

THE OTTOMAN RUGS OF BISTRIȚA

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Moves are at last underway to restore to their rightful home more than fifty Ottoman Turkish rugs taken from Transylvania to Germany late in World War II by the Saxon parishioners of the Lutheran Church in Bistrița, Romania. Since 1952, the rugs have been held in storage, 'on loan' to the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.

OVER THE PAST DECADE, the unique holdings of Anatolian rugs that comprise the Transylvanian heritage have come to the attention of the international carpet community through their concerted study and promotion in publications, articles, study tours, exhibitions and conferences. The lynchpin of the project is the comprehensive volume *Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania*, (AORT), published in five languages, a recent winner of the Romanian Academy Prize for Art History.

Bistrița (Bistritz) in northern Romania was capital of one of the four Transylvanian regions that have been home to German-speaking Saxons since the 13th century, the others being Sibiu (Hermannstadt), Mediaș (Mediasch), and Brașov (Kronstadt). Lying at the crossroads of the main trade routes to northern Moldavia, Lvov (Lemberg) in Poland, and Russia, with its vital trade links and skilled crafts guilds, the town flourished.

Between 1559 and 1563, shortly after the local Saxon community embraced the Reformation, the master builder Petrus Italus from Lugano remodel-

led the Lutheran Evangelical Parish Church, the pride of its inhabitants. A 246-foot stone church tower overlooking the city, the tallest in Romania, was added later, but was destroyed by fire in 2008.

As in other Saxon communities, over the centuries pious donations from parishioners and guild members built a rich carpet collection,¹ housed in the parish church with many other objects of art, and constituting a significant part of Bistrița's cultural patrimony. The fact that Ottoman rugs were not rejected as products of an enemy culture, but used to adorn Protestant churches in Transylvania,² and to a lesser extent Orthodox churches in Moldavia and Wallachia,³ is evidence of the capacity of oriental rugs to bridge creeds and cultures.

The earliest record of the Bistrița collection is the publication in 1914 of a blue-ground six-column rug in the catalogue of the great Budapest exhibition 'Turkish Carpets of Transylvania'.⁴ In 1928, an inventory lists 68 rugs in Bistrița, including one with an early 17th century donor inscription.⁵ Not long afterwards, the Parish Committee (the Presbyterium) decided to try to sell the rugs to raise funds urgently needed for church restoration.⁶

To value the collection, the Presbyterium called in a well-known expert from Brașov, the industrialist and collector Emil Schmutzler, who catalogued and photographed 42 complete rugs and 15 large fragments. The rugs were offered to several potential buyers, including the Deutsches Museum in Munich, the art dealer Otto Bernheimer, Julius Orendi from Vienna, and also Teodor Tuduc. But because the parish refused to sell single items, they remained unsold.

Schmutzler published his *Altorientalische Teppiche in Siebenbürgen* in 1933: of the 54 colour plates, eight were rugs from Bistrița. He listed a total of 443 Transylvanian church rugs (*Kirchenteppe*), including 47 in Bistrița, the largest holding in the region after the Black Church in Brașov.⁷

1 The Evangelical Church in Bistrița, home of the *Kirchenteppe*, before the tower was destroyed by fire in 2008

2 Small-pattern Holbein rug, west Anatolia, mid-16th century. 1.21 x 1.98m (4'0" x 6'6"). Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Gew 4909

3 Star Ushak rug, west Anatolia, first half 16th century. 1.45 x 2.68m (4'9" x 8'10"). GNM, Gew 4927

4 'Transylvanian' six-column rug, west Anatolia, second half 17th century. GNM, Gew 4945



In summer 1944, with the advancing Russian armies approaching Bistrița, the authorities ordered the evacuation of the area. Obligated to leave their community's home for more than seven centuries, the Saxons took with them the parish archives and church valuables, including silver chalices and oriental carpets. Since 1952, the rugs have been on 'loan' to the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (GNM) from the 'legal heirs' of the Northern Transylvanian Evangelical Consistory A.C. and the Bistrița Presbyterium. During 1956/57, some thirty of them were exhibited at the museum, described as "*Siebenbürgische-türkische Teppiche aus einem Kirchenschatz*".

