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ARTICLE

The Human Factor: Living with and after Empire

Gábor Egry

Institute of Political History, Budapest, Nádor, Hungary
Email: egrygabor@freemail.hu

The article, as an afterword to the special issue *Navigating Post-Imperial Transitions*, uses the story of a Transylvanian Romanian and Greek Catholic family, the Pordeas, as an example of several key themes of the articles: managing difference within and after the empire, concrete consequences of international arrangements, agency of individuals in the transition. The Pordeas' extremely intense engagement and entanglement with the empire highlights that a key feature of imperial biographies, the skill of connecting milieus as a way of differentiated rule, was not limited to the high-ranking imperial bureaucrats; it was rather a knowledge important in lower educated strata of society. After 1918, within nation states that often consciously used techniques of imperial rule for their own consolidation, it opened upward mobility and sometimes global horizon for these people. However, the ability to create connections is just as important for any state facing internal difference as it was for empires, showing how much empire was created from below.

Jean-Marie Le Pen, the father of contemporary French radical right-wing, xenophobic and anti-immigrant politics, rocked French and European politics in 1984 by gaining ten seats in the European Parliament. The fourth-placed candidate on his party's list was Gustave A. Pordea, who was anything but a native Frenchman. Born in Hungarian Kolozsvár (Romanian: Cluj) in 1916, he left the Romanian diplomatic service in 1948 and recast himself as an academic teaching in France and the United States. Behind Pordea's candidacy was an open secret. The secret services of communist Romania (*Securitate*) wanted to have an agent in the European Parliament where issues of minority rights, mostly notably those of Hungarians in Romania, became part of the agenda. Pordea's role – in his seat allegedly bought for $500,000 – was to counter any allegations and undermine any political action protesting ethnic discrimination and supporting human and minority rights.[1]

Pordea had many talents that the dreaded *Securitate* could use. Bubuka – as he was colloquially known – had been a high society celebrity in Cluj towards the end of the 1930s. His graduation from the city's law school in 1938 had been widely reported in the local media, not least because his family was among the most distinguished in the city, equally well connected in Romanian and Hungarian circles.[2] Unlike his disgruntled peers who turned to the Iron Guard and hoped to secure a safe social standing by replacing 'foreigners', he immediately got a job at the directorate of Romania's largest iron and steel works in Reșița, where his father, Augustin Sr. (colloquially Guszti), was a member of the board of directors. His sister, Livia, was the wife of Reșița's general director and main shareholder, Max Ausnit. Although Ausnit became the victim of an antisemitic show trial in 1940 and lost Reșița

[1]István Bándi, 'Chapters on the Activities of the Emigration Department of the Romanian Intelligence from the Sixties to the Change of Regime', *National Security Review* 7, no. 2 (2021): 5–43. I'm grateful to Csongor Jánosi, who drew my attention to this case.

[2]'Ifjabb Pordea Gusztávot doktorrá avatták', *Ellenzék*, 28 June 1938, 8; 'Pordea Bubukát – doktorrá avatták', *Erdélyi Futár*, July 1938, 25.

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and his other holding, the *Titan – Nădrag – Călan* ironworks, they then lived comfortably but scandalously in France and Spain during and after the Second World War.[3] Gustave joined them when he emigrated, but from the 1960s he sent out feelers to the Romanian authorities, mostly inquiring about the conditions of a possible return to Bucharest. Supply and demand did not exactly match in this case, Gustave requesting he be provided with certain luxuries, such as a chambermaid, for his future life in socialist Bucharest. But, from the late 1970s, a mutually beneficial cooperation developed, propelling Pordea, whose publications were increasingly aligned with the national-communist and anti-Hungarian Romanian historiography of that era, to the European Parliament.[4]

Pordea's route from Hungarian Kolozsvár, through late 1930s Cluj still dominated by Hungarian popular culture and social habits, to the French far-right party, the National Front (*Front National*, FN), is a fascinating story in and of itself. His biography is, however, just one thread in the larger story of his family that is completely entangled with the history of Transylvania's imperial past and post-imperial transition. The life trajectories of the Pordea family members (from Augustin Sr.'s parents to his siblings and in-laws, including Bubuka's wife, Zoe Millea) were inextricably linked to processes of both the expansion of dualist Hungary to the principality and later its integration into Greater Romania. Moreover, their lives highlight not just one but many different aspects of imperial biographies after empire, providing an extremely condensed picture of how individual lives in this long period related to empire and imperialism in its many forms.

