

The Intercultural Communicative Habits of Noncolonizable Székely Identity: Áron Tamási's *Ábel* Trilogy

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In the European Union of the 21st century minority versus majority issues also the minority policy of certain countries, the question of national identity, various forms of intercultural communication or its impossibility are topics more and more foregrounded—at least that is the way it should be. This is what makes perennial *Ábel* of Áron Tamási's 1934 novel-trilogy¹ timely again. *Ábel*, who has become by our days the classical Székely-Hungarian² representative of minority strategies of identity management, is probed in various majority environments of diverse cultural make-up in the course of his adventures and never fails the test.

So let us take the *Ábel*-trilogy in hand again and see what changes *Ábel*'s Székely-Hungarian identity does or does not undergo in the post-Trianon world as the story takes him from the Székely Land countryside of the Hargita-mountain pinewoods (Nature) through "the country" (of Transylvania) to America and back to Székely Land. Let us examine what it is that ensures his firmness in resisting identity colonization, what his identity reflexes are, and what role of his identity backbone plays in shaping his attitudes³—in times when (as a result of the Treaty of Trianon) his Székely-Hungarian community is subjected to the assimilative pressure exerted by hegemonic Romanian majority rule. Does intercultural communication function here in open and closed multicultural space and what forms does it assume? Is the "I" identity of the individual enough or the sustaining strength of "we" identity is indispensable too (Jan Assmann's well-known terms)? How do the forms of cultural mimicry appear in various situations of assimilation/identity colonization in *Ábel*'s case? In search of possible answers I will apply some insights of Homi K. Bhabha's colonial—postcolonial theory, Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory and national identity, as well as Karl Erik Rosengren's theory of communication to what appear to me to be three *Ábelian* forms of Székely identity in the three multicultural worlds of the trilogy.

Writer and editor Dezső László appreciated the figure of *Ábel* with these words in 1935: "Ábel is the most real Székely that anybody has ever written about. The eternal Székely today" (László, 1935, p. 156). *Ábel* did indeed become a symbolic figure who stands for the Székely people, inside and outside the Székely community. Many tried their hand at grasping the Székely mind, but none succeeded as Tamási did. The author of *Ábel* confessed: "it is difficult to achieve satisfaction, but not impossible [. . .]. I took my hero to the Hargita where he could do anything in his distress, poor soul, nobody cursed him as there was no social protocol on the Hargita, nor structured religion, nor moral obligation that obliges from the top down only. There *Ábel* could do as he pleased; moreover, one could take delight in the beautiful way he suffered! With no social reasons to blame!" (Tamási, 1934, p. 116). But after the formative, character-building experience of the Hargita, he soon finds himself submerged in society at home (in the country—mostly represented by "the city") and abroad (America). He sets out from Székely Land and that is where he returns. His journey commences in his native village in all the three cases, and that is where he returns after the three journeys of the three novels.

Ábel keeps his peace of mind in all the adventures he encounters; appeals to his Székely resourcefulness when in trouble; stares in wonder at the world but would not let it change him in any way—all in the best Székely spirit. No wonder that he came to symbolize Székely mentality, Székely national consciousness even.

¹ Only the first novel of the trilogy exists in English translation: *Abel Alone* (1966) (*Ábel a rengetegben*, 1932). The other two are: *Abel az országban* (*Ábel in the Country*, 1934) and *Abel Amerikában* (*Ábel in America*, 1934).

² The Székelys are a subgroup of Hungarians living in Székely Land, south-eastern Transylvania. As a result of the Treaty of Trianon (1920), Transylvania, with Székely Land in it, was annexed to Romania.

³ These are notions introduced by me in former papers, but they are self-explanatory and will be clear in the course of the present study.

If there is a change the Székely boy undergoes under the influence of the numerous adventures he is exposed to in the course of the three trying journeys, it is that the ties that bind him to his native land become stronger, and he comes to like his native village more and more. He preserves his identity under any circumstances, looks the world straight in the face: in spite of all the disappointments and frustrations, he is guided by his internal principles when passing judgement because with him it is an innate demand to interpret the world for himself. László's words apply here too: "The more you have the courage to be yourself, without shame and concealment, the more you endure. You are different from other people, it is no problem, do not want to be like everyone else, as the world would not need you any more" (László, 1935, p. 156). Through the identity-mentality just described, Ábel's symbolic function becomes emblematic for Székely-Hungarians as the highest artistic expression of the Transylvanian cultural policy and self-preservation program of Hungarianness. (Károly Kós would call it "Transylvaniam," although Tamási is not a Transylvanist in the Károly Kós sense of the term.⁴) In this view, the Hungarians of Transylvania must rely on their own resources; endure on the land of Transylvania; must be continuously aware of, and feel the significance of, what is happening; must lead a modern life yet preserve what they were created to be.

The three scenes of Ábel's journeys are three stages of Tamási's life: from Farkaslaka to Kolozsvár then on to America. Much of what is presented in the novel is based on the author's personal experience—perhaps one reason why the novel is so thoroughly "Ábelian." Even from overseas, Tamási conducted vigorous correspondence with fellow writers and friends back home, with Elek Benedek among them. It is in one such exchange of letters that Ábel's personality, which was taking shape around that time, crops up for the first time: "I cannot, not even approximately, depict what is burning in me. I am in a constant state of agitation, and if I were afire without a single letter, it gives me painful extasy that way too. Expatriation has done good to me: much trouble, but new worlds open up for me, not only in breadth but also in depth. Here I am much more intensively aware of my Székelyhood and of its all-beautiful blinks of lightnings (Tamási, 1923, p. 47)." These sentences anticipate Ábel's America-experience.

