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WILLIAM BLACKER

## Ballroom to Basement

Comrade Baron: A Journey through the Vanishing World of  
the Transylvanian Aristocracy

By Jaap Scholten (Translated by Liz Waters)

Helena History Press 425pp £18 order from our bookshop

Reading this book reminds you of how lucky we are to live on an island and be subjects of a benign parliamentary democracy, and so not be at the mercy of marauding armies or the whims of ruthless communist dictators.

The aristocracy of Transylvania were not so lucky. Their fate, as told in this book, is a harrowing one, as well as a cautionary tale of how one can have everything one day and nothing the next. It was in 1945 that things started to go terribly wrong. Patrick Leigh Fermor, just a few years before, had drifted through their gilded lives, staying with them for months in their porticoed country houses, where he was seduced by their charmed existence in the leafy hills and misty valleys by the Mureş river. There is quite a contrast between Leigh Fermor's lyrical descriptions of their happy prewar years as recounted in *Between the Woods and the Water* and what happened soon after.

In 1945 the Russians came through. Transylvania was just a staging post for them – they were pursuing Hitler's retreating army all the way to Germany – but for the local people this made little difference. Their quiet life abruptly ended. One lady from a Transylvanian noble family, Alaine Polcz, described how she was raped for days on end by the Russian soldiers, afraid her back would break from the violence of their assaults. Her white-haired mother-in-law was dragged off too. In Budapest alone it was estimated that 100,000 women and girls were sexually assaulted by Russian soldiers.

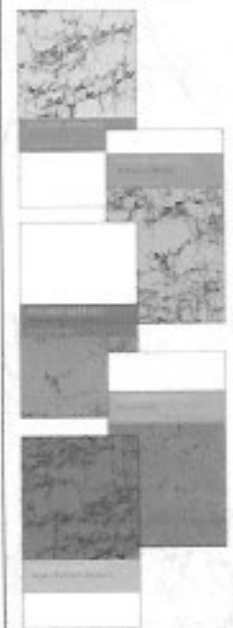
When the soldiers looted the mausoleum of a Transylvanian Hungarian family, a white temple standing on a small island in a lake behind the grand house, they pulled the coffins out of their niches to search for gold or jewellery and afterwards hurled them into the water. 'Where once swans glided between the fountains, the coffins holding the remains ... bobbed on the surface.' It was the beginning of the end of the fairy tale, and a sign of what was soon to happen.

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The front passed and the war, but not the nightmare, ended. On the night of 2–3 March 1949 the Romanian communists put into action a ruthless plan to eradicate the aristocracy. In a great sweep of the country from the dusty Moldavian steppes to the green valleys of Transylvania, aristocratic families, both Hungarian and Romanian, were evicted and arrested. They were woken at night with loud bangs on the door by local gangs and taken away in trucks, permitted one suitcase each if they were lucky. The Kemény children were allowed one toy each. After this the family's possessions, including their libraries, paintings and furniture (some of which dated back hundreds of years), were looted or burned and their great houses turned into mental asylums or used for storing grain. The owner of the castle of Dornafalva had been an amateur taxidermist and had a huge collection of stuffed birds decorating the castle rooms and passages. He used to work on them for hours. His daughter, now in her nineties, described to Jaap Scholten how communist thugs hurled her father's collection out of the windows of the castle on the day after his arrest. 'I imagine', writes Scholten, 'thousands of stuffed birds flying. Down in the valley, in a cloud of billowing feathers, they break their necks with a snap.' It is another of the many powerful images in this book.

Once all the castles, houses, estates and property had been confiscated or destroyed, their residents were variously imprisoned, sent to labour camps or executed. The luckier ones were exiled. Many of those found in their forced exile only damp cellars in which to live, moving literally in the space of a few days from ballroom to basement.

Scholten's book tells their riveting, though disturbing, story. It will appeal not only to anyone interested in Transylvanian postwar history but also to anyone interested in the human condition and the limits of endurance. It is a tale of unimaginable hardship and persecution, and of the strength of people's spirit to endure and somehow to survive. The book is full of heart-rending stories, but also of heart-lifting ones. Even while women were raped by the Soviet troops in 1945, some brave Russian soldiers tried to protect them from the violence.

Gradually the noble families (those who survived) adapted and did their best to live in the new, alien and utterly hostile environment in which they found themselves. Not only had they lost everything in an instant, but they were also treated as pariahs. The adults were refused employment in state factories and made to report each week to the militia, working in the lowliest jobs as cleaners, street sweepers, gardeners, janitors or sellers of dried flowers or ice cream on the streets. The young were humiliated and made to stand up at school in order to show their fellow students what the children of 'class enemies' looked like.

Jaap Scholten describes how the persecution was systematically planned and put into action according to strategies formed in the Soviet Union. For the Romanian communists to succeed, all

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possible opposition had to be stamped out. The personal stories of the victims are fascinating, as is Scholten's own journey to discover how it all happened. He hunts about in the rubble of medieval castles, wanders the passages of political prisons and learns about the tortures used in them and the bizarre reasons why some of the inmates were there: one prisoner in the penitentiary in Sighet, Dumitru Bacon, was sentenced to six years for taking Marx's portrait down from a wall and dancing on it while singing an old song.

The immediacy of Scholten's tale and of the accounts of the survivors, combined with his wonderful eye for the surreal details of the totalitarian and the post-totalitarian societies through which he travels on his quest, make this a unique, deeply moving and unmissable book.

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