A (Post)-Imperial Family Biography

Take Bubuka's brother in-law, Max Ausnit. As the director-general of Romania's largest steel and machine producing conglomerate, his life and business empire intersected with Ferenc Chorin Jr.'s, whose career Máté Rigó describes in one of the articles from this special issue. Indeed, in the 1950s Chorin (whose address was 1000 Park Avenue) lived less than two miles from Ausnit (at 521 Park Avenue) in New York.[5] Decades earlier Ausnit's Titan ironworks were co-owned by the Pesti Hungarian Commercial Bank and Wiener Bankverein, both also co-owners of Chorin's Salgó and the Jiu valley mines. Unsurprisingly, Ausnit's rise to prominence from his family's modest – at least compared to his Viennese and Budapest partners – businesses in the port city of Galați was part of the process through which Austrian and Hungarian capitalists salvaged their property in Romania.[6] His father was one of those local businessmen whose factory was integrated into Austro-Hungarian business networks before 1914. Osiaș Ausnit even demonstrated his loyalty to the empire with gestures like subscribing significant numbers of Austrian war bonds in 1916.

The post-war transition of the iron and steel sector happened along the same lines as in the Jiu valley. Max Ausnit emerged as the head of a so-called Romanian group that acquired about half of the shares of the most important steel works and machine factories in Austrian and Hungarian hands with the promise of investing fresh capital. The former owners got the other half of the shares practically for free, in exchange for the physical assets, fixed capital and exploitation rights – and a larger part of the profit than their ownership ratio. Curiously, it was the director-general of the Reșița works, Béla Veith, who drafted the plan, and he stayed at his post until the late 1920s. After leaving, he was replaced by his former secretary from before the First World War, Kálmán Révay. Thus, both the 'Romanian' and the 'Austro-Hungarian' groups were led by individuals with very close ties to imperial-era Austro-Hungarian high capital. Ausnit's marriage to Livia Pordea manifested this intricate relationship in a

[3]Gábor Egry, 'The Rise of Titans? Economic Transition and Local Elites in Post-1918 Banat and Transylvania', *European Review of History* 31, no. 5 (2024): 788–816.

[4]Martin Mevius, 'Defending "Historical and Political Interests": Romanian–Hungarian Historical Disputes and the *History of Transylvania*', in *Hungary and Romania Beyond National Narratives Comparisons and Entanglements*, ed. Anders Blomqvist, Constantin Iordachi and Balázs Terncsényi (Frankfurt a. M: Peter Lang, 2013), 569–606.

[5]See Máté Rigó's article in this special issue.

[6]Egry, 'The Rise of Titans?'

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highly symbolic way too. He had to convert to Roman Catholicism and his godfather was none other than Veith's successor as the representative of the non-Romanians: Révay.[7]

Ausnit's (and Chorin's) story shows how, when it came to the transition after empire, imperial businesses were well embedded, with pre-existing networks of mutually beneficial – although not necessarily symmetrical – relationships and willing local partners. This was certainly the case with the German shipping companies in West Africa described in Todzi's article on Woermann.[8] That this pattern was not just a peculiarity of Austria-Hungary's more informal imperialism is demonstrated by Ludwig Noé's story, the subject of Anna Ross's essay in this issue, which resembles Ausnit's in several important ways. The Ausnits laid the foundations of their business's success in a port city, just as Noé rose to international prominence in the Free city of Danzig. Both men were trusted by the old elites to become the manager – and in Ausnit's case owner – of a strategic industry. Most importantly, they could use their contacts to internationalise their firms, reducing the risk of domestic political interference, while profiting from state procurement and subsidies in various forms. And both of them acted with approval from political circles.

