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Lebensspuren – Traces of Life¹

Abstract: *The article that follows is Michaela Wolf's introduction to the volume Visions of Historical Anthropology in Southeastern Europe. Karl Kaser – Continuing the Discussion,² a collection she edited as a way of carrying forward Karl Kaser's scholarly vision and research approaches. Our sincere thanks go to LIT Verlag for kindly allowing us to reprint and translate this text.*

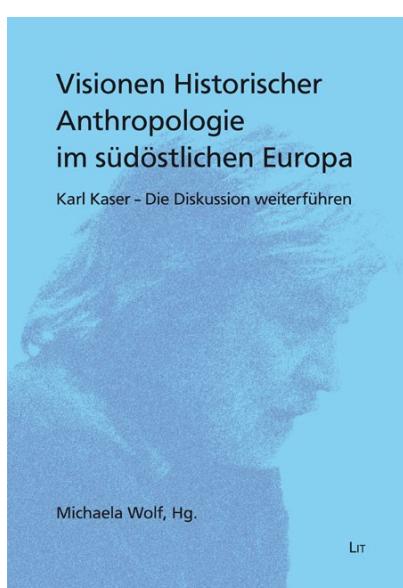
Keywords: *Karl Kaser; Historical Anthropology; Black Sea region.*

Karl Kaser's untimely death on April 11, 2022, has left gaps that are, in many ways, impossible to fill, not only in scholarly terms, but above all on a human level. The reactions to his death bear impressive witness to this.

As Karl Kaser's long-standing partner, confidante, friend, listener and constant companion also in academic matters, as his travel companion and discussion partner, it is important to me after his passing that he be honoured as a scholar and colleague and that his research be continued. Karl Kaser's thinking, actions, and being were always forward-looking and future-oriented. Therefore, this book should also not be understood as a commemoration of his life, nor as a retrospective of his scholarly achievements. Rather, it continues along paths whose course Karl himself conceived and mapped out. Most of the contributions in this volume take up again and develop further discussions and conversations with Karl Kaser that were interrupted or left unfinished; some of them do so critically and question aspects of his statements. This, and the wide range of formats this volume set out to include, reveals a kaleidoscope of relationships between Karl and the individual authors.

¹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to Julia Kölbl for translating this text.

² Wolf, Michaela (2024) „Lebensspuren“, in: Wolf, Michaela (ed.) *Visionen Historischer Anthropologie im südöstlichen Europa. Karl Kaser – Die Diskussion weiterführen*. Wien: LIT Verlag, 1–9.



search and focused intensively on the Mediterranean region, the Middle East, and the Black Sea region, especially the Caucasus. In doing so, he was keen to counteract a persistently Western-biased historiography, which, in the context of his work on visual anthropology, led him to develop “elements of decentralized theory formation” (Kaser 2013a).

Historical anthropology, as his central field of scholarship, was closely aligned with Karl’s approach to life: to place people at the centre, as the starting point for a multi-layered and differentiated understanding of human coexistence and of the social, cultural, political and economic conditions and interrelations that shape it. One of the reasons why Karl began to focus consistently on the field of historical anthropology was, in his own words, the nationalism that emerged during the political transition of 1989 and soon spread rampantly in the “post-socialist” countries, replacing communism as the ruling ideology. As he explained in a conversation with his Bulgarian colleagues, historian Kristina Popova and ethnologist Anelia Kassabova, this led to a kind of alienation from his own discipline, which was now “intensively engaged in research on nations and identity” (Kaser, Popova, and Kassabova 2020: 39). He continues: “I found this abhorrent, in that the breadth of human strategies for coping with existence was reduced to national identity and thus to the demarcation from the Other” (*ibid.*). The complete departure from the concept of nation coincided with the

Karl Kaser has opened up many new fields of research: from being originally an expert in regional everyday history, he became a pioneer of the historical anthropology research approach in Southeastern Europe, particularly influenced by Joel M. Halpern (University of Massachusetts Amherst) and Michael Mitterauer (University of Vienna). The topics he addressed in the context of this approach ranged from the role of family and kinship to gender issues and studies of visual heritage in the Balkans. At the same time, he expanded the geographical areas addressed in his re-

stroke of luck that anthropologist Joel M. Halpern entered Karl's life and, through intensive exchanges with him and Michael Mitterauer, "the long-awaited research alternative to the study of nations, which only further divides people" (*ibid.*) emerged. In addition, Halpern's wish to pass on a vast amount of data from his family research conducted in the Balkans to the department in Graz could be realized. This paved the way for many externally funded projects and countless publications within the framework of historical anthropology and its central category of "human beings".