Ábel of the Hargita: the natural Székely of Nature

The decisive moment of the boy's life comes when his parents resolve to send him up to the Hargita, to serve as the guard of the forests of the bank of Csíkszereda. This was a year after the Trianon decision, the latter being registered by him in simple words, in the best Ábelian fashion in the opening sentence of the trilogy as: "a year after the Rumanians had adopted us Székelys" (Tamási, 1966, p. 7).⁵ Up to that point the life of the Szakállas family revolved around coping with everyday problems and around questions of poverty and subsistence in the closed Székely village. There was nothing extraordinary about it; it was not more demanding on him than on other Székely boys of his age-group. The dimensions of his life are expanded with his "rule on the Hargita" (Tamási, 2011, p. 46. Trans. E. D.⁶), paradoxically exactly when he is left alone in "the wilderness" (the literal translation of the Hungarian original of *Abel Alone*—*Ábel a rengetegben*—is "Ábel in the Wilderness"⁷).

There are no people around, and it is in the company of his dog Flea that his education concerning life and the hardships of every day starts.

⁴ The literary Transylvaniam of Károly Kós incorporated all Hungarians of Transylvania while the Áron Tamási of "The Eleven" always wanted to be Székely. ("Tizenegyek antológiája" [Anthology of Eleven] was the first post-Trianon Hungarian literary anthology in Transylvania, with eleven contributors, published in Kolozsvár in 1923.) The Helikon-community enterprise that was created under the aegis of Transylvaniam desisted publishing Tamási's *Címeresek* (The Armored), saying it is detrimental to the interests of the ruling elite.

⁵ The 1966 translation may have put a damp on the original here for (Communist) ideological reasons ("a románok kézhez vettek minket" means: "we were delivered to the Romanians"—the metaphor of a delivered ethnic community is based on the idea of mail (parcel) delivery, even suggestive of a sender in the background, Trianon).

⁶ The official translation loses its Ábelean flavor when "a Hargitán való uralkodásom" (he "rules" the Hargita in that he is in charge, commissioned by the bank, as the guard of the forests) is rendered simply as "my stay on the Hargita" (Tamási, 1966, p. 37).

⁷ The translator was right in deciding against "wilderness" in the English title and thereby against the intertextual hint to the Bible, since the Hungarian Biblical equivalent of the English "wilderness" is "puszta" ("lowland plains," "desert"—while the Hargita is a mountain covered with trackless, vast forests). It must also be noted that the English translation dropped the diacritical mark from Ábel's name. He became "Abel" in *Abel Alone*.

Strange as it is, it is in this environment, where the human element is mostly absent, that his human relationships begin to expand: dealing with people who come out to do business with Ábel, the forest guard (to buy timber) teaches him to recognize, gradually, different types of people. A young adolescent, he realizes that *others* decided about his life (his father and the bank manager) and that must end. Although he agrees with the father's and the director's decision, "For the future, I'm resolved to live like a man and use my own head." He does not want to be "like a leaf torn from a tree, swept this way by one wind, that way by another" (Tamási, 1966, p. 31). That the natural little man is also a man of Nature is also indicated by how the mighty challenges of Nature in the Hargita wilderness bother him less than the people buying timber from him. Despite all odds, he can maintain harmony with Nature; it is with people that discord creeps into this world. He does indeed need his common sense and cunning mind as those encounters with money and cheating of various degrees as well as with the domain of beliefs and national issues start shaping his views of the world step by step. His belief in God is unrelated to church. He is inclined to believe in the power of Nature (which he may call divine, without conceiving of them as identical) rather than in the servants of God. So much so that he is bent on avoiding situations when he should defend priests. Here is what happens when the idea of the "army chaplain" comes up apropos of Ábel's camp-bed. "Where there're priests, there's everything," the man declared.

I did not want to contradict him as I was afraid he would say something bad about priests, and then I'd have to defend them." (Tamási, 2011, p. 41. Trans. E. D.⁸)

As regards Ábel's attitudes concerning money and power, he is aware of the power that resides in money, but would not wish to become possessed with longing for it. Despite being a man of Nature, and with the Szakállas family's struggle with poverty behind him, though, he accepts the necessity that money *is* needed to get along in life. Be he never comes under the spell of money. He does obtain money with natural trickery (extra income, that is, in relation to what he is paid by the bank). It can be seen as another manifestation of the natural man of Nature in his dealing with the world of financial transactions: a natural gesture that ignores the system; the vast trackless forest of the Hargita belongs to everyone after all, it is his too, why could he not sell some timber and make his own profit by it. But he is not a believer in almighty money as we have seen. Money comes to him easily, and it is just as natural for him to part with it. When he must lend financial assistance to his fellow human beings, he is outright open-handed. We can detect the natural morale of the collective behind it: he is unguarded when accepting the given word when doing business with no written IOU. The real guaranty for him is the power of the given word. It does not occur to him that he is being deceived, something that does indeed happen (and the natural community reflex of the belief in the given word proves to be naive gullibility). The latter circumstance anticipates the world in which Ábel finds himself after the vast forests of the Hargita. In other words: "the city" (or "society," by the Brassói Lapok [Brassó Papers] title of the second novel of the trilogy⁹) penetrates the vast forest. These experiences make Ábel notice, to his astonishment, that the wheels of the world do not turn on close-to-nature community morale. But he would not be the resourceful Ábel that he is if quick adjustment could not develop strategies of defense in him.

He runs into the national minority issue in a not less Ábelian fashion. Raised in a closed Székely community, the boy has no sense of nationality differences. He approaches everyone as a human individual, or, let us put it this way: he does not treat otherness as other where he senses it. For him it is natural if some speak a different language or speak broken Hungarian. He does not stereotype Romanian people in negative ways. Consequently, he does not know how to relate when he is approached with the arrogance of Romanian *national* majority.¹⁰ He does not understand but tries to handle situations of conflicting nationality with humour when running into them at first.

⁸ Here is another outrageous example of Communist censorship. The words "priest" and "chaplain" were apparently ideologically undesirable for Communists, so 1966 *Abel Alone* replaces the "army chaplain" with "camp-follower" and "priests" with "women"—"he'd say something unpleasant about women, and then I'd have to defend them" (Tamási, 1966, pp. 32-33). This is not only a criminal abuse of the original Hungarian text, but it also falsifies the character of Ábel, making him out to be a misogynist which he is not at all.