This blessing from high politics – demonstrated through the presence of prominent public figures on the boards of directors in Romania[9] – was necessary, but hardly the most important factor of survival. Besides business partners, erstwhile imperial businesses needed more active and more accessible interlocutors in politics and administration – as Augustin Pordea, Bubuka's father, turned out to be after 1918. From a prestigious Greek Catholic family, whose father had been secretary to the bishop of Szamosújvár (Romanian: Gherla) for decades since the early 1880s, and whose brother, Iuliu or Gyula, was a cause célèbre as the sole Romanian law student graduating *sub asupiciis regis* (with a special distinction handed over by the secretary of state from the Ministry of Justice),[10] Augustin had also attended law school. While Iuliu, who died in 1917, had been a proponent of Hungarian–Romanian reconciliation, and a progressive intellectual, Augustin had impeccable Romanian nationalist credentials, even though the family had very good social relations with Hungarians too. After 1918, Augustin's career developed quickly, mostly due to his politics. He soon joined the National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*, PNL), which dominated Romania's politics in the 1920s, and became one of its regional grandees.[11] But within the province of Transylvania, it certainly did not hurt that, through his wife, he was a relative of legendary Transylvanian Romanian politician, and archenemy of the National Liberal Party, Iuliu Maniu.[12]

Maintaining good Hungarian relations mattered too, however. In the business world, Pordea used his politics to help Hungarian companies in court and with politics. Not surprisingly, the Pesti Hungarian Commercial Bank made use of Pordea's services from the early 1920s too, and Augustin became a member of the board of directors of the *Banca Ardeleană/Erdélyi Bank*, which continued operating Pesti's branches in Transylvania. When he left, his brother Ioan replaced him, retaining the seat as a family fief.[13] All this helped him to accumulate the wealth to educate his daughter Livia in a way that facilitated her meeting – allegedly in Monte Carlo – and eventual marriage with Ausnit.

[7]Egry, 'The Rise of Titans?'

[8]See Kim Todzi's article in this special issue.

[9]Máté Rigó, *Capitalism in Chaos: How the Business Elites of Europe Prospered in the Era of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Ludovic Bathory, 'Capitalul străin in industria mineră din România (1919–1924)', *Anuarul Institututului de Istorie Cluj* XVIII (1975): 247–62.

[10]'Sub auspiciis regis avatás a kolozsvári egyetemen', *Nemzeti Hírlap*, 11 March 1905, 2; 'Sub auspiciis regis', *Pesti Hírlap*, 12 March 1905, 12.

[11]Ovidiu Buriana, 'Cea din urmă oaste. Considerații asupra elitelor Partidului național Liberal în România interbelică', in *România interbelică. Modernizare politico-instituțională și discurs național*, ed. Oliver Jens Schmitt and Sorin Radu (Polirom: Iași, 2023), 347–8.

[12]Csongor Jánosi, 'Az erdélyi magyar kisebbség ügye az Európai Parlamentben (1978–1989)', *Pro Minoritate* 29, no. 3 (2024): 71–110.

[13]Egry, 'The Rise of Titans?'

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He was trusted by Hungarians to the extent that Hungarian Prime Minister István Bethlen once even hired him as his attorney. And he felt secure enough within Romanian society to offer his legal – and political – help in very publicised and overtly political cases of Hungarian institutions – concerning property rights and state succession. The most notable was probably the nationalisation of the secondary school building of the Order of Friars Minor in Şimleul Silvaniei (Hungarian: Szilágysomlyó). This school was a favourite of several Greek Catholic Romanian-speaking families from the area before 1918.[14] After a complicated financial transaction with the city – about the building lot and contribution to salaries; with the state – about financial subsidies for the construction and the school's operation; and with a Budapest commercial bank – about a loan that made the state subsidies accessible in advance – the order inaugurated in 1916 a new, modern building that was after 1919 soon expropriated by the Romanian state.