Almost forty years later, after a request for access by a German rug society had been refused, a 1994 HALI editorial, 'Transylvanian Intrigue', posed a number of questions, including: "Why has it been impossible to establish ownership during the past half century?" and "Why and for how long does the museum propose to deny access to the carpets?"⁸ In response, Charles



2



3

Grant Ellis, who had been permitted to examine the rugs in 1964 and 1975, wrote a summary of his findings, listing 52 rugs which he described as “the property of the Evangelical church of Bistrița”, and hoped that they would “soon become more readily accessible”.⁹

Because the status of the Bistrița church rugs has remained unclear, in more recent times they have not been restored, published, or exhibited by the GNM, nor could any be included in recent exhibitions of Transylvanian rugs in Rome (2004), Berlin (2005), and Istanbul (2007). However, 18 of them were published in the 2007 edition of *AORT*, together with an account of the recent history of the collection, written with the co-operation of Dr Jutta Zander-Seidel of the GNM.¹⁰ The inventory of 380 rugs extant in Transylvania published in *AORT* noted that the only significant difference from Schmutzler’s 1933 listing was the loss of the Bistrița collection.

Early in 2009, a group of prominent members of the Bistrița community, including Mihai Buliga, Dr Cornelia Gaiu and Eladie Greere, as well as the local rug-enthusiast Nick Kazan and the author, formed a committee – ‘Ottoman Rugs of Bistrița’ – with the aim of returning the rugs to Transylvania. A letter outlining this aim was sent to the pastor of the Bistrița church, Johann Dieter Kraus, and to the mayor of Bistrița, Ovidiu Crețu.

According to Chapter 6 of the ICOM *Code of Ethics for Museums*, on the ‘Origin of Collections’, museums should “promote the sharing of knowledge with museums and cultural organisations in the countries and communities of origin”, and “be prepared to initiate dialogues for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin.”

Sixty years after World War II, with the fall of the Iron Curtain and Romania’s entry to the European Community, it is time that the rugs were returned to the Evangelical Parish of Bistrița, where the Saxon church still stands. We therefore cordially invite the GNM, the Saxon communities in Germany, and anyone involved in this matter, to join our efforts to clarify the position of the collection, and to provide comprehensive information, including photographs, to complete the documentation and publication of Transylvania’s rug patrimony. The rugs could be safely stored in the interim at the recently renovated Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu, which belongs to the Consistory of the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Romania, and is the only Transylvanian centre with textile restoration facilities.

The townspeople of Bistrița, the Saxon parishioners led by Pastor Kraus, with full support of the local authorities, have begun the reconstruction of the bell-tower of the Bistrița church, destroyed by a catastrophic fire in June 2008. Their aim is to reopen the church in June 2013. For that occasion, the Bistrița rugs should be back home and Transylvania would be entitled to host an ICOC regional event.

I should also mention here a parallel project, initiated with great energy by Nick Kazan: a Transylvanian Rugs Museum, to be built in Bistrița. An ambitious undertaking, with the potential to become transformative for the town, the museum is set to address the needs of the Transylvanian collections for generations to come.



4

NOTES

1 Church records and inscriptions on rugs prove that this was common practice in 17th and 18th century Transylvania. See Gernot Nussbächer, ‘Rugs of the fur-makers guild in Brașov’, in *Karpatenrundschau*, Brașov, 27.01.2007.

2 At the beginning of the 20th century more than a hundred Saxon Lutheran and Hungarian Reformed Churches with antique rugs were recorded in Transylvania. See ‘Index of Locations with Otto-

man Rugs in Transylvania’, in Stefano Ionescu, ed., *Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania (AORT)*, Rome 2007, Appendix V.

3 Mircea Dunca-Moisin, ‘Ottoman Carpets in the Romanian Principalities’, *AORT* 2007, Appendix VII.

4 See Ferenc Batári, ‘The First Turkish Carpet Exhibition in the West’, *HALI* 136, 2004, pp.86-91.

5 Cornel Gaiu, ‘A Lost Patrimony’, in *Gazeta de Bistrița*, year II, no.87, 14-20 November 2005, p.23.

6 Something quite similar happened to the rug

collection of the church in Rupea (Reps).

7 Schmutzler’s important volume *Altorientalische Teppiche in Siebenbürgen*, published in Leipzig in 1933, has been the main source of information on the Bistrița Collection for several generations of carpet scholars and enthusiasts. It has recently been reprinted, with an English translation of the German text, by the author of this article.

8 *HALI* 72, 1994, p.55.

9 *HALI* 74, 1994, p.69:

1 small-pattern Holbein,

14 Lottos, 9 column rugs, 3 Star Ushaks, 2 double re-entrant rugs, 11 double-niche rugs, 11 prayer rugs with head-and-shoulders or stepped arches, and 1 Gördes prayer rug. Ellis also underlined his view on a long-debated matter in characteristic style: “I am cross-grained enough to say that I would be decidedly surprised in any of these Bistrița rugs had ever seen Anatolia.” It is now generally accepted that they were all woven in western Anatolia.
10 *AORT* 2007, p.198.