⁹ The second volume of the trilogy was published in installments by Brassói Lapok (as the first had been) in 1933, with the title *Ábel a társadalomban* (Ábel in Society). The three novels were republished by Révai Irodalmi Intézet (Révai Literary Institute) as a trilogy in Budapest, in 1937.

¹⁰ National majority, since the Romanian population represents a majority in the country as a whole (Transylvania included). But inside Székely Land where Ábel lives, the Székelys are the majority.

When his first visitor introduces himself as Ábel's Romanian enemy, the Székely, inexperienced in ethnic conflict, responds with the noble naturalness of someone who is ready to gather the whole world to his broad breast.

"I can't see any foes."

"But I am Rumanian," said Fusulan,¹¹ looking at me suspiciously.

"You may be for all I care; I shan't accept you."

"Won't you accept me?"

"As an enemy, I mean." (Tamási, 1966, p. 79)

Ábel's response communicates a mentality socialized in the closed space of cultural homogeneity (Székely-Hungarian, with no Romanian living in his village); consequently, he knows no majority vs. minority cultural difference (not yet). Besides, as a basic characteristic, he discusses everything with himself first, the response meant for an external partner is thought out in internal communicative space. This is his natural way to exist and to communicate. It is not a strategy, nor an internal terrain where he retreats in moments when identities clash or when losing a battle in such a fight. The natural Ábel of Nature comes into view also in the terse simplicity which describes him in this inner communicative space: his manner of internal deliberation is marked by reflexes of natural and essentialistic articulation.

We can talk about intercultural communication only on the individual level in his case here since in the first space (in the vast mountain forests) of his epistemological journey towards self-knowledge and on the way to getting to know the world, only this form of communication is possible (communication, for example, with Fuszulán, the bank cashier, the Romanian policeman). Ábel is successful in interpersonal communication, using a technique of conflict-avoidance, talking around it. He is sincere in asserting his opinion, but takes the sharp edge off a potential conflict with humour. He steers clear of unnecessary confrontation and does not argue unless his self-esteem or his sense of honour requires it. In the latter cases he is ready to take a stand for his truth, but never with the intention to hurt. This strategy does work in the interpersonal space of communication; it does not generate irreconcilable conflicts. With Suryélán, the Romanian policeman (who is made to move in with him to protect the bank's lawful property) it is a series of what can be called allegorical communication. Broken as the policeman's Hungarian is, he does speak the language. His very name is indicative of how he as a Transylvanian Romanian used it as the current political regime expected him to: "In the Magyar world, it was first [the family name]; now it went to end"¹² (Tamási, 1966, p. 101). They do not talk much to each other, but in those few words of communication there is a struggle going on (whose is the bed, whose is the house, where to draw the lines of responsibilities). One suspects it is a microcosmic variation on the theme of the post-Trianon intercultural warfare. The Romanian policeman, instead of supporting the young boy, who was employed by the bank, by keeping order, ousts him from his house—like Romanian rule ousts Hungarian-Székelys from their living space as it were. The message conveyed allegorically targets us, receivers outside the novel. Ábel comprehends it inside the storyworld, and he in turn transmits it, wrapped in another allegory, to the person whose power he would have reasons to fear.

He bravely asks the Romanian policeman if he knows what a cuckoo-bird is and what its nature is. When the answer is eventually negative, Ábel responds, allegorically, with an intercultural truth: the cuckoo "goes into the nests of other birds as if it was his own" (Tamási, 1966, p. 103). This the intruder Romanian "housemate" does not condescend to answer. Nor does he comprehend Ábel's allegory as it is quite natural to him that, as he wields power and represents the majority nation, he can afford to behave like the cuckoo does.

Their joint struggle with the eagle can be regarded as yet another allegory since the bird shot by the policeman can be seen as what springs up as an association: the Austrian heraldic bird, itself perhaps a reference to the post-Trianon falling apart of the Monarchy. Two of Transylvania's nationalities (the Romanian policeman and the Hungarian Ábel) are battling the "Austrian bird," and defeat it, both having their share in the fight. They both fall ill too, and nearly die of food-poisoning (having eaten the meat of the baked and roasted eagle). But the bullying nature of the stronger manifests itself against the weaker even when they are both in trouble.

¹¹ The name is spelt "Fuszulán" in the original.

¹² In Romanian the Christian name comes first.

The suffering endured with policeman Surgyelán became the master lesson of Ábel's life in the vast forests of the Hargita and the chief motivating force behind his decision to leave the Hargita: "the time I'd lived with the gendarme billowed darkly in my wounded heart. Şurghelan the gendarme, who tormented me ceaselessly, who made me eat the stinking eagle-flesh and made me sick with it" (Tamási, 1966, p. 130).

In isolation on the Hargita, group communication is out of the question, thus Ábel cannot be tested in it. But the thought gathering head in him on the Hargita is that perhaps it is because of the Cains that we have Abels, so he arrives at the decision to go to the city, accompanied by his dog, Flea. The reason can be read as his summing up of his development on the Hargita: he goes to the city "[t]o find my brother Cain, who causes all the trouble for us Abels" (Tamási, 1966, p. 168).

He finds his Cain in his cultural experience. The naive Ábel of the vast mountain forests does not realize that he has in fact met Cain already, who can be found in several layers of the trilogy. We are dealing with a Cain-idea of several components; Cainness is approached through more factors than one: it can be personified or can be an alienating life-style as well. Thus the Cain-Able dimension is itself ripe with multiple meanings.