However, the order contested the decisions and Pordea Sr. won the litigation, although this was not the end of the story.[15] A staunchly anti-Hungarian intellectual-politician, Onisifor Ghibu, who in these years waged a veritable crusade against the property rights of the Catholic orders over their school buildings, abusively transferred the property rights in the property register to the city. He argued that state donation was a form of debt owed to Romania as Hungary's successor, while the private debt to the Budapest bank was redeemed by Romania according to the provisions of the peace treaty and converted into another financial obligation of the order. As the order was in arrears with the private loan, Ghibu claimed state ownership, and this administrative act was never reversed by the courts.[16]

But Augustin's role as interlocutor was not limited to business interests and legal contestation. His career was equally related to the transition of the state administration. Greater Romania faced at least two serious challenges when it took over the administration of the eastern parts of Hungary: a shortage of qualified personnel and resistance of the population to ways of administration that were unfamiliar.[17] Both issues were related to the ethnic composition of the pre-1918 state services. Hungarian speakers were dominant, although a small number of Romanians were employed too, in regions like the Banat, Sătmăr or Maramureş, even in relatively high positions. But everyday administration – especially in Romanian-inhabited areas where literacy rates were low (and Hungarian language literacy rates of Romanians even lower) – was mostly verbal and informal. Therefore, administrative culture entailed a knowledge of both the formal and informal practices of the administration, especially as people were often most familiar with the latter.[18]

Despite all efforts to establish a monolingual Romanian-speaking administration, Romania replicated this pattern. Its state service needed people with formal qualifications – a tall order in the first few years – and people who understood what the population expected as informal practice. The latter was all the more important as it was a means of pacifying the locals to whom the new, francophone

[14]Ágoston Berecz, 'Az"oláh fiúk"': Román diákok magyar középiskolákban (1867–1914)', *AETAS* 36, no. 4 (2021): 77–99.

[15]'Még nem ért véget a szilágysomlyói minoriták kálváriája', *Keleti Újság*, 21 Sept. 1934, 5.

[16]'Még nem ért véget a szilágysomlyói minoriták kálváriája'; Mihály Kőhalmi, 'A főgimnázium története', in *A Minorita rend szilágysomlyói róm. kath. püpsöki főgimnáziumának értesítője az 1914–1915. tanévről*, ed. Mihalcsik Bonó (Szilágysomlyó: Bölöni Sándor könyvnyomdája, 1915), 1–167; Mihály Kőhalmi, 'Adatok a szilágysomylói főgimnázium újabbkori történetéhez', in *A Minorita rend szilágysomlyói róm. kath. püpsöki főgimnáziumának értesítője az 1915–1916. tanévről*, ed. Mihalcsik Bonó (Szilágysomlyó: Bölöni Sándor könyvnyomdája, 1916), 7–29.

[17]Gábor Egry, *The Empire's New Clothes? How Austria-Hungary's Legacy Kept the Successor States Running* (Leiden: Foundation for Austrian Studies, 2022); Francesco Magno, *Dagli imperi alla nazione Eredità giuridiche asburgiche e zariste nella Grande Romania, 1918–1927* (Editura Viella: Roma, 2023); Judit Pál and Vlad Popovici, 'Une analyse statistique du personnel de l'administration publique départementale de Transylvanie pendant son intégration administrative au royaume de Roumanie (1918–1925)', *Histoire et Mesure* 37, no. 2 (2022): 99–124.

[18]Gábor Egry, 'Zárványok, hagyományok, szakemberek. A magyar közigazgatás és Nagy-Románia működése', in *Trianon és a magyar közigazgatás*, ed. Béni L. Balogh (Budapest: Magyar Kormánytisztviselői Kar – Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, 2020), 131–50; see also Tamás Sárándi, 'Konszolidáció után konszolidáció. Szatmárnémeti közigazgatásának változásai 1918–1924 között', in *Trianon és a magyar közigazgatás*, ed. Béni L. Balogh (Budapest: Magyar Kormánytisztviselői Kar – Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, 2020), 69–86.

