

20TH CENTURY LANDMARK CEREMONIES OF A HUNGARIAN CALVINIST COMMUNITY REFLECTED IN FAMILY PHOTOS

Abstract: The study examines the reflection in family photographs of religious life of a Hungarian Calvinist village in Romania. Among the more than four hundred photographs included in the analysis, fifty portray events and ceremonies that can be linked to religion, giving an insight into details of the sacral actions in the church or within the family. Most of the photos record rites linked to landmarks in human life (christening, confirmation, marriage, funeral). The largest number are confirmation group photos marking the passage of an age group. There are also photos showing religious celebrations and the church itself as the village's exceptionally important and symbolical building. In the family photo groups these photos serve a similar function to the others, they mainly record the memory of a family member or acquaintance and represent the religious sentiments that accompanied them throughout their lives. Allegiance to the Calvinist denomination played a big role in the survival of the Hungarian community of Végvár in the 20th century, and also in differentiating it from the Romanian Orthodox culture surrounding the community.

Keywords: religious life, Hungarian Calvinist community, minority status, visibility

The Christian religion played an important role in the spread of visibility and in shaping image culture. The visual contents became accessible for all members of society through paintings of sacred subjects, stained-glass windows, engravings and prints, resulting in a traditional use of images with a centuries-long practice in Europe in which the role of the image and its cult, its content and symbolical meaning became fixed and part of the methods of obtaining and interpreting information.

The Reformation brought a change that influenced the attitude of image users as its teachings rejected the cult of images surrounding veneration of the sacred.¹ The systems of symbols and the principles of image framing underwent change,

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¹ BÉRES 2006. 282.

leading to new image interpretation practices. Under the influence of the social changes profane contents took over ever greater space in visibility and the use of images increasingly entered the private sphere. However the mass spread of images of a private nature with religious or secular content required the new techniques that speeded up and simplified multiple copying. Photography was one of these techniques² that opened up new paths in the use of images: it brought the creation and possession of images within the reach of wide circles of society.

The spread of photography, the technical possibility of access for the lower strata of society is known as the democratisation of photography.³ This process was helped to a considerable extent by the church ceremonies since in Hungary wedding photos were the first to bring it into the culture of less individualised communities,⁴ they were followed by other photos related to landmark ceremonies, then by portraits and group photos. From the end of the 19th century when Kodak cameras appeared on the market, anyone could switch from being simply a viewer, recipient or subject, to being the one who could choose the content of the image.

However, the 20th century's growing production of private images differed significantly from the earlier image creation practice. Nevertheless in a certain respect motivations similar to those in the initial period of visual culture when the images with sacral content were created for the churches can be discovered behind the photography (creating a memory and setting an example, outward display, declaration)⁵. Different visual contents were created in the secular and religious spheres. Among the photo subjects the secular aspects of family life dominated in the 20th century, they served a role in connections between people and in the individual intentions. Aspects of religious life, sacral spaces and ceremonial actions were less often portrayed. In the present study I do not examine photography customs related to the use of images in connection with the cult of the sacred.

My examples are drawn from a Hungarian village in the Banat region of Romania, where I analysed the connections between private photographs and religious life. In my investigation I seek an answer to what the small number of photos related to religion found in family albums tell us about the sacral life of the local community and what role they play among their possessors.

2 BÉRES 2006. 283.

3 CHALFEN 1987. 4.

4 KUNT 1995. 12.

5 KUNT 1987.15.

The community examined

The venue of the visual ethnographic field research was a settlement established in 1786 during the Habsburg rule under the name of Rittberg. During the 18th century it was forbidden for Hungarians to settle in the Banat territories, but since the Catholic Swabian settlers did not really prosper in this village designed by engineers, most of them moved on after a few years and so by the end of the century Hungarian Calvinists from various parts of the Great Plain moved here. Their church was built by 1794. In the documents in the archives by 1806 the former settlement of Rittberg is mentioned as a Hungarian settlement called Végvár; as it prospered in the following decades it was raised to the status of market town. A school and cultural centre were also built and the buildings in the main street were given an urban structure.