Tamási's Ábel is not a man of cultural mimicry in dealing with his Cain. His characteristic mimicry is the playfulness of talking around things, a genuine Székely disposition in the first place. Mimicking Nature is everyday tactics in the forest-wilderness as he lives a life whose relation to Nature is symbiotic. Society is remote and mostly absent here so there is no need for him to fall back on any form or stage of cultural mimicry. As he steps out onto the social stage more and more, and is confronted with a large multicultural city (outside Székely Land but still inside Transylvania), later on with multicultural society (in America), the problematic of cultural mimicry becomes foregrounded more and more, but assuming forms and moving through stages that cannot be described with Homi Bhabha's stages of cultural mimicry.

Small-community Ábel and post-Trianon multicultural large community: the natural man of Nature and the politicalization of identity in "the city"

Ábel, after his voluntary leave of the Hargita, sets out to the city in the second volume of the trilogy. On his way there, at Madéfalva railroad station, the realization dawns upon him that he has reached an important station of his life. It can be no mere chance that Tamási decided Ábel should step out into the wide world at Madéfalva of all Transylvanian places. When he leaves the closed community of his small Székely native village and the mountain-woodland wilderness of the Hargita, he enters Székely history through the gateway of Madéfalva, symbolically speaking. The incident at Madéfalva came down as one of the most traumatic events in Székely collective memory.¹³ This lends a historic dimension to a place (Madéfalva) where the boy is offered a cigarette, a gesture that—to him—indicates that he reached a milestone in his personal life (crossing a threshold in growing up to become a man). But the way he adds: "That moment I felt that I was at a station, no question" (Tamási, 2011, p. 235), with what seems to be an authorial plus of dramatic irony, the reader senses a hint of history. By indirectly evoking a tragic scene of Székely history, Madéfalva places the Ábel story in a broader context. It is at this station that he meets a Romanian track-watchman and fully comprehends the true misery of minority existence. He did have the bitter experience of who was the master and who was the servant in Transylvanian intercultural existence when he met the Romanian gendarme on the Hargita, ture. Still, Surgyelán was only *one* Romanian. What the Romanian track-watchman teaches him, though, is that Romanian hegemonic arrogance generally applies. It is here that he has the first taste of belonging to a minority which became a victim to discrimination. It is for the first time that he has to suffer the humiliation of "Shut up, minoritar!" (= Shut up, minority) (Tamási, 2011, p. 260). He does not understand the Romanian word, but stress and intonation make it clear that the watchman of railroad tracks (but in this instance also intercultural "tracks") just humiliated him to the dust.

This confuses Ábel, who has excelled in interpersonal intercultural communication up to that point. As if his communicational habit were suddenly inadequate: humour and shrewd retort, that is. He is startled, unable to manage the situation as he always thought that "the poor all belong together, and if you need to fight with somebody, it must be the poor against the rich, and the good man against the bad man" (Tamási, 2011, p. 260)—be the poor man Hungarian or Romanian. That is to say, this is the principle by which he would judge the world, supposing hegemonic arrogance let him.

¹³ It was at Madéfalva that the Austrian imperial army massacred hundreds of protesting Székelys in 1764.

The Székely boy's reaction comes as a surprise for the Romanian watchman, who was convinced that what he said was natural and true. He feels that this Székely of sovereign spirit needs to be given fuller information: "But keep it in mind, we are the rulers of this country: Romanians! Who, up to this time, for so many years were living in subjugation and were practically not allowed to express our feelings. But now we are free to! But as we were then, you should be now! Have a taste of oppression, and you should not be allowed to express your feelings!" (Tamási, 2011, p. 260).

What follows from an intercultural position like this is that a playful-humorous repartee will no longer do; previously acquired reflexes of communication are bound to fail. Thus the encounter with the track-watchman's "fuller information" does take place, but Ábel does not comprehend it, nor does he accept it. He does not take up the gauntlet, but does not yield to the track-watchman either. He does not take offence, does not protest, but does not leave it unreflected either: "I did not want to hurt your feelings, Your Honour. I just thought that we both earn our living with work and strive forward. But now I realize that Your Honour is Romanian, who is allowed to rule, while I am a poor Székely-Hungarian, who is not allowed to express his feelings" (Tamási, 2011, p. 261). This is already declared national identity, also exhibiting Ábel's strategy of its management: it is cloaked with protective disguise. It is also an identity management which does not yet betray signs of mimicry in the sense Bhabha defines the word. Later, in a letter to his father, Ábel attaches a comment to his confrontation with what the essence of the city is for minority Székely-Hungarians in post-Trianon Transylvania: "the track-watchman declared the governmental thesis, according to which the Romanians bequeathed the place behind the door to us" (Tamási, 2011, p. 310).

The intercultural space of communication augments around Ábel. Arriving from a close-to-Nature, closed community in the intracultural sphere of a large community, he is involved in a series of situations that are, or have the value of, group-level communication. After all, the traveling dentist is Jewish; the man from the big city¹⁴ is not the same as a Székely from the Hargita; not mentioning the Transylvanian Saxons; and the bullying singular policeman is succeeded by the "sziguranta", i.e., the police force as the state machinery behind majority cultural pressure.

Ábel shields his Székely identity amidst the city's cultural diversity too. And he has a price to pay for it: there is nothing for him but to recourse, by degrees, to the strategy of mimicry. The superb nature of such identity management lies in always regarding the communicative partner, whom he approaches, as a human being, an individual, abstracting him or her from the group as it were.

This is the only way—reducing the group to an individual—that enables Ábel to communicate on the group level. As someone who handles communication on the individual level masterfully, by detaching the individual from the group, he handles group communication on the individual level.

A clear example of individual intercultural communication treated at group-level value is when Ábel is interested in the Jewish community ritual and makes friends with a Jewish man (and communicates with him, as an individual with an individual), who secures him entry to the Jewish baths. Intercultural curiosity makes him dress like a member of the group and don a false beard so as to get close to the ritual ceremony. This way Ábel's encounter with Jewishness is Ábelian too, propelled by cultural openness (one of his characteristic features through the whole trilogy). He finds a world which is not his, but wants to understand it: to get inside and to have an inside view of it. He has a dip in the water too, but this makes the false beard come off, and the well-meaning attempt at cultural understanding will end in fun, a farcical intercultural adventure in fact, if you like. And here comes his inability to communicate with the group: instead of facing the consequences, he escapes; whereas he can communicate with the individual, he cannot with the group.