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model of administration was quite alien. Pordea, with his easy access to the Hungarian elites, was an ideal candidate to manage the political dimension of such cases, in cooperation with an administrator with similar credentials and social capabilities. That is why he became the head of the liberal party's county organisation of Odorheiu (Hungarian: Udvarhely) with over 95 per cent Hungarian population and the parliamentary representative of the county too.

There was nothing uniquely Romanian about this situation. All of Austria-Hungary's successor states capitalised on the presence of figures who could manage the ethnic and social differences they had inherited.[19] They tried to strike a balance between the need for efficiency and the push to ethnicise state services. In this process, they sometimes preferred ethnic minority officials over ones from the majority, offered promotion for people with experience of managing difference in the imperial administrations and generally tried to retain as many of the serving personnel as was necessary to run the state. Thus, the filtering of personnel deviated from the strict application of ethnic conditions and friend–enemy dichotomies. As Keely Stauter-Halsted demonstrates in her article, people facing vetting procedures realised their leverage – however modest it was – and used various claim making strategies, often perpetuating former imperial modes of speech and professional qualification. State agents like Pordea went out of their way to find a compromise that benefitted both the state and the individual.

From a more general perspective, taking over the state was about stitching together not just administrative cultures but also legal systems. Imperial law was heterogeneous, whether because of the composite origins of continental empires like Austria-Hungary or as a result of deliberate hierarchies of colonial spaces as in the German or Russian cases. Knowing how to benefit – as a state, as a corporation, as an administrative unit, as an individual – from legal differences and loopholes was part and parcel of imperial socialisation. Post-imperial transitions not only exposed those differences in a new context but, as Dominique Reill's story of Fiumean citizenship and divorce highlights, also offered the opportunity to reinforce existing and create new differences for individual benefit. Cunning Fiumeans understood how valuable their very liberal Hungarian marriage law with relatively easy divorce was, and how they could create a 'free zone' of divorce against payment.

No one should be surprised that the Pordeas, a family of lawyers, were involved in this aspect of the post-imperial transition too. Augustin's meddling with businesses was very often about ownership and property rights of companies, not just school buildings. In the transformation of the liberal property regime of the pre-First World War era, when Austro-Hungarian owners settled on new forms of partnerships, they released the direct ownership of physical property and accepted instead management rights and a disproportionate share of profits, effectively creating a financial asset from physical property.[20] But often these arrangements relied on private law agreements like syndicate contracts and the involvement of third-party entities from Western Europe. This kind of internationalisation efficiently decreased political pressure – as cases like Ludwig Noé's demonstrate – and helped the original owners to retain most of the profit. The knowledge of this complicated system was therefore a real asset. Not surprisingly, the 'filthy rich' paid aspiring local lawyers to navigate the system in order to retain their freedom of action.

Imperial property regimes collided with the civic law of the new states in other forms, often raising issues of sovereignty. Real estate that was once part of a feudal system of obligations (donation to specific goals, or patronage and obligations of communities to schools for example) and the complicated system of expanding state services with combined private, local and state investment and subsidies held a precarious status in Romania (e.g., schools, public buildings and even hotels). Furthermore, real estate was frequently indebted and used as escrow for mortgages, and those rights were often

[19]See Keely Stauter-Halsted in this special issue. See also Jernej Kosi, 'Summer of 1919: A Radical, Irreversible, Liberating Break in Prekmurje/Muravidék?', *Hungarian Historical Review* 9, no. 1 (2020): 51–68.

[20]Hannes Siegrist and Dietmar Müller, 'Introduction', in *The Twentieth Century, in Property in East Central Europe: Notions, Institutions and Practices of Landownership in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Hannes Siegrist and Dietmar Müller (Berghahn: New York, 2015), 1–29.