The 20th century brought big changes in the life of the small town: under the provisions of the Trianon treaty (1920) that ended the First World War for Hungary the Hungarian settlement was annexed to Romania. Romanianisation began in the following decades: families from the old Romanian territories were resettled here with the aim of changing the ethnic identity, language and religious characteristics as soon as possible. It was around that time that the name of the settlement became Tormac. The Second World War and the socialist dictatorship that followed made even stronger efforts to achieve uniformity in the areas of culture and the economy. During the Dej era⁶ and also the Ceausescu regime⁷ the Stalinist principles were applied, although Romania's relations with the Soviet leadership were ambivalent. In the 1950s the schools were nationalised and the church's freedom of action restricted. Privately-owned farming land was confiscated and the previously independent farmers were forced into collective farms.⁸ From the point of view of religion Romania was a diverse country in the 20th century, especially following the expansion of its territory in 1920 when the Roman Catholic and Calvinist Hungarian settlements were annexed to the country where the majority of the population were Orthodox and a smaller proportion Greek Catholic. In the case of the Banat this ruling, that significantly changed the earlier course of life, also affected the Germans, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Bulgarians and Czechs who lived there.⁹ There were Jews in both Hungarian and Romanian settlements in this territory (mainly in the towns).¹⁰ Following the take-over of power in 1948 the situation of the non-Orthodox denominations and the conditions of their followers for the exercise of freedom of religion became uncertain because the basic tenets of communism were opposed to belief in God. The Greek Catholic Church was merged with the Orthodox Church, violent political methods

6 GAGYI 2006. 26. Georghie Georghiu-Dej was the head of the Romanian Communist Party from 1945–1965.

7 GAGYI 2006.26. Nicolae Ceausescu led the Socialist Republic of Romania from 1965–1989 as head of the Romanian Communist Party.

8 GAGYI 2006. 43.

9 GAGYI 2006. 35.

10 GAGYI 2006. 36.

were used in an attempt to restrict the freedom of the Roman Catholic Church to a minimum, while the organisational structure of the Protestant Churches representing the smallest proportion in Romania and therefore judged to represent no danger was re-regulated, their operation within narrow frames was tolerated under supervision.¹¹

After the change of system in 1989 ownership rights were re-regulated, religion was given greater space in public life, but there was no weakening in the tendency to cultural assimilation. Today within the ethnic proportions of the population of the village the Hungarians make up around 50%, and most of them are still Calvinists. In addition to their sense of community arising from their ethnic allegiance and religion, the Hungarians are also bound together by a dense web of kinship ties that has increased in importance mainly because of the factors mentioned in the period between 1920 and 1989.

The material studied

The basic question of my research¹² – the basis on which I selected the visual material of the Hungarian community in the village – was to determine the proportion of photos in family image collections that portray community occasions and whether there is an outlook from the narrow circle of the family towards the integrating society. It can be said on the basis of experience in the field that there is; I collected a total of 412 photos in Végvár meeting this criterion. These images portray outstanding events and everyday activities of groups of varying size in the village. Due to the method used for collecting, the group of images examined can be regarded as a heterogeneous sample of items produced in different periods. However, the same photos could be found in different collections, or photos taken at the same events or places, and the same persons also appeared in different photos. Their differences are thus not an obstacle to interpretation of the assemblage, all the photos are connected to Végvár and the people of Végvár, and represent mosaic pieces in the history of the local community.

The oldest photos in the set collected were taken in the 1910s, while the most recent are from the 1990s. Four are colour photos, the rest are black and white, suggesting on the one hand slower, more difficult access to technical innovations, and on the other an attitude that attaches greater value to older photos.

The image collection includes 43 photos connected in some way to religious life; these were taken between 1920 and 1990. The informants had fewer photos

¹¹ GAGYI 2006.45

¹² The research is carried out within the frame of a priority project of the TÁMOP 4.2.4.A/2-11-1-2012-0001 National Excellence Program – National program for the elaboration and operation of a system ensuring support for Hungarian students and researchers. The project is supported by the European Union, with co-financing from the European Social Fund.

from the beginning and end points of the time scale portrayed, while there were more photos linked to religion in the middle period, from the 1950s to the 1980s. Time is a determining factor in this topic because of the characteristics of political history briefly outlined above.

The main line for interpretation of the photos examined is set by the subjects portrayed. Among the photos we find some taken at religious feasts, at landmark ceremonies and on other community occasions as well as photos showing the religious place in itself, but due to limitations of space the analysis here is restricted to the landmark images that make up the largest number within the sample.

