

VI. RECENZII/COMPTES RENDUS

A living sociographic tradition: Review of Zoltán Rostás, *Bukaresti magyarság – alulnézetből* [The Hungarian Community in Bucharest: A Bottom-Up Perspective], Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, 2025, Series: Magyarország felfedezése (Discovering Hungary, 79.), 288 p.¹

Zoltán Rostás's book *Bukaresti magyarság – alulnézetből* [The Hungarian Community in Bucharest: A Bottom-Up Perspective] convincingly demonstrates that sociography is not merely a genre of historical significance or a precursor to classical sociology, but remains a productive mode of empirical and interpretive inquiry. Drawing on oral history interviews, personal recollections, and fieldwork experiences gathered over several decades, the book reconstructs the twentieth-century and contemporary social history of the Hungarian minority in Bucharest. In doing so, it contributes to debates in Eastern European urban sociology, minority studies, and oral history methodology.

One of the most significant contributions of this monograph is that it analyzes the Hungarian minority in Romania not within the traditionally studied regional clusters of Transylvania, Partium, or Banat, but in an urban context where ethnic identity is subject to continuous institutional, economic, and linguistic renegotiation. In this interpretation, Bucharest emerges not merely as a destination of migration, but as a social space in which state-socialist urbanization, labor market cycles, educational mobility, and informal networks collectively shape the conditions of minority life. Rostás's analysis avoids both the exoticization of minority communities and reductive narratives of victimhood. Instead, it offers an empirically rich reconstruction of everyday strategies of survival and adaptation, including commuting practices, informal learning, and quiet bilingualism. The volume pays particular attention to how housing chains, referral networks, church infrastructures, and employment niches shape the social reproduction of urban minority communities.

1. An earlier version of this review was published in Hungarian (Szabari, 2026).

The book's methodological significance is also worth highlighting. Here, oral history functions not merely as a supplementary source, but as the primary organizing principle of the narrative. The interviews do not fulfill a merely illustrative function; rather, they themselves constitute the archive from which the community's social structure and identity dynamics can be reconstructed. In this respect, Rostás's work is closely linked to the international tradition of oral history. Similar to Alessandro Portelli's argument, the value of recollections lies not solely in their factual accuracy, but also in their meaning-making function (Portelli, 1991). The volume likewise demonstrates that oral history is particularly well suited to the study of social groups, such as domestic workers and construction workers, whose experiences are only partially preserved in institutional written records (Terkel, 1974).

The development of Rostás's intellectual interests was closely linked to the International History Congress held in Bucharest in October 1980, which significantly reinforced his commitment to oral history methodology. According to his own recollections, the lectures and discussions at the congress led him to recognize oral history as, in essence, the application of unstructured anthropological interviewing to historical research. For Rostás, oral history did not merely complement written documentation; rather, it offered a particularly effective approach to social worlds in which written records remained fragmentary or secondary. In this framework, the interviews themselves become the archive, while sociography narratively organizes this material, rendering it interpretable, teachable, and comparable before it disappears through generational change. Rostás also emphasized that oral history carries an implicitly critical orientation, insofar as it foregrounds the experiences of marginalized social groups that either left few written traces behind or were documented primarily through official institutional mediation (Rostás, 2020, p. 214).