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transferred to the Romanian state under the conditions of the financial settlement between Hungary and Romania.[21] What was – for example – initially a private law relationship between the government and the school-builders in Şimleul Silvaniei became an issue of state sovereignty when Romania claimed that those debts established its right to transfer the property to the city. At this abstract level, using private debt to claim sovereignty was analogous with the afterlife of the Ottoman sovereign debt and how the arbitration over its distribution among Ottoman successors established two legal facts of international law: modern Turkey as the legal successor of the Ottoman Empire and Palestine (and the other mandates) as sovereign states in waiting, not merely colonies or overseas dependencies. Unlike the Ottoman case, where inheriting sovereign debt was understood as sign of sovereignty even for the mandated territories, Romanian courts adjudicated on a private law case of debt, but the final argumentation hinged on surprisingly similar issues: whether a financial obligation was legally entangled with state sovereignty.

Augustin Pordea lent a helping hand to not only Hungarian capitalists but also Hungarian organisations and his success was the result of both his political stature and his knowledge of complicated Hungarian civic law. But in highly politicised cases it was customary that the High Court in Bucharest overturned verdicts, or politicians – like Ghibu – resorted to administrative abuse.[22] Thus, capitalists were more successful in salvaging what they had, one reason being that they could still rely on their transnational networks. As Máté Rigó and Anna Ross both point out, western imperial powers checked the moves of successor nation states. On the other hand, the new partnerships with locals broadened the room for manoeuvre for Romanian businessmen too, in a way analogous with what happened to imperial property in international zones. Here, symbolic buildings hosted the international administrations, and in some cases – most notably in Tangier – in this capacity they were handed over to the local – Moroccan – government, which had no chance of getting its hands on German imperial property prior to 1914.[23]

Finally, the creation of new, unitary law also provided opportunities. A case in point is the reform of the institution of public notaries in Transylvania. Often used as a sinecure for retiring politicians, public notaries enjoyed safe income and relative prosperity with much less work than practicing lawyers. Thus, from 1919 Romanian legal professionals started to replace Hungarians and Germans, although only gradually. However, the Bucharest government wanted to eliminate the institution and transfer its tasks to the lower courts or village notaries. Facing the loss of their livelihood, Transylvanian public notaries – unified in the corporate body of their chambers – pushed back and achieved the opposite outcome: the extension of the institution to the Old Kingdom, the territory of Romania before 1918. Not only did they preserve their income, they also actively shaped the legal framework of the new nation state.[24] As the chairman of the Cluj chamber of public notaries, Augustin's brother Ioan marched together with his colleagues, while his election was most probably not independent from the fact that his family background and socialisation made him an acceptable choice for non-Romanians too – someone who could balance the interests of different ethnic groups.

This pro-Hungarian aspect of the Pordea family history points to analogies with the post-imperial history of German settlers in East Africa – presented in Willeke Sandler's article. Just as German colonists were at one point seen by the British inter-war administration as potential White allies

[21]Gábor Egry and Anikó Izsák, 'A városi hitelek és az impériumváltás. Bánsági és szatmári példák', *Századok* 155, no. 1 (2021): 37–68; Mihály Kőhalmi, 'Adalékok'.

[22]'Még nem ért véget a szilágysomlyói minoriták kálváriája'; Anca Glont, 'Fostering the National Interest: Utilizing Hungarian State Property in the Jiu Valley to Build a Modern Coal Industry', *Hungarian Studies Review* 50, no. 1–2, (2023): 26–48.

[23]Anna Ross, 'Property and the End of Empire in International Zones, 1919–1947', *Past and Present* 264, no. 1 (2024): 162–98.

[24]Francesco Magno, 'Law between Nationalism and Regionalism: The Integration of the Transylvanian Juridical Field in Greater Romania (1918–1927)', *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 3 (2022): 828–49; Gábor Egry, 'Fallen Between Two Stools? Imperial Legacies, State–Society Relationship and the Limits of Building a Nation State in Romania after the First World War', *Südost-Forschungen* 79 (2020): 4–31.