Almost all the images are group photos, the only difference found was in the framing of the image. Some were made following the rules of studio photography, while others were spontaneous photos where presumably it was not the intention of the person taking the snapshot that determined the image as that person was probably not able to intervene in the events taking place before the camera. The persons in the photos are Calvinist Hungarians from Végvár among whom there was a close network of connections. Members of the present over 50 age group still recognise members of the older generations on the photos and naturally they are also able to identify photos of each other taken in their youth. The family photo collections do not include solely photos of members of the given nuclear family, they also preserve photos of more distant relatives and acquaintances received as gifts. However, it could be observed that these photos are not part of the active use of images, they are produced from unarranged collections of photos kept in drawers and it was only after longer inspection that they recognised the person through whom the photo entered the collection, or in other cases the inscription on the photo helped identification. "It's my father's writing, TL, that was our neighbour, it's here because we were at the neighbours at a confirmation lunch."¹³

Photos of landmarks in the lives of individuals

All cultures attribute great significance to events marking off the stages of human life. They are changes of position in the life of the individual that also influence the community large or small that integrates the person. Since the role that the person has played up to that point is to change, the passage from one period of life to another can also bring a crisis, depending on the extent and quality of the change. Religious rites and cultural traditions help those concerned to overcome the crisis and adapt to the new situation.¹⁴ It was by recording these ceremonies that photographs were able to spread most smoothly into the broadest strata of

¹³ Extract from interview with KL. 2013.

¹⁴ Cf. van GENNEP 2007 (1960), TURNER 2002 (1969).

society.¹⁵ From the mid-19th century the rules for recording these landmarks and the customs for the use of these photos constantly changed. Among the photos examined were one photo of a christening, 35 confirmation group photos, three wedding and four funeral photos.



Moment of christening an infant in white swaddling clothes, Végvár, 1980s

This the first social event in the life of the individual although he or she is not aware of it at the time, which together with the church rules also expresses reception into the community and the provision of care by the family. The photo in the collection was probably taken in the 1980s; the informants deduced this date from the time of service of the minister in the photo. The primary verbal content associated with the photograph was lost because this photo came from a collection that had been thrown out or was selected by a woman teacher in Végvár together with other family photos to be thrown out or burnt. Thus for some reason this photo had become worthless and without function for its original owners and the event portrayed on it had, as it were, fallen out of family memory. On the photo the photographer recorded the actual moment of christening in the church, with the infant dressed in white swaddling clothes in the centre – its identity entirely obscured by the clothes – and the minister wearing a festive cloak and holding the christening jug. The parents and godparents in their Sunday best stand around, obscuring each other in the photo. The image is of a spontaneous nature showing the event from the angle of the photographer who had no possibility to intervene.

¹⁵ KUNT 1995. 12.

The persons in the image are paying attention to the ceremony conducted by the minister and we can conclude from their behaviour that they attributed great significance to this act.

No other christening image was found, but in the course of conversation when the question of the connections between politics, private life and the practice of religion arose, one of my informants mentioned the example of her daughter's christening.

“Well, for example, I wasn't in the church when my daughter was christened because at the time I worked at the people's council and they said that if they see me there, it's goodbye.¹⁶”



Confirmation group in Végvár, 1942

Both church and secular ceremonies provide the formal frames for the change of age group. The profane rites are closely connected to education: recognition that children are becoming adults is linked to passing examinations and completing different stages of schooling. Among the church ceremonies in the case of the Végvár Calvinists confirmation traditionally held at Easter can be regarded as such an act although it precedes the age of legal maturity by several years, being held at the age of 13-14 years. In earlier centuries in Hungary it was from this age that young people were entitled to a number of adult rights, for example the young men could begin to court girls and could freely enter the inn, while girls could receive suitors and wear the traditional headdress.¹⁷ However as the

¹⁶ Extract from interview with SzL 2013.

¹⁷ DÖMÖTÖR – HOPPÁL 1990. 472.

culture gradually changed and the childhood stage of life grew longer, the connection between confirmation and these rights weakened.

In Végvár

“she couldn’t go to a ball because she was only 13 at the time of her confirmation. No, no, not even with her family, with her mother and father!”¹⁸

Although confirmation did not bring a significant change in the status of a child, the photos and narratives indicate that it was and still is regarded as an important event. Among the 20th century photos with a religious subject the greatest number, a total of thirty, were taken on this occasion. Each of those confirmed received a copy of the group photo, so the same photo was found in a number of family photo collections in the village.

