable doubt about how and by what means the required transfers of funds actually had been accomplished. The author's attempt at an explanation for the absence of an unequivocal accounting record (p. 94) is less than convincing; charitably, one may once again invoke his lack of expertise in financial matters. In any event, Lucian arranged to have *Generaldirektor* Klein, his directors, and the members of the board of supervisors removed from office and arrested. After a few days in jail, with interrogations by Lucian, who turned out to be a Securitate official, they were released. Management of the *Sparkassa* was taken over by Romanian bankers, and in June 1948 it closed its doors for good.

Shortly thereafter, Klein and several of his officers were jailed again and put to trial before the Sibiu (Hermannstadt) people's court. The gist of a lengthy list of charges was that, from 1928 until 1944, management had used credit transactions with German banks to conceal the "intrusion" of German capital into Transylvania and thus had misled the Romanian government and public into considering the *Sparkassa* an indigenous banking institution. They were found guilty and sentenced to jail and assessed monetary penalties–in Klein's case, seven months' imprisonment and some 10,000 lei in damages and court costs. All appeals were rejected. His son ruminates at length about the reasons for what he considers Klein's vindictive treatment by the new regime; they range from Romanian resentment over the views expressed in his 1924 dissertation to the fear of local officials that he might once again play a leading role in an organized resistance against "socialist reconstruction." All of this rings quite true but is largely irrelevant, because

whatever the specific factors, in the end Klein's case was not substantially different from that of other "capitalist stooges" victimized by the new Communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

After his release from jail, Gustav Adolf Klein worked as a bookkeeper for various nationalized enterprises, in Sibiu and at construction sites around Transylvania. In 1955, he passed an examination to become an "authorized Romanian-German interpreter for belletristics." As such, he received work from Bucharest publishing houses, involving mainly the translation of contemporary Romanian works of literature. Soon thereafter he obtained a position as tutor for the children of the Finnish ambassador to Romania; although this meant separation from family and friends, it brought material improvement and more congenial working conditions. It also led to yet another disaster.

Klein soon developed a strong personal and intellectual relationship with Matti Pyykkoe, the ambassador, who offered his good services in the transmittal of letters to the West, especially to his brother Karl Kurt Klein, who lived in Austria. In this correspondence, they apparently discussed all kinds of sensitive political, cultural, and economic matters. Unfortunately for them, the aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian uprising had produced increased vigilance in all Communist countries. So it was only a matter of time before the Securitate would manage to intercept one of these letters, presumably through an agent in Austria. In May 1958, Klein was arrested in Bucharest, spent two years in *Untersuchungshaft* (investigatory confinement), and then was sentenced to ten years' incarceration, with confiscation of all private property. The charges were straightforward: the accused knew that the transmission of information about Romanian affairs to foreign countries was prohibited; he also had enclosed in one his letters the sum of 750 British pounds, as a favor to a friend; and he had received, copied, and distributed the manuscript of an "incendiary" talk that his brother had given at an assembly of emigrees from the Romanian People's Republic (actually the *Landsmannschaft der Siebenbuerger Sachsen in Deutschland*). In the climate of the late 1950s and 1960s, there was nothing unusual about these charges. Dozens of "enemies of the state" ended up in jail for similar transgressions. What strikes one as remarkable is the ability of anyone in Romania secretly to hold the then-incredible sum of 750 pounds and his willingness to send the money abroad. Although he alludes to the transaction in the book's title, *Anvertraute Pfunde*, the author's account of the background to the whole affair is quite uninformative. Whatever the facts, committing a "currency crime" was a very risky undertaking.

Klein spent most of his prison time in the Gherla penitentiary. Conditions there are described by means of lengthy quotations from the writings of other inmates (pp. 121-23). They probably were no better or worse than those in other Romanian jails. On the basis of a special decree passed by the Council of State, Klein was released in June 1964, before he had completed his sentence. In letters to his son, the author, and others he refers to having returned from "meiner langen Reise," praising the good fortune of once again being able to live among loved ones. His health impaired and all opportunities for gainful employment eliminated by his criminal record, Klein devoted himself to various social activities and to the writing of historical essays, none of which he was able to publish. Just how much political conditions had changed, if only temporarily, in the 1970s is suggested by the fact that he was issued a passport and given permission to visit his brother in Austria. He returned to continue his life among his ever-smaller group of friends, was honored in formal celebrations on the occasions of his sixty-fifth, seventieth, and seventy-fifth birthdays, and in 1987 buried his beloved wife of fifty-three years, Maria-Martha. He now lived with his son, the author, requiring constant medical attention. In 1988, he went on what he thought would be a short visit to Germany with his daughter, who had agreed to care for him, and he died there in May 1989, just a few months before the collapse of the Ceausescu regime.

In one way or another, thousands of *Siebenbuerger Sachsen* shared the fate of Gustav Adolf Klein under Communist rule. They, too, were arrested, deported, or just subjected to all sorts of hardship. Yet his story can hardly be regarded as typical. Throughout his life, he had been a highly visible member of an elite in a small, tightly knit community. His political and economic views as well as his professional activities were a matter of public record. Clearly, these had stamped him as the sort of "bourgeois" who became the target of official attacks in all of the new "socialist" regimes of eastern and southeastern Europe. Trumped-up or not, the charges concerning his management of the *Sparkassa* provided a convenient method of removing him from any position of influence. The violations of Romanian laws for which he was sentenced in 1960 were of course real; surely, this is an indictment of the laws rather than of Klein's attempts to circumvent them. I suspect that historians will find many corroborating details, but few surprises, in his son's account of his life.

In a broader perspective, what matters is that over a span of some forty years, the Romanians by various means managed to "solve" the problem of their German minorities; today they amount to a minuscule proportion of the total population. For better or for worse, recent attention to ethnic conflict in Transylvania has therefore been focused on the Romanian treatment of the Hungarian population. So far, Budapest's vigorous campaign on their behalf has not produced any notable results. But whatever the outcome, Transylvania remains a troubled region.

Note

[1]. *Das Schicksal der Deutschen in Rumaenien: Eine Dokumentation.* Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa, Bd. 4 (Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 1994). With support from the Bundesministerium fuer Vertreibene, Fluechtlinge und Kriegsgeschaedigte.

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