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against native Blacks, the Pordeas nurtured social connections not just as mediators between ethnic milieus but often based on their belonging to the nobility.[25] In electoral politics, this manifested itself as campaigning for the allegedly anti-Romanian Hungarian government candidates, regardless of the presence of Romanian nationalist politicians. As a result, in 1881 Vasile Pordea, Bubuka's grandfather, the Greek Catholic bishop's secretary was sent by the bishop to convince Romanian peasants – most of them former serfs – to vote for the Hungarian candidate in a close fought election near Nagyszeben (Romanian: Sibiu; German: Hermannstadt). Clearly, noble–serf relations in nineteenth-century Transylvania were different from heavily racialised colonial relations. The underlying logic was nonetheless similar. A social hierarchy that was considered as natural or in the case of Transylvania necessary for the education of the common people fostered an alliance of political actors who in a different context would have been opponents. Moreover, the roots of this unexpected alignment were similar – patterns of landholding. Transylvanian nobles held the right of landownership with a few specific exceptions until the abolition of serfdom in 1848. Their privileged access to political rights was built on this foundation too. Even after the abolition of serfdom, nobility meant prestige, access to power and peer recognition. In the colonies, settlers pushed out natives and established discriminatory property regimes, while they claimed monopoly over politics. In both cases an imperial – as opposed to a liberal – property regime generated formalised or informal privileges.

An Imperial Family and the Human Factor of Empire

The story of the Pordeas as a family with a relatively low social status and rather local social prestige before 1918 that used its imperial background to rise up the social ladder after the fall of empire might be exceptional in terms of the density of this experience. After all, the Pordeas managed to turn almost every post-imperial opportunity into an advantage. But as an insight into a more general phenomenon it was hardly exceptional.[26] Nor is the experience of the Pordeas limited to this post-imperial framing. On the contrary, it reveals something that imperial biographies of high-level state servants could not: how much imperial pervaded life at all levels. If we ask what accounted for the success of the Pordeas in the new context of nation states, we are forced to conclude that it was their ability and experience in connecting milieus, institutions and fields – and to make use of those connections. Very often such connections enabled the operation of larger structures – the administration, the law, local governments, electoral system etc. – reduced frictions and tensions and fostered interactions. But not infrequently making connections needed creativity and imagination – just as Natasha Wheatley has demonstrated in her exploration of the creative rethinking of sovereignty.[27]

What the Pordea story and the articles in this special issue add to a structural interpretation of empire as institutionalised hierarchy is an understanding of how individuals could navigate imperial systems. The Pordeas learned the ways of empire – making connections – as members of the provincial middle-class with aspirations and social capital. We do not know whether they would have risen as high as they did without the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the post-imperial transition. But making use of that transition, they reimagined and repurposed what was at hand – their knowledge of the ways of empire. Their imagination was not imperial as regards its geographic and political horizon (unlike post-Ottoman Arab politicians and intellectuals[28]), at least not until Livia married

[25] See Wilke Sandler's article in this special issue.

[26] Egry, 'The Leftover Empire. Imperial Legacies and Statehood in the Successor States of Austria-Hungary', in *Postwar Continuity and New Challenges in Central Europe, 1918–1923: The War That Never Ended*, ed. Kamil Ruszała and Tomasz Pudłocki (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 81–102; Gábor Egry, 'Central European Elites in Post-Imperial Transition: Locality, Agency, Capital: Introduction', *European Review of History* 31, no. 5 (2024): 673–84.

[27] Natasha Whetaley, *Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[28] Ádám Mestyán, *Modern Arab Kingship: Remaking the Ottoman Political Order in the Interwar Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

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Max Ausnit. Yet their achievements were no less substantial than those of other prominent imperial figures.

Finally, small-scale imperial biographies like those of the Pordeas highlight two other important phenomena. First, how ordinary individuals create empire, often unknowingly. If empire is about managing difference, ordinary people connecting spaces contribute just as much to its operation as the central designs of differentiated rule. It is important to keep in mind that the central gaze of imperial power is just one factor – and who knows whether the more important – that facilitates the emergence of imperial rule. Second, in societies that are inherently heterogeneous, in which almost any form of difference might become a subject of politics and conflict as a focus of identifications, connections and creative reimagination are essential for some form of cohesion and social stability. As long as we live in heterogeneous societies, empire will be here to stay – perhaps even forever.

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