“Confirmation of young people born in 1955. István Nagy minister and old Józsi Kele the caretaker. We will find the same people on this school leaving photo, except for this girl, she was confirmed but she wasn’t with us because she graduated from the Romanian section, CL did too, this one too, this one died (pointing to figures in the photo), but they kept their religion, the others are all still alive.”¹⁹



Young confirmation candidates in front of the congregation in the Végvár church, 1970s–1980s

¹⁸ Extract from interview with Szné 2013.

¹⁹ Extract from interview with KL 2013.

There is only one photo in the collection of the examination-type ceremony following the church rules; it was taken from the balcony by the village's professional photographer Antal Knöbl around 1970–1980. In the photo the candidates can be seen seated in the front pews facing the altar, the girls in front, the boys at the back and behind them the members of the presbytery. Both the candidates and the congregation can be seen in special dress: “traditional white dress, the boys received a new suit for the occasion”.²⁰ While the style of the dress differs in the photos taken in different periods, the colours are the same. Apart from this photograph only group photos were taken of the confirmation, where the minister and caretaker can be seen in the centre and the young people around them, either mixed or with boys and girls in separate rows. A third of the photos were taken indoors after 1980 and show the figures behind the altar with the pulpit in the background. In earlier periods – presumably because of the poorer technical conditions and the light levels – the confirmation group was arranged in the church garden for the photo.



First communion group in Végvár, 1937

²⁰ Extract from interview with KL 2013.

The oldest confirmation photo was taken in the 1940s and shows a group of 41 persons. Several photos have survived from the 1950s where the number of candidates range from 24 to 37; in the case of these photos it is important to take into account that by that time the socialist dictatorship based on atheistic principles was already well established in Romania. On the photos taken in the 1960s–1980s the average number of persons is 15–20, then after the 1990s the number of young Calvinists receiving confirmation drops below 20. However because the photos were not collected on the basis of a representative methodology these figures give only a general idea of a trend. But they do nevertheless throw light on demographic characteristics and identity strategies: on the one hand the declining number of children resulting from the economic situation of the village, the decline in active Calvinist religious practice as a consequence of secularisation and Romanianisation and on the other hand the village turning inward in the face of external political and cultural threats, and the retaining and distinguishing power of religion.

Among photos of the village's Catholics the collection included a picture of the 1937 first communion group showing children around the age of six to eight years holding sacred images and candles. Here too the girls are dressed in white, most of them also have a wreath and veil on their head, the boys wear a jacket over a white shirt and short cloth trousers. According to the inscription, the teacher and sister stand in the centre of the group. The names on the back of the photo reveal that most of the children were descendants of the former Swabian settlers. This photo too was rescued from destruction; the symbols recorded in the visual content helped my informants to determine the occasion on which the photo was taken, but memories associated with the image have faded and without the inscription they would not have been able to identify the persons.



Wedding in the 1980s in Végvár

Throughout the world rich traditions are associated with the choice of partner, rooted in part in religious rules and in part in popular culture. In the full collection I found only one photo of a church wedding among the photos of my informants and another photo can be interpreted as an intermediary point because it had all the features of the standard group photos but was taken not in a studio but in the church garden so that here it is rather the involvement of the sacral space that can be observed.

In the first image the connection between the framing of the photo and the visual content are similar to those of the christening photo. This photo was taken by a professional photographer, so the framing shows the event from a wider angle; it is easier for the outside observer too to interpret the photo that is richer in detail. The active participants in the ceremony (bride, groom, witnesses, bridesmaids and pages) stood in front of the altar that, in keeping with the traditions of the Great Plain was low and surrounded by a carved wooden railing.²¹ The minister stands behind the altar. Judging from the gestures and posture recorded, he must have addressed a passionate sermon to the assembled congregation. The participants are dressed in festive clothing following the European fashion of the 1980s: the women wore long dresses made of shiny materials, the bride wears a veil and a long-sleeved white dress, the men are in dark suits. The floral decorations that were part of the wedding attire can also be clearly seen. The expressions on the faces are serious, the gazes are focused on the minister. Although it is clear from the photo that this was not posed, it reflects a kind of stiffness and order that must have been the result of the festive atmosphere of the event and the seriousness of the commitment.



Funeral in the 1950s–1960s

²¹ DÖMÖTÖR – HOPPÁL 1990. 465.

The subject of the third image is the wedding procession; although it can also be seen in many other photos it was included in the group of photos examined because the church can be seen in the background and so the sacral space also appears on the photo. This image reflects the most relaxed atmosphere: at this stage of the rite fewer rules determined the behaviour of the participants, indeed merrymaking and joking were also important.