In his *Apology of History*, Marc Bloch succinctly notes that his primary concern is "humanity [...] in time" (Bloch 1949/1985: 30). Even though Bloch does not use the term, this can nevertheless be regarded as an initial definition of "historical anthropology", and Bloch can be seen as one of the pioneers of this approach (Tanner 2004: 9). The dimension of time was also a primary concern for Karl in his historical-anthropological view of human beings, namely "human beings in their historical, i.e., temporal conditionality and change, as well as cultural diversity" (Grandits and Kaser 2003: 13). In the second edition of his volume *Südosteuropäische Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Southeast European History and Historical Science), he emphatically refers to humans as the focus of historical-anthropological research and specifies:

[...] humans in their knowledge and [their] forms of action, in their perception and aesthetic forms of expression, in their social, political, and economic existence, in their naturalness, their sexuality, their fundamental experiences and subjective interpretations of the world and phenomena, humans as historically creative beings. (Kaser 2002: 203)

For many years, these existential moments formed the cornerstones of his research, enabling him to explore a wide range of subject areas. The path he took was not easy, as can be seen in the volume *Between the Archives and the Field* (Jovanović, Kaser, and Naumović 1999), among other works. Some of the contributions in this collection openly question the necessity of historical anthropology and reflect the difficulties and doubts that arose in the course of the gradual establishment of this particular field of research. Above all, the exploration of possibilities and scope for action, as well as the investigation of the ambiguities and contradictions of the actors involved and the constantly changing *conditio humana*, have found expression in many ways in Karl's work.

Despite the long-standing lack of recognition for historical anthropology as a field of research, not least at his own university³, research into humans as actors in history – and the resulting insight that humans should be seen “as structured and structuring actors in a diachronic perspective and in relation to their living environment in a regional, continental, or global context” (Grandits and Kaser 2003: 22) – has gained ground. Historical anthropology can now no longer be excluded from the historical canon.

In his lecture “Historical Anthropology”, which was regularly attended with great interest by large numbers of students from various fields of study, Karl postulated “Five social tasks of Historical Anthropology”:

- to contribute to a better understanding of the present;
- to highlight culturally conditioned human behaviour;
- to offer strategies for individual problem solving;
- to promote engagement with difference;
- to contribute to the democratization of society.

This shows once again how seriously he approached political considerations when selecting topics for research and teaching (starting with “Die Findelkinder der Oststeiermark (vom 19. bis ins beginnende 20. Jahrhundert)” [The Foundlings of Eastern Styria (from the 19th to the early 20th century)], Kaser 1987). At the same time, these postulations also reflect his consistently self-reflective approach to science. When asked in an interview what his early life had taught him for his academic work, he replied: “personal modesty and the conviction that all science is political, especially when it pretends to be apolitical and objective” (Kaser, Popova, and Kassabova 2020: 25).

In addition to political acumen, other considerations – not least pragmatic, research-related ones –, also played a role in his everyday decisions about the direction of his work. Although such considerations are undoubtedly part of a scholar’s daily routine, and Karl certainly took them into account, they were rarely decisive. Rather, both “Die anderen Blicke” (2013b) and a desire to experiment with research-guiding questions often exerted a decisive influence. He thus never renounced his passion as a scholar.

³ It was not until 2011 that Karl Kaser succeeded, after a long and often conflictual process of persuasion and many discussions with colleagues, deans, and rectors, in renaming the research area at the Department of History from “Southeast European History” to “Southeast European History and Anthropology.”

This, it seems to me, outlines the field in which Karl created many paths and followed others that already existed: some of them paved and broad, others barely discernible trails that disappear into the distance. These, too, are to be followed and continued by future researchers. Some of these paths are already taking shape in the contributions to this volume.

The Contributions to the Volume

The process of selecting individuals to invite to contribute to a publication is always a delicate matter. This book is no exception. Overall, it features persons who had a collegial or amicable relationship with Karl: friends, colleagues, companions, project collaborators, former students, and others.

