

## **Romsics, Ignác. *Hetven év - Egotörténelem 1951-2021* [Seventy Years: An Autobiography 1951–2021]. Budapest: Helikon, vol 1. 2022, 435 pp.; vol 2. 2023, 492 pp.**

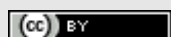
**Reviewed by Géza Jeszzenszky<sup>1</sup>, Corvinus University, Budapest**

Ignác Romsics's place is undisputed among the most prominent present-day Hungarian historians; his output exceeds most of them in quantity and impact. He is the author and/or editor of dozens of scholarly works—monographs, syntheses, collections of essays. Although his main period of research is the 20th century, he has written thorough, authoritative, and rather popular books on earlier periods, too, a feat not common among professional historians. His autobiography in two volumes, totaling 900 pages, stands out among the memoirs of prominent Hungarians in the last hundred year. The genre "life and times" has a tradition in Hungary, too, exemplified by János Kemény (1607–1662), Miklós Bethlen (1642–1716), Ferenc Pulszky (1814–1897), and more recently mainly by men of letters like Ferenc Herczeg (1863–1954), Tibor Déry (1897–1977), István Vas (1910–1991), Gyula Borbándi (1919–2014). Others, too, wrote interesting accounts of the turbulent times they lived in, but few historians had the time and the inclination to look back on their own careers, which could not help being closely connected to the difficult political conditions of 20th-century Hungary. The main merit of the present work is that it is an authentic record of the intellectual life of the period, including the changing interpretations of and attitudes to history. It is a reliable historical source. It also provides an indirect answer to the question of what happened to the great hopes of 1989/90, whether Hungary made good use of the freedom it had gained, and how a deep political and social polarization (not unknown in Hungarian history) emerged and grew.

Romsics's career is remarkable: he started out as the son of a hard-working family of farmers in a small village without electricity and a proper road. His family intended him to become a mason. Unlike the generation growing up in the late 1940s ("fényes szelek" [shining winds]), Romsics did not require political favoritism to become a respected intellectual. He became a full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a Széchenyi Prize-winning university professor. Today, a youth from a remote Hungarian village would not have any chance to repeat that feat. From the present autobiography, one can learn a lot about the later, better but still ugly phase of the Kádár era, followed by the hopeful years of the regime change, to end with a record of the controversial economic, social and political developments of the last thirty years. People born in the 1940s and 50s (the present reviewer is exactly ten years older than Romsics), were fortunate not to have lived through two world wars, the terror of the Arrow Cross followed by the Muscovite Rákosi's, unlike their parents and grandparents. My generation and those a bit younger, like Romsics', lived to see what we have only dreamed about: the birth of a free, democratic Hungary, allied to the Euro-Atlantic democracies.

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Romsics' intellectual development and political outlook are typical of the generation that grew up after the Second World War. Despite his lowly social background, his thinking hardly differed from the attitudes of those coming from middle-class families. His family of poor farmers held traditional values regarding honesty and religion. Romsics, as a young man, showed strong social sensitivity and held leftist ideals that stemmed from his youthful idealism. For a while, he embraced the radicalism of Che Guevara, but soon found himself in conflict with the state security apparatus of the milder dictatorship. One way out, which seemed to bring not only career opportunities but also protection, was loyalty and membership in the ruling (communist) party. But in the 1970s and 1980s, most party members, just like those who refused to join the Party, listened to Radio Free Europe, read forbidden books and criticized the regime more and more openly—mainly among friends. The Party's publisher, Kossuth, regularly brought out unauthorized, pirated books with important political content in Hungarian translation—only for “internal use,” intended for a trusted circle. Romsics, thanks to his teachers, had access to such books and they contributed to his growing disillusionment with the communist regime.

The author's memories and experiences at the secondary boarding school in Kalocsa, followed by military service and then studying at the teachers' training college in Szeged, are a valuable source for the history of those years. He had strict but highly educated and inspiring teachers. Many of them were charred by the fires of the '56 revolution, which they later tried to forget. Reading a large quantity of fiction shaped the worldview of the young Romsics, who had a wide interest and was a fast reader. His reading included many Western authors, published from the 1960s onwards, as well as the classical Hungarian novelist Jókai and the French Jules Verne, who was immensely popular among the young.- He also read books on the American native Indians and studied the French language,

Local history is a somewhat underrated genre but it is cultivated by many and read by even more. It is an excellent school for young historians. Romsics also began his academic career with a book of the history of his native region in 1919: the Bolshevik Revolution and red terror, followed by a counter-revolution and “white” terror. This work won him his first awards. He spent four years as an archivist in Kecskemét in a much freer atmosphere than studying in the city of Szeged, run by the infamous Komócsin clan. It enabled him to complete his education, receive a degree in history at Eötvös Loránd University, travel to France and publish some eye-catching articles in journals. In mid-1977, at the invitation of György Ránki, the influential historian, he joined the Institute of Historical Sciences of the Hungarian Academy. His impressions of his colleagues were the same as mine, who came to know them a few years earlier. In November 1979, in a workplace discussion of Romsics's work on the first phase of the Horthy era, György Ránki unexpectedly and indignantly called his concept a rehabilitation of that period. “The young people present listened and watched in dismay as the grand old men of the Horthy-era department knocked the 28-year-old Romsics into the ground.” (Vol. I, 334)

With the 1980s, Hungarian history took a new, hopeful direction, allowing Romsics's talent to flourish, free from political and ideological shackles. The taboo on the subject of the 1920 Trianon peace treaty and its primary victims, the Hungarian minorities detached from Hungary, was gradually lifted. The easing of travel restrictions triggered a wave of travel to Transylvania; many friendships were forged with the local Hungarians. Romsics, too, was captivated by the atmosphere of “the other Hungarian homeland” through the people he met. Ceaușescu's increasingly harsh dictatorship, which struck particularly the Hungarians, also shaped the political views of the promising historian.