The awareness that Hungarian city-dwellers of Transylvanian large communities living outside the Székely-Hungarian block can no longer rely on what Ábel still can: that in his own community he has the protective consciousness of the whole Székely-Hungarian community as a support. It means that Ábel being a minority is ideological, through a political determinism; but he is not in minority in terms of numbers of inhabitants since the Székelys are the majority inside the Transylvanian subregion of Székely Land. When he meets big-city Hungarians, whose minority fate is that of the real, literal minority in terms of numbers of inhabitants (the majority is Romanian in the city), this expands his space of communication further.

¹⁴ Not specified, but most likely Kolozsvár, the capital city of "the country" (of Transylvania).

The life-story of the Hungarian teacher, who arrives in the city from the Transylvanian diaspora outside Székely Land, affords Ábel a close view of the big political games that derail the life of the small man. What happens is that the teacher—at the instigation of the Hungarian parties—repudiates the Romanian oath of allegiance, as a form of resistance to the Romanian pressure for assimilation. The decision costs him his job, and he is exposed to existential peril. Ábel tries to put himself into the teacher's shoes. He even grants the teacher—who has only the symbols of patriotism to hold onto (the symbols are all that is left for diaspora Hungarians)—that it is the national anthem that patriotism springs from (for Ábel, patriotism is existence rooted in the motherland and the mother tongue).

But high political games are way over Ábel's head. What the above contexts indicate is that our Ábel is a Székely boy of "I" identity—to put it in Assmannian terminology—but for him "we" identity does not work on social level. It is the concept of protecting the (Székely-Hungarian) group from being silenced (by Romanian oaths of allegiance for example), a concept that becomes a political strategy in the program of the Hungarian parties that will in fact destroy the individual (in this case the teacher). The strategy whose aim is to prevent the silencing of the (Székely-Hungarian) group and thus protect them from the majority pressure, which is out to assimilate them, turns out to be self-defeating as it does itself lead to the group falling silent.¹⁵ As Ábel hears about the subsequent impossibility of Hungarian culture and identity in the Transylvanian diaspora and about the self-defeating strategy of extant Hungarian minority parties, also while philosophizing about patriotism, the main question the novel is asking is taking shape in him: to what end are we in this world? The thought can be regarded as the epistemological yield of his intercultural encounter with big-city Hungarians and the Hungarian diaspora. While talking to the teacher, the boy makes no secret of the fact that although he is not living in the diaspora, is not one of the big-city Hungarians for whom minority existence became a reality and is aware of the supportive Székely-Hungarian block and the Hargita behind him, and these maintain solid national identity stable in him (it is this very solidity of their identity that has been wrecked in diaspora and big-city Hungarians¹⁶), still, he too has moments of insecurity. As opposed to those other two kinds, he does have his fixed point to hang on to. Yet, it is more and more difficult to grasp and hold on to as intrecultural space expands: "True, it often seemed as if I had known, but then, as soon as I took one step forward, what I previously thought was not true anymore" (Tamási, 2011, p. 362). Nevertheless, his patriotism and sense of identity are still real and not a symbolic replacement (as in the teacher's case), nor just their strategy of dubious outcome (the Hungarian political parties).

Since the time he met the track-watchman, Ábel knows that by disguising his Székely-Hungarian identity, he can protect it from hegemonic pressure. But he is not exposed to such pressure in the city, so, whereas the epistemological journey that he travelled on the road of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world so far, prepared him for the strategy of mimicry, his encounter with the city does not compel him to resort to that strategy. He is not compelled to protect his culture. In the post-Trianon Transylvanian city the irresolvable antagonism incited by the state among different ethnic groups of the population did not (yet) exist, certainly not in multinational Kolozsvár, at least not in the social sphere in which Ábel moves.

He could have attained different experiences, true. For the main character of contemporary author Sándor Kacsó's *Vakvágányon* (On a Trail Track, 1930) the replacement of Hungarian academics with Romanians at the Hungarian university and the way Romanian state machinery makes Hungarian spiritual-intellectual life in Transylvania impossible—are personal experience. Ilona Kovács of Rózsa Igáncz's *Anyanyelve magyar* (Native Language: Hungarian, 1937) encounters the same phenomenon at high school. It goes without saying for unschooled Ábel that there is no way for him to stumble upon the issue. His conflicts are not nationality-based in nature, his Hungarian identity is not jeopardized, there is no need for strategies of identity-crisis management, and his intercultural communication does work on the interpersonal level only.

That is to say, he remains firm in the city, exactly as his dear pine tree does on the Hargita. While his environment continuously adds to his education, the world is expanding around him, and he keeps developing as a result, he remains the same Székely boy, who sets out from the Hargita to see the world. His sense of humour is constant, his thinking is logical and sly in a manner peculiar to him, and his phrasing is tersely expressive.

¹⁵ This phenomenon is present in two other Transylvanian novels of the period, György Böződi's *Romlás* (Ruin, 1940) and József Nyírő's *Néma küzdelem* (Silent Struggle, 1944).

¹⁶ In the interwar period Kolozsvár (the unnamed big city of the second Ábel book) was not diaspora yet (which it is today).

In the end, he turns his back on the city too, to return to his village so as to be recharged with energies of home and to get ready for an even longer journey that will take him to America, the transatlantic country of many cultures.