In inviting contributions to this volume, I asked the authors to reflect on Karl's work in historical anthropology and, at the same time, to take a visionary perspective on future intellectual projects. The contributions should not be traditional academic articles, but rather take the form of a fictional conversation with Karl, a fictional interview with him or a third person, an essay, polemic, reportage, serialized story, field notes, or another format, including mixed formats. Most authors opted for a fictional interview or a hypothetical conversation with Karl, thus choosing the most direct way of engaging with him and his work.

The 27 contributions demonstrate the breadth of the field of historical anthropology, and, in some cases, even extend beyond it. The following overview is intended to offer an initial impression of this breadth of topics addressed. The first section focuses on "Fields of research" in historical anthropology that are linked to topics such as migration, ageing, health and illness, the environment, and emotions in the research process. Particular attention is given to the area of "Family research" (section two) which raises questions regarding inheritance systems and family and household in the demographic and urban context of what Karl refers to as the "Balkan family" (a term that is often discussed critically). Karl's exploration of the "other gaze" is taken up in the (third) section of "Visual anthropology as historical anthropology", where the engagement with images is also linked to future developments (keyword: AI-generated images). Several other contributions focus on field research as the most important method in historical anthropology both retrospectively and prospectively (section four), and on "Terminological aspects". The latter section comprises articles that,

from gender-specific, spatial, and patriarchal perspectives, offer a detailed discussion of terms to which Karl devoted considerable space in his publications. The concluding section, “Encounters”, illustrates the many personal and professional points of contact with Karl from the perspective of long-standing colleagues as well as younger scholars. Their contributions open up further avenues for reflecting on Karl’s work.

Against this backdrop, several visions for future work can be identified in the contributions to this volume. These are often articulated as research desiderata and primarily concern the discussion of sources and methods. For example, the potential of autofictional or autobiographical texts in the sense of narrative ethnography is highlighted, as is the need to give greater consideration to urban sources in comparison with rural ones. From a methodological perspective, participatory approaches in field research (keyword: *visual life-story telling*) and an intensified use of digital methods in demographic family research, particularly in AI-based visual studies, are outlined as visions for future work. The increased incorporation of approaches informed by the history of emotions and more differentiated gender-specific perspectives in historical anthropology can likewise be regarded as visionary.

From the diversity of the contributions and, above all, from the visions formulated here, it becomes clear that the authors, through the writing of their texts – some of them based on an intensive engagement with Karl’s work – have each experienced a personal encounter with him. In this sense, what is remembered as the last encounter was not necessarily the final one. At the same time, there is also some truth in the idea that no one who has left a lasting mark on the biographies of others is ever truly forgotten. This book bears witness to that by showing in which (academic) biographies Karl has left his mark, and how this mark enables a form of continuity and, in a certain sense, an enduring presence.

Finally, the many personal references and connections in the contributions shall be linked to some reflections on Karl Kaser’s personality.

Karl

Karl was aware that the knowledge-generating process which he was constantly engaged in sometimes conflicted with his own personal aspirations. This was particularly the case in relation to his main area of research, historical anthropology. As much as Karl’s work focused

on human beings, he hardly ever placed himself at the centre of his own reflections. He rarely considered himself the centre of attention, even though he certainly enjoyed recognition; but in personal exchanges, he tended to be reserved and modest. Or, as Anelia Kassabova and Kristina Popova describe it in their contribution: “About himself, he rarely spoke”.

The positions described here reflect contradictions that Karl embodied both consciously and unconsciously. They are also evident in his attitude toward family: although he was a family historian, he repeatedly emphasized his scepticism towards the idea of having a family of his own. And yet, especially in his later years, he took a keen interest in his own family history. His working style was generally characterized by consistency and continuity, even during his illness. Karl regarded his illness as an irritating distraction – albeit one that was constantly growing. Nevertheless, his willingness to work and his scholarly output (he was, among other things, in the process of drafting a new project proposal) remained unbroken until his passing – which still came unexpectedly.

This book is intended above all as an initial attempt to build on the enthusiasm that Karl brought to his scholarly work with unwavering and continuous dedication. This was visible not only in his tireless preparations for the 10th InASEA (International Association for Southeast European Anthropology) conference in Graz, which he did not live to see, but also in his passionate work on his last article, “Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia. Visual Oscillation between ‘Orient’ and ‘Civilization’” (Kaser 2023), which he completed and submitted only a few days before his death. He seemed, even then, to be propelled by a thought he had expressed in a commemorative publication for his colleague Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch (Kaser 2013c: 207): “Life [seems] to be endless for us who are constantly driven”.

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