It was more difficult to change the labels of “fascism” and “dictatorship” associated with the Horthy era, replacing them with a more nuanced image. An example of this difficulty was the fate of a manuscript by Romsics, published by Gondolat Publisher under the title “Counterrevolution and Consolidation” only after a long debate in 1982. The book tore open old wounds and made the author a controversial personality, accused of trying to whitewash Regent Horthy and minimize the anti-Semitic features of the 1920s. The label “populists” as opposed to the “urbanites” was rediscovered and has remained the source of a most unfortunate division in Hungarian intellectual life. However, from the late 1970s, one could see (in György Litván's essay) the convergence of “Hungarian thought” and “free thought” (“Magyar gondolat-szabad gondolat”). The common denomination was opposition to the system personalized by János Kádár, the communist leader.

The significant resonance of his first book made Romsics a nationally known and sought-after person, even attracting attention abroad thanks to Hungarian exiles. Studying the consolidation period of the 1920s led Romsics to the subject of István Bethlen, prime minister from 1921 to 1931. In 1986, he joined the newly established School of Hungarian Studies and met many Hungarian emigrants and experts on Hungarian history and literature living in the West. His most important contacts were, in my opinion, C.A. Macartney, John Lukacs, László Péter, Ferenc Fejtő, Péter Kende, Zsolt K. Lengyel, Lóránt Czigány, Péter Gosztonyi, Denis Sinor, Ferenc Mózsi and Elemér Illyés. He also came to know a number of prominent Hungarians in Hungary's neighboring countries. In 1988, he co-authored a pamphlet entitled *Nation, National Minority and Reform Politics* with Rudolf Joó, Csaba Gy. Kiss and Péter Pál Tóth. Their proposals were well received by the Foreign Affairs Department of the Central Committee of the Party. I agree with Romsics that “the Party leadership, at least its Foreign Affairs Department, was ahead of the government led by Károly Grósz.” (Vol. II, 43)

In the mood of the intellectual fervor of 1989, it would have been strange if Romsics had not been tempted by the political movements. However, while wholly sympathizing with the regime change, he resisted getting involved—fortunately for historiography. He joined the Department of Modern Hungarian History at Eötvös Loránd University. Romsics's most important work in terms of its impact and resonance, *István Bethlen. A Political Biography*, (Magyarságkutató Intézet, 1991) was published at the end of 1991. The combination of the well-chosen subject matter, the novelty of the approach and the quality of the writing resulted in a large number of highly appreciative reviews.

An unexpected result of the Bethlen biography was that, in February 1993, Romsics received an unrefusable invitation from Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, who was teaching at Indiana University in the United States, to fill the vacant Hungarian Chair at Bloomington. He successfully adapted to a different university environment and teaching system and proved a popular teacher. Returning home, Romsics wrote and edited several books and became a popular professor at the universities of Debrecen and Szeged as well as in Budapest. His *Magyarország története a 20. században* [History of Hungary in the 20th Century], has run into several editions. The last three chapters may be the most exciting, covering all the historical and current policy issues over the past 25 years. The leitmotif is the deepening divisions in the country, in society, which have virtually eliminated the middle ground. Romsics, who had written a seminal book on the sad modern history of Transylvania (*Erdély elvesztése—1918–1947* [Losing Transylvania], 2018), became an anti-Hungarian traitor in the eyes of one sectarian camp. On the other hand, a section of the left and some politicians from the neighboring “successor states” accused him of being sympathetic to the Horthy era and Hungarian revisionism. These attacks did not, however,

prevent him from writing further exciting and popular works—popular despite, or perhaps thanks to, the controversies. He was recognized by the Széchenyi Prize awarded to him at the young age of 54. I share Romsics's view that "an important task of the historian is to discredit manipulative and propagandistic interpretations that are crudely ideologically defined and depart from the known and accepted facts of the past." (Vol. II, 272) Following this principle can easily lead the historian into a hornet's nest. Such was the reaction to Romsics's inaugural lecture at the Academy, held on March 17, 2011, on the *Gleichschaltung* ("leveling") of Hungarian historiography between 1945 and 1949. The climax of the attacks came when Romsics's old friend András Gerő accused him of anti-Semitism and a desire to rehabilitate the Horthy era, which charges collapsed under the weight and number of those who came out to defend Romsics.

I see the importance of Romsics's life's work in the following: he increased the historical interest and knowledge of society with books that transcended biases and were based on original sources, usually not yet used by others. He presented the international factors that determined Hungarian history and considered the decisive role of the great powers. More of his works on Hungary and Central Europe were published in foreign languages than any of his predecessors or contemporaries. His work, therefore, has reached a wide international audience (including in Hungary's neighbors). Unlike the dilettante publicists and the historians serving the requirements of current politics, who tend to misrepresent history and create unfounded illusions, Romsics has served and continues to serve genuine Hungarian interests and thus the interests of Hungarian communities outside the borders of the mother country. I consider his work as a teacher on par with his writings. His conscientiousness and inspiring influence have contributed greatly to the number of outstanding historians who have emerged from among his students.