7.3. Uncolonizable identity: Ábel in the multicultural world¹⁷

In his native village, Csíkcsicsó, Ábel is making systematic preparations (studies hard) for the journey overseas. The local reformed-church minister supports him, teaches him, polishes him, provides him with German and English dictionaries while fortifying him in his faith, and introducing him to—with Tamás's expression quoted above—"structured religion." He sends him off with these words: "whatever happens, you will return to this land, where your mother was laid to rest and your father will, and, generally, our Székely people live and will rest" (Tamási, 2011, p. 445). This corresponds to what follows from Ábel's nature as a matter of course. After all, the manner in which he leaves the Hargita to set out to "the country"/the city in the second volume is indicative, already on the first pages of the new volume, of the road he will follow. If he must choose between the law and his father, he will decide in favour of the latter; but if he has to choose the law too, then, he tells his father: "Don't worry, because you will be the first paragraph forever!" (Tamási, 2011, p. 231). The minister hands over to him a pouchful of native soil: "a little native soil so that you never forget your mother land"—a gesture and words that "made him suddenly so strong" that he felt he was not afraid of anybody or anything any more (Tamási, 2011, p. 445).

These together—the *father* as "first paragraph" and the *motherland*—are no less than cultural heritage itself, the "we" identity of collective memory. And Ábel will need these provisions for the journey in "a zigzagged world" (Tamási, 2011, p. 269) since, in proportion to the distance, which is growing between him and his native village (he is riding a train across Europe to the sea harbour), he gets in closer and closer acquaintance with the various nationalities of "the country." This way intercultural space expands even more, with his traveling companions of Germans, Saxons, Jews, and emigrating Hungarians (of both the parent-state and Transylvania). And obstacles that hinder intercultural communication range over a larger and larger scale, from strangeness of language use to intercultural tensions.

Making himself understood in Hungarian *intracultural* space presents no problem to him, he communicates successfully with cultural otherness on the train. Should intercultural conflict bob up, he dismisses it with a joke, laughs it away: "Edmond and blond Rudolf played Germany and looked spikily at those who spoke Hungarian, which they absolutely did not do themselves. But me and Györffy, a tailor's mate, hoisted the Hungarian flag and insisted on uttering Hungarian words even when they were empty" (Tamási, 2011, p. 463). The Székely-Hungarian is self-conscious in Ábel at this time already. This manifests itself at every step, in words and action alike. It is there, together with his characteristic humor, in the way he is joking around too: once he is in the mood of kiddig with his companion, he refers to the hornet as "Hungarian" even if, that very moment, the train is passing through Poland.

Real intercultural communicative breakdown sets in when his sense of national identity is hurt. And it happens there and then, in the closed space of the railway compartment, among individuals with varying cultural heritage and collective communicative reflexes. The small groups and alliances mapping the pattern of the conflicting or less conflicting intercultural communication of cultures are now making the joint communicative effort, as it were, to manage intercultural tensions or to tense those strings further (Ábel sticking together with Györffy; and Edmond with Rudolf). The Saxon "group" does not understand the humor of the Hungarian "group," nor do they want to as they regard the latter as their enemies. In an acrimonious moment of the argumentation they call Ábel "a Székely tramp": "Because you always lie!" shouted Edmond. "It is your lie that we are the same, but it is not so, as I'm stronger than anyone else! It is your lie that there must be peace, but that's not so either, because the stronger party must be on top and not the twisting mind!" (Tamási, 2011, p. 468)

Ábel's interpersonal communication that had worked so well up to that point broke down in that situation. Disagreement is turning serious here: "for the first time in my life, no joke that could laugh it away could come out of my heart, nor could the kind of nasty word he would have deserved" (Tamási, 2011, p. 469).

¹⁷ In Ábel's days (the first half of the 20th century) America was not yet multicultural in the sense she would be towards the end of the century. I still introduce the term here since even the melting-pot America of many/multi cultures exhibited cultural *tolerance* (at least as far as European immigrant cultures are concerned), a novelty for Ábel, who arrived from an *intolerant* political formation of many cultures.

So, in the best Székely fashion, he reaches for the jack-knife in his pocket, opens it, and puts it down beside him without a word; i.e., he moves communication from a failing verbal level to a metacommunicational one, as if intercultural tension started to turn into a severe physical conflict.

Tangible in the scene is that it is the nationalities of the quondam Monarchy that clash here. German, Saxon, and Hungarian national identity are baring their fangs, each asserting his cultural stereotypes, and in his own fashion at that (with offensive cultural arrogance or with offended concern for culture). All in a railway train compartment where you cannot get up and walk out: tightly sealed space of communication in closed physical space.¹⁸

Even if Hungarian bravado may be also part of the pocket-knife scene, Ábel's sense of his Hungarian identity is unwavering, he does not reach for the guise of mimicry. He does not have to, as he had to when he, as a member of a minority community, met the Romanian track-watchman in a closed space of a different nature (closed in a different sense), inside the borders of a country (which locks the door of minority existence upon its minority). The cultural stereotypes of a collapsed empire that were dragged along for centuries clash on this train. But there is no machinery of state power behind anybody this time. Everybody is minority here if you like. What is more, Ábel is on his way towards being a minority when he is on his way to America, even if the American "melting pot" definition of "minority" (as the US still liked to define itself in Ábel's days) is radically different from the way Romanian policy of assimilation conceives of it.

When Ábel opens his pocket-knife, communicative silence ensues, which allows Ábel a little time for inner reflection. And the basis of comparison is Hargita again: "I examined my mind on human nature in that silence, but the more intensive and eager my search was to find a straight road somewhere, the more I had to realize that this is a much vaster forest than that of the Hargita" (Tamási, 2011, p. 469). "Only one thing was certain: that there are rats and skylarks among people too; and even this one thing I learned from my dog. [. . .] in the absence of the dog I need to catch the rat and fly the skylark myself" (ibid.).

Let me remark at this point briefly that in *Szülőföldem* (My Native Land, 1939), another novel by Tamási, it also happens that communicative silence sets in. It is also in the compartment of a train, on its way from Kolozsvár to Segesvár. Three Romanians and one Hungarian express standoffish ethnic strangeness, a refusal to consider even the possibility of communication in the closed compartment—not in knife-opening tension, rather, with metacommunicative signs. As if they were saying—supposing they could address us in our theoretical categories—nothing "inter" in the communication, please, everybody had better stay inside the closed compartment of their ethnicity.