The author's biographical embeddedness is also crucial to the project. For many years, Rostás was an active participant in Bucharest's Hungarian cultural and media milieu, working in the Hungarian editorial departments of Romanian Television and Romanian Radio, and later as a staff member of the cultural weekly *A Hét*. Beginning in the 1970s, he conducted extensive interviews with members of Bucharest's Hungarian community, experiences that fundamentally shaped his later sociological orientation. In the 1980s, his attention increasingly turned toward the Romanian village monograph movement of the interwar and postwar periods, particularly the monographic research associated with Dimitrie Gusti. Rather than focusing primarily on the published findings of the Gusti school, Rostás concentrated on interviews with former participants in these research projects, exploring their intellectual motivations, personal trajectories, and the everyday practices of monographic fieldwork. His work was simultaneously shaped by the tradition of critical Hungarian sociography, especially its commitment to bottom-up representations of both the intelligentsia and socially marginalized groups. Through his scholarly and institutional work, Rostás became a prominent figure in Romanian and Hungarian sociology, as well as in oral history research. After 1989, his career increasingly shifted toward university teaching and academic scholarship. From 1991 onward, he taught at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Bucharest, first as associate professor and later as full professor, primarily in the fields of media and organizational sociology. He also supervised doctoral research in the history of sociology at the university's Faculty of Sociology. Beginning in 2001, with the establishment of Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Rostás played a major role in developing the Department of Social Sciences at the university's Csíkszereda campus. The primary sources of the monograph consist of interviews conducted by the author together with students from the Institute of Social Sciences at Sapientia EMTE, complemented by memoirs, press materials, and professional documents. This collaboration with students also functions as a

pedagogical practice, simultaneously training new generations of field researchers and enabling the triangulation of personal memories with contemporary documentary sources.

One of the volume's most distinctive narrative strategies is its reverse chronological structure. The narrative moves backward from the post-socialist period toward the early twentieth century, emphasizing that reconstructions of the past are always shaped by the perspective of the present. This organizational logic is closely aligned with the reflexive traditions of oral history and life-history research, although it also presents certain challenges for readers. The linear progression of historical processes is at times interrupted, which may prove demanding for those less familiar with the context of Romanian social history.

Rostás moves beyond linear and normative models of assimilation. Through analyses of language use, intermarriage, religious affiliations, and occupational mobility, he uncovers differentiated identity strategies within the Hungarian community of Bucharest. Rather than presenting this population as a homogeneous ethnic group, the book depicts it as a socially heterogeneous constellation shaped by divergent migration experiences and social positions. Particularly noteworthy is the volume's nuanced analysis of micro-level mechanisms – such as chain migration, household risk-sharing, and workplace code-switching – that contribute to the long-term reproduction of minority communities.

A further strength of the volume lies in its ability to illuminate complex sociohistorical processes without relying on an overly explicit theoretical apparatus. Economic cycles, state-socialist urbanization, the urban development projects of the Ceaușescu era, and the consequences of the 1977 earthquake do not appear as abstract macrohistorical processes detached from lived experience; rather, they gain analytical meaning through their embedding in individual life histories. Rostás's prose is accordingly clear and essayistic: theory never overwhelms the narrative, but instead functions as its underlying interpretive framework.

The Hungarian Community in Bucharest: A Bottom-Up Perspective not only contributes to the history of the Hungarian minority in Romania, but also provides broader methodological insights for migration studies, historical sociology, and urban sociology. The volume offers a research model that is particularly relevant for examining social contexts in which archives are fragmentary, minority identities remain unstable, and the social reproduction of communities is organized primarily through informal networks. Rostás's work convincingly demonstrates that sociography continues to generate empirically rich, conceptually productive, and internationally relevant social scientific knowledge.

Vera Szabari¹

Bibliography

- Portelli, Alessandro (1991). *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories Form and Meaning in Oral History*. State University of New York Press.
- Rostás, Zoltán (2020). In search of the lost interwar sociology. In R. Mateoc & F. Ruegg. (coord.), *Recalling fieldwork: People, places and encounters* (pp. 213-234). LIT Verlag.
- Rostás, Zoltán (2025). *Bukaresti magyarság – alulnézetből* [The Hungarian Community in Bucharest: A Bottom-Up Perspective]. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó. Series: Magyarország felfedezése (Discovering Hungary, 79).
- Szabari, Vera (2026). Társadalmi csoportok laza hálózata: a bukaresti magyarság szociográfiája [A Loose Social Network: Hungarians in Bucharest]. *Szociológiai Szemle*, 1-6.
- Terkel, Studs (1974). *Working. People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. New York: Pantheon Books.

1. Facultatea de Științe Sociale a Universității Eötvös Loránd (ELTE).