



Some Contributions of Keith Hitchins to Romanian Studies

Keith Hitchins was not only the outstanding American scholar of Romanian history and Romanian studies, he was arguably the world's leading expert on the "Romanian Phenomenon" anywhere. About Hitchins the gifted mentor, the talented linguist who knew over 20 languages, the robust author of works that will remain standard for a long time, and the tireless mediator of Romanian culture to academic and popular audiences around the world, you will read about elsewhere in this tribute issue. I think it would be useful here to underline some lesser known contributions of Keith Hitchins to Romanian studies in the US.

The first was his role as an academic pioneer. Keith Hitchins and Frederick Kellogg were the first American Fulbright grantees to Iron Curtain Romania in 1960-1961. Hitchins was joined in 1961-1962 by Glenn E. Torrey, Gretchen Buehler, and Bill Fell. Many others soon followed, and, as Torrey emphasized, all benefited from the advice, counsel, and contacts that Keith provided. He spent his first year in București at the Institute of History. He was indebted to Andrei Oțetea, the director, for constant support and often times off the record assistance. Oțetea forcefully argued with archival and library personnel that these young American scholars had to have access, otherwise, how could they make credible contributions to the knowledge of Romania culture and history abroad? He also met Petru Comarnescu, the noted art and literary scholar, who gave Keith and Torrey much useful advice about Romanian society, culture, and intellectual circles as well as about how to navigate the Romanian milieu.

Keith spent his second year, 1961-1962, in Cluj, which was the natural habitat of his research interests. It was there that he began a lifelong friendship with Pompiliu Teodor, then working at the manuscript section of the Romanian Academy Library, whose interests in the 18th century coincided nearly perfectly with his. Pompiliu had an encyclopedic knowledge of the works and manuscripts of the giants of the Transylvanian School, which he unstintingly shared with Keith. They also shared the inevitable daily cups of strong fresh-brewed coffee.

In Cluj, Keith developed close relationships with Mihail Triteanu, Director of the Library of the Romanian Academy there, who not only provided generous support, but also cooked breakfast every morning for Keith at the Library; with Romania's most prominent specialist on the 18th century, David Prodan, who though a lifelong Marxist, was usually on ill terms with the Communist nomenclatura, and a genuine scholar whose multi-disciplinary approach to the past Hitchins admired and emulated. Teodor and Prodan, Keith later wrote, "aided me perhaps more than they realize in our discussions of the history of the Rumanians of Transylvania." Others over the years included István Semlyén, Deputy Director at the Academy Library, who facilitated his "work in a variety of ways"; Ștefan Pascu, who made possible access to valuable materials; Sofron Vlad, Director of the Romanian Orthodox Theological Institute in Sibiu, who gave Keith "his support when it was badly needed"; and Protopop Ioan N. Beju, Director of the same Institute's Library to whom Keith had "Above all...a special debt...for his never-failing professional and moral support."

The longterm spinoff of this was that Keith set the tone for those who were to follow and opened the way for future generations of American scholars. He continued over the decades to widen these shared contacts. Glenn Torrey warmly recalls Keith as a mentor who was not only generous with his contacts and books, but also as a lifelong friend and collaborator.

The second contribution of Keith Hitchins to Romanian studies was that of the bookman. He was aided in this by contact with the fabled Romanian book dealer, Radu Sterescu, who could generally produce copies of any book on very short notice; and with Comarnescu, who lent him or gave him rare books and made useful bibliographical suggestions. Sterescu became the builder of libraries for countless subsequent American scholars. He was allowed to carry on his more or less illegal trade because Ștefan Andrei, sometime Minister of Foreign Affairs under Ceaușescu and a collector of Romanian first editions, shielded him. Comarnescu was later shown by the CNSAS Archives to have been an agent of the Securitate assigned to keep an eye on these suspect Americans, but his detailed reports, Torrey notes, were generally positive about his supposed targets and Hitchins comes off pretty savvy in them. Keith also made prodigious book acquisitions in Cluj at the Academy Library, at the Institute of History (which had a whole basement full of pre-1948 books and journals that they were most generous in sharing with serious scholars), and at various and sundry anticariats. Mihail Triteanu, I was told, facilitated the shipping of these books back to the US by deliberately ignoring the usual red-tape. Most of the University of Illinois' superb Romanian collection was acquired by Keith over the years, another scholarly boon. Also of legendary proportions was Keith's own library, which expanded to such an extent that he converted his garage into a library and for other shelving simply got rid of all the furniture in his house except the kitchen.

Lastly, Keith Hitchins' role as a founding board member (1973-1978) of the Society for Romanian Studies deserves a brief mention. Keith was not fond of meetings and conventions, but he was prevailed upon by Jim Augerot, Michael Impey, Glenn Torrey, and Barbara Jelavich to help give the SRS a good start. I once asked him why he didn't come to more conferences and he candidly but politely replied that going to a conference involved losing at least five days en route and with the meeting itself, all for minimal benefit. In contrast, if he stayed at home, he could get a good deal more work done on his myriad projects. Who can deny the wisdom in that? Dumnezeu sa vă odihnească în pace. There won't be any more like Keith.

Paul E. Michelson, Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus, Huntington University



Source:

December 2020

SOCIETY FOR ROMANIAN STUDIES NEWSLETTER



www.society4romanianstudies.org

The Society for Romanian Studies

www.society4romanianstudies.org

Vol 42 Fall 2020 No. 3 (Special Edition)

pp. 16-17

Special Edition: Remembering Keith Hitchins

coedited by Leah Valtin-Erwin and Maria Bucur