As if—back in Ábel's train compartment now—the macrocultural hostilities that "contract" microalliances were turning minority groups against each other after all, whereas (paradoxically in the present context but naturally otherwise) small alliances that are capable of bridging otherness are formed on the basis of shared cultural memory. This teaches Ábel that common fate can make itself felt in cultures that are utterly alien for each other; and, at some fundamental level, it is possible to bring to the surface something that connects one human individual with another. Following a short, simple-sentence attempt to communicate (in German, a foreign language for both of them), the Székely-Hungarian young man remarks to the Russian merchant—who is also a minority (a Russian in Poland), but shows no willingness for communication: "how different we two are, yet how much the same" (Tamási, 2011, p. 485).

The recognition of sameness in the two different kinds also implies the idea that it is sameness which is of two different kinds—a new element in the Bildungstrilogy called *Ábel*. In Ábel's epistemological journey, that is. Why can we say that? Ábel has already been enlightened regarding Romanian ethnic discrimination, which he already sensed on the Hargita when he came into contact with Fuszulán and Sergyelán. Then the cruel track-watchman confronted him with it. He is also fully aware of the social differences from the beginning: he sets out in "the country" with the intention that "I should always stand up for the rights of the poor and the oppressed" (Tamási, 1966, p. 168). He is consistent in relating to the human individual in a world so deeply divided by discrimination and huge social differences in a true democratic spirit. In short, for him every human being is the same, he knows "good and bad people only" (Tamási, 2011, p. 654). His democratic view of the world is characteristic through the whole trilogy.

¹⁸ In József Nyírő's novel *Az én népem* (My People, 1935) the whole ethnic group communicates in closed space.

This is the view he voices to the Romanian track-watchman, to the Saxons Edmond and Rudolf, to the Russian Leupold living in Poland, and later to the American bank manager when the latter reprimands him because he saw Ábel “with a Negro.” It is one of the main components of his identity backbone molded on the Hargita (Hargita in a broad sense, also as Székely cultural heritage). And sameness perceived in multifariousness is what warrants the noncolonizability of identity.

But sameness has its own diversity too, and Ábel finds some of those diverse manifestations scary. Such forms of manifestation are not the sameness of difference however. While he holds that all people are the same in a universal, democratic sense, they remain individual and sovereign, with distinct cultural identity and with the plus that individuates them and makes them personalities. But reaching the shores of America, he comes across the sameness that melting-pot ideology inspires. Tamási conveys it through the symbology of dressing: “All those men wore straw-hats that were white and hard as if they were not various people but some homogeneous company that came to receive us so early” (Tamási, 2011, p. 488). Uniformity that bespeaks of melting-pot mentality is certainly one level on which identity can be taken as colonized. Nevertheless, it is a world of difference from assimilating aggression. It goes hand in hand with giving up cultural (today we would say multicultural) identity. It is only natural that someone with an unshakable sense of who he is, with an identity backbone, is taken aback by this. In Ábel’s disapproving astonishment at that first impression of America it is the Székely-Hungarian’s identity-anxiety that alarms him.

No wonder that he deems it essential to inform the customs officer what sort of a nation the Székely is: “Hungarian, only even better than that” (Tamási, 2011, p. 490). On hearing the customs people’s words that think little of his pouch of native soil, he becomes indignant: “this is also soil that yields in winter and summer [like American soil does]: wheat some of the time, other times thoughts” (Tamási, 2011, p. 490). He proudly explains his Székelyness to the medical team too because they have never heard about Ábel’s people and are not interested either: “I could not suddenly decide whether to blame myself for being a Székely, or to blame those who had never heard about us! But that didn’t stop me; rather, I simply said, promptly and rather curtly, that the Székelys are the oldest and shrewdest Hungarians, but also the most orphaned because they are not allowed to sit around the same table with the Hungarians” (Tamási, 2011, p. 494).

Then, in the New World, the shrewdest Székely-Hungarian drifts from employment to employment. It is Ábel himself who cannot stay long at the same place as he runs into conflicts, one after another. The essential difference in the New World is that the dissensions that arise are not generated by nationality issues as it used to happen on the Hargita, in the country, and in the course of his journey to America. And it is not because he finds himself in a melting pot, where he could have easily run into ethnic (if not nationality-based) conflicts as conflicts of that nature still divide a New World that was founded on the idea of all men having been created equal. Ábel has never been confronted with the skin-colour issue since discrimination in Transylvania is based on national(ity) status and not on the colour of the skin. And it is this mentality that brings him into trouble, when, for example, “the Negro doctor will also be fine” for him (Tamási, 2011, p. 646). On the other hand, when he hears a Philippino say that “the white man is no man” (Tamási, 2011, p. 544), he decides that even if it is physically impossible, in soul he will be stronger than anyone else who makes statements like this. Here again he goes by his principle that all people are the same. In other words, Ábel is not a racist, and cannot be turned into one. All in all, and irrespective of this, from the moment that he failed to communicate with the American customs officer in the best Hargita spirit, he feels that thoughts come differently in this country, and, most importantly, “the word is dead” (Tamási, 2011, pp. 490-91). The suggestion goes far beyond the fact that Ábel’s English is extremely primitive. The *Székely* “word” is dead in the sense that argumentation in the manner which is natural to the Székely turn of mind does not work in America.

Ethnically multi-coloured America accepts the individual with Székely identity, he is not pushed behind the door simply because of his Székely affiliation. But his social group is not there among the others. Uncle Gáspár, relative of Kelemen, the Csíkcsicsó reverend, to whom Kelemen directs Ábel is an Americanized Hungarian already. When Ábel, who hangs on to his Székelyhood more and more consciously, appeals to their mutual Székely origin as he needs Gáspár’s help, he is dumbfounded by the Americanized immigrant Hungarian’s reaction: “‘True, you are not my father, and we are not relatives either; still, there is one great thing that unites us to the end of our life. [. . .] ‘What is it,’ he asked. ‘It is that we are Székelys.’ He [Uncle Gáspár] laughed spitefully and immediately said: ‘I spit on it!’” (Tamási, 2011, p. 552).