The rite marking the end of life and of importance mainly for the living community appeared on photos already in the 19th century. Around the turn of the century photos were still taken showing the mourners standing around the open coffin and recording the actual deceased person.²² Funeral photos taken in Végvár in the second half of the 20th century show a closed coffin representing death but placing the emphasis on the gathering of mourners.

Although at that time the church also had an important role in this rite, the minister does not appear on the photos – that could also be attributed to chance selection of the moment. The older photograph (around 1950–1960) portrays the most lively scene among the landmark photos. The place is the cemetery where people have gathered for the funeral of a person presumably of importance for the community. The mourners stood around the still open grave into which an elderly woman has thrown a handful of earth in farewell, a sign of letting go of the deceased. This image portrays the events as they happened, stepping beyond the limitations of imitating mourning.

In the other photo, taken at the end of the 1960s, the coffin occupies the central place. The bier heaped with wreaths dominates the image, the mourners are in the background, partly hidden, only a few faces can be seen clearly, the viewer sees mainly expressions reflecting negative emotions. In this photograph the emphasis is less on the ceremonial actions and more on the emotions.

In addition to these there are two other funeral photos taken in Győröd (Giroda), a nearby village. Taken at the same time, they show the funeral procession from a distance and close up. In one image we see the coffin being carried on shoulders along the street, and in the other is a long line of mourners dressed in black. According to the narratives, the customs in Végvár were similar. Over the course of the 20th century the coffin was set up at first in the house and later in front of the church, then the mourners followed the funeral procession on the few kilometres to the cemetery.

22 KUNT 1995. 75.

A few conclusions

According to visual ethnographic theses examining phenomena related to photographic use customs, documentation intentions lie behind the taking of private photos. People wish to record the moment they consider worth remembering, they project its significance into the future. This implicit form of attributing value was characteristic up to the end of the 20th century as long as the technical conditions required photographers to strictly select how they use the 24 or 32 frames in the rolls of film in their analog cameras. Examining the thematic proportions of the images of religious subjects in Végvár from this angle we find that confirmation was the most frequently occurring image subject accounting for the largest numbers in our sample. These images illustrate religiosity in their locations, actors and inner content. Arranging the photos in order it can be seen that the successive generations entered the religious continuity of the local community. It was mainly group photos that were taken of confirmation: thus the local customs placed greater emphasis not on individual but on collective religiosity. This type of photo

“declares that there, then, these few people regarded themselves as belonging together and considered it important to record this.”²³

The narratives placed special emphasis on the collective lunches or suppers²⁴ that were as lavish as the possibilities allowed, and were regarded as an essential part of the celebrations, nevertheless these meals marking the end of the ceremony were not recorded. While it was mainly only the immediate family and close acquaintances or in cases neighbours who were present at christenings and confirmations, many people from the village were invited to weddings and wakes.

After examining the whole collection of photographic material it can be said that although when portraying the landmark ceremonies great emphasis was placed on the minister and the sacral space, the members of the community are always present too in these rites accompanying – in the form of a procession – their companions on the passage.

An analysis of the layers of visual content of close to fifty photos from Végvár portraying religious subjects together with the background information revealed by the narratives shows that in the 20th century despite the restrictive political measures the Calvinist Hungarians of Végvár actively practised their religion and as the photographs show they gathered in large numbers in the church for different ceremonies. However the photographs only portray and passively transmit the sacral acts, they do not take part in them. In using the photos they remember a moment or event in the life of an individual or the group in which he or she was integrated, that is, the person comes to the fore and religion appears as a part of life, an integral part of the individual history. These photos are preserved because

23 KINCSES 2006. 39.

24 NYÍRI 1975.152

of the now deceased person or the still living persons who appear on them. And if the memory of the person is lost, or if for some reason the descendants come into conflict with their predecessors, the photos of christenings, confirmations or Christmases lose their value, are thrown out, or burnt. The fact that there is a person who rescues these foreign photos from destruction is an indication that the members and generations have differing attitudes to the community. According to the narratives of the local people, when the justification for the very existence of the community was challenged, efforts were made to change its values by force and restrict its freedom of conscience and it was surrounded with foreigners, the community closed its ranks, clung to its traditions, religion and values and to each other, even if they were not able to do so openly. But this was the condition for their survival.²⁵

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²⁵ GAGYI 2006. 120.

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