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FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
EVERY DAY LIFE OF THE CLUJ ARISOCRACY IN THE SECOND
HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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CLUJ-NAPOCA

2012

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Tags:

Cluj aristocracy, everyday life, fashion in the nineteenth century, carnival in the nineteenth century, food in the nineteenth century

Summary:

This paper is the result of an extensive research aimed to reconstruct and highlight the main aspects of the daily life of the Cluj aristocracy in the second half of the nineteenth century, specifically the period right after the crushing of the 1848 Revolution to the end of the First World War.

The high class “society” (in Hungarian “társadalom”), the equivalent of the French “haute volée” remains a closed social group, reluctant to any kind of compromise, arising from the two great movements that introduced such concepts as equality and uniformity within the European society, democratization and embourgeoisement. It was the threat posed by the trend questioning its position, its purpose and its value that made “society” want to initiate an extensive process of redefining its contours, by which it essentially sought to differentiate itself from the rest of the social classes. The various existence models don’t always follow the same pattern, from top to bottom, (“ennobling of the bourgeoisie”), but also the other way around, from bottom to top, in the so-called phenomenon of “aristocratic embourgeoisement” whose effects are felt especially among families that lead their lives closer and more consistent to the bourgeois thinking. The imitation process in the various aristocratic families is among other things a way to mask the refusal to accept the new state of things, but mostly it is the result of some people’s failure to adapt to the new realities. Much more important than the imitation of the great families or the “aristocratic embourgeoisement” is the occidentalization of the high society in which the English and French models play the central role. We may speak of imitation, but it’s much more than that, it’s the desire to be different, aligned to the cosmopolitan thinking characterizing the entire aristocratic society on the continent.

Briefly, this would be the primary motivation in choosing the theme, but also the period, adding that despite the exhaustive study of this age, few researchers have had the curiosity to tackle aspects of the daily life in the world of the aristocracy and even if some of them succeeded, they restricted their research to the Middle Ages and early modern times.

The paper is divided into four chapters, plus an Appendix that includes vintage photos centered on the era’s fashion trends, carnivals and aristocratic performances. The **first**

chapter, entitled “Behavior” takes the form of a “cursus vitae” of the Cluj aristocracy, “the first steps in life” to the last stage of existence, crowned by a peaceful old age or on the contrary life suddenly interrupted by a suicide decision. From an early age, children were subjected to a vigorous education not so much to build a future career but rather to become an agreeable member of the “society”, distinguished by attitude, gesture, sophisticated dialogue, in a word “bonton” or “etiquette”. Parental intervention extends beyond the age of maturity, their opinions counting a lot when considering marriage with or without benefits, the latter being the cause of many cases of divorce, infidelity, but also of willingly assumed celibacy. The two types of aristocratic personalities, the traditional and the “out of the box”, are examples of the same pattern, the difference being that they take on concerns and attitudes more or less in line with the innovative spirit of the times. The reinventing process of the aristocracy occurs on a social level through symbolic domination, where it seeks to replace its traditional patronage of the community and culture with the evergetism, a procedure that unites the old habits of getting involved in charity works and patronage with the ever-growing concern for the problems of the city and its residents, regardless of their origin. Beyond fulfilling moral debt (expressively suggested at the time by the expression “la noblesse oblige”), the aristocracy dedicated its time and efforts to pleasurable activities, “loisir” as they called it, a form of entertainment that is not reduced to personal delight or unproductive activities, but on the contrary favoring the development of amateurish endeavors: painting, noble sports, hunting, music, theatrical performances, but most than anything else traveling.

The **second chapter** is focused on fashion in its dual perspective, as a means of preserving the community values and national identity (by adopting the national costume), and as a means of receiving and transmitting Occidental influences. Attempts to promote, simplify and adapt the Hungarian national costume were accelerated in 1859, success being achieved more easily with men than with women who rapidly acquired a taste for luxury, with the growing number of social events, especially balls. As of the eighth decade the traditional costume is limited on both sides to a festive outfit worn only on holidays, ceremonies, weddings or in celebration of political figures being appointed into office. Beyond appearances and “that which can be seen”, the chapter aims to capture that which is “hidden” also, meaning certain accessories that highlight opulence and refinement, gracefulness and elevated taste, serving as a means to clearly separate authentic members from those who imitate without knowing how to “wear” the clothes. The gradual evolution of

hygiene practices is also depicted in this section, from the application and use of homemade products to the appearance of modern cosmetics at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The **third chapter** explores the secrets of the aristocratic cuisine in Cluj, the recipe books, the menus, banquets and culinary feasts, which help not only separate the “fine taste” from the “common” taste, but give a clear idea about the rules and principles which guide the dialogues and table manners, gestures commonly practiced from an early age. The Occidental influences, French, German and English, can be noticed by observing the names of the dishes, the appearance of new cooking techniques, the dinner serving intervals, the composition of the family meals menu, as well as the quality and quantity of ingredients. The traditional Hungarian dishes are considered unhealthy and are gradually replaced by others bearing meaningful names, popular recipes of the continent, common to the European capitals. They become known not only from cookbooks, but especially thanks to cooks coming from Vienna. Rich meals remain a strictly observed habit, both to reinforce the idea of welfare and to keep up with fashion trends that require the use of the French menu example which consists of at least six courses.

The **last chapter** ends the presentation in a cheerful note by depicting the carnival, an occasion to manifest the joy of life, the pleasure of being among relatives, but also a time of oblivion, of physical and spiritual healing. Of the various forms of entertainment, we can speak of an exclusively aristocratic presence only when referring to soirees and balls held in the privacy of the aristocratic palaces or casinos. On all other occasions, contact with the middle class occurs inevitably, hence the reluctance to make an appearance in public masked balls.

The new values bestowed upon the carnival are coming from its interweaving with the national movement, specifically the one inducing equality and democracy within the society as well as with the local cultural movement. The most important outcome rising from these popular events is the promotion of charitable actions, a double-edged sword, because although it draws participation in large numbers of the aristocracy, it inevitably leads to monotony, a contagious “spleen” sharply expressed at the end of the nineteenth century. After a brief review of the era’s dancing types and the role of folk music in fueling the atmosphere, the chapter ends in a nostalgic tone, longing for the “carnivals that once were”, an expression that comes to designate at the time the glory of the times before 1848, in total antithesis to the erosion of the traditional significance due to the diversification of the leisure opportunities in a new, more diversified context.

The use of a large variety of sources and original material allowed the successful compilation of distinct pieces that eventually make up a complete picture of the life of great aristocratic families, who despite losing their privileges remain the driving force of the society, at a pace which is determined precisely by the daily existence of this particular social group, deeply anchored in the past yet showing an increased desire to adopt the modern character of the Occident.