Uncle Gáspár has reached the Yingerian level of “substitutive acculturation”¹⁹ (qtd. in Gyurgyik, 2001, p. 153). The eventual next step will necessarily be full assimilation—in his case voluntary and not as a result of aggressive external pressure. Thus, in the absence of a social group held together by Székely identity, Ábel’s “I” identity does not have the external support of a “we” identity in America. He meets Hungarian compatriots and keeps up a friendly relationship with them, and the common Hungarian language they use lends him a sense of security, true. But this is not enough, it is not the same as Székely-Hungarian group-support. When all is said and done, what he can rely on are his inner cultural-identity reflexes. But he has to protect that inner source with greater and greater care as he feels the multifarious world is tearing him apart.

Nor is he completely alone. In American Hungarian Miklós Toldi, who can recite János Arany’s *Toldi*²⁰ by heart he finds the string that resonates to Ábel’s Székely-Hungarianness. He will be the companion with whom Ábel can form the two-person “we” group. What amounts to much more than mere resonance: Ábel’s decision to return to his native land makes Toldi go back to Transylvanian Nagyszalonta, his native town, after sixteen years in America. After all, he adds, qualifying Ábel’s decision, obviously, “if a Székely does something, it cannot be wrong” (Tamási, 2011, p. 665). As for Ábel himself, his decision does have its long-ripening logic: “When I traveled in the country back home, and when I came here crossing foreign countries, what I continually experienced was that it is really not the best thing to be a Székely or Hungarian at all. Because it is a small nation, that one: much smaller than what it would deserve on the basis of its intelligence and humanness.” (Tamási, 2011, p. 553).

The atmosphere is culturally permissive, but for this son of “a too small nation” the tumultuous presence of cultures is too much. He feels his own culture cannot breathe here. The slowly waning sense of national identity in Hungarian Americans does not appear to bother him, but, in fact, he cannot accept the tendency. Giving up national and cultural identity in the process of assimilation is a terrifying spectacle that alarms him. The owner of the casino, whose God is money, is of Hungarian extraction (from Upper Hungary) and a more hopeless case when it comes to Hungarian identity than even Uncle Gáspár is: “there is not much to build on his Hungarianness since he puts a Hungarian outside the gate sooner than any other nationality” (Tamási, 2011, pp. 623-24). Although the most important “colour” of multi-coloured America is money, the first English word Ábel speaks in America, and he does avail himself of the opportunities America presents too, he is not the casino owner, not at all obsessed with the idea of becoming rich (he was not covetous of money in Transylvania either).

As opposed to the casino owners and uncle Gáspárs, he is not driven by the prospect of future fortune. The future of Székely-Hungarians engages his attention much more, on seeing the tremendously influential and transforming power America represents: “it is not only us who rule over the world, but the world rules over us too. That is, the priests may preach that God created man in his image, but varied life will have a say in it too: it will shape a Leopold out of one, rainbow-chasing Toldi out of another, and an American out of Gáspár Kelemen. And out of me? I wonder.” (Tamási, 2011, p. 512). The force with which America sucks identity into herself is an even bigger cause for worry for Ábel since, as already mentioned above, he has nowhere to turn for help in his efforts to maintain Székely-Hungarian identity. His “I” identity has no community (“we”-identity) support.

As we have seen, he does create his cultural “group” when he manages to intensify the sense of national identity and the sympathy for Székelys in Miklós Toldi. The two of them rescue their culture by taking it back home from what they feel to be cultural tumult; i.e., from where they could lose their cultural identity by reaching the stage that Milton M. Gordon calls “identification” (Gyurgyik 2011, p. 151). Yielding to either of the two potential threats (to be lost as one of the many cultures or to assimilate in America) would mean giving up cultural identity. Such a development, for whichever reason, would not be better than the colonization of cultural identity after all, considering the end-result, even if in a completely different sense and manner: if such a thing comes to pass in America, it would not be the outcome of dictatorial political pressure (the way identity colonization is taking place in Romania).

¹⁹ At the stage of substitutive acculturation, John Milton Yinger maintains, the dominant culture weakens the minority culture.

²⁰ The *Toldi* trilogy (an epic poem) by 19th century Hungarian poet János Arany.

The secret of noncolonizable identity is, again, the philosophy that travels from the Hargita to America and back and can offer solace even to Uncle Gáspár when the latter “spits” on his being Székely-Hungarian: “Do not worry a bit, because if somebody were to take away our Székelyness from us, we would have something left even then, something that would unite us forever. And it is nothing else than the great thing that we are human beings, both of us” (Tamási, 2011, p. 554).

Noble gesture, noble words, but they do not make him swerve from his purpose; quite the contrary, they give him impetus: those who are “united” in their Székely-Hungarian identity should protect and save, as a joint effort, their “we” identity. According to the best-known sentence of the trilogy, which became a household expression: “We are in the world to be at home somewhere in it” (Tamási, 2011, p. 663). But real home is at home, in our own culture, in the cultural space of our “we” identity. And the Ábels cannot afford to lose that home: “The strange thought revolved about my head that this whole America is not true; the only truth is that I lost my beautiful and enchanting Transylvanian homeland” (Tamási, 2011, p. 516).

Ábel, who guards his national identity as his precious treasure is the highest artistic rendition of the Székely-Hungarian mentality. Áron Tamási put it into the following words in an intimate letter to his friend Elek Benedek.

“Then, as I did not kowtow to them, being an immigrant that I am, I do have some respect after all, which is a really good result if you take the American mentality that looks down upon everything European and presupposes that we did not yet see an automobile back home, nor is it possible to conduct a gentlemanly conversation in our language” (Tamási, 1924, p. 58).

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