

CHANGE OF DENOMINATION AS A GESTURE OF INTEGRATION

EXAMPLES FROM CSONGRÁD (19TH TO 20TH CENTURY)

The continuous growth of historical literature on the situation and everyday difficulties of religious minorities shows that the study of local communities can always add further details and enrich knowledge on the coexistence of denominations and conflicts between them.² In this study I analyse a previously unexamined slice in the social history of Csongrád, the path and possibilities of the local Calvinist minority for social integration from the early 19th century up to the construction of the Csongrád Calvinist church (1937).

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The fact, that in the course of the 16th century the inhabitants of Szentes became Calvinists basically determined the relation with the neighbour settlement, the Roman Catholic Csongrád. The frame of the first documented conflict was an event that the people of Szentes simply called a “flight”.

In the summer of 1685 Tatars cooperating with the Turks set up camp in Szentes and, in their desperation, the people of Szentes fled to the Csongrád fortress. The people of Csongrád took in the refugees but the authorities forbade them to hold religious services or give religious instruction to the Calvinist children. The people of Szentes therefore kept a close watch on the movement of the Tatar troops in their town, and when they withdrew, they immediately left their restrictive refuge.³

Following the *Carolina resolutio* issued by King Charles III the differences between the two settlements were further aggravated.⁴ The Csongrád parish priest kept a vigilant eye on the respect of Catholic feasts and rest days in the entire region. In 1725, for example, after the people of Szentes worked all day on the feast of Saint Emmerich, the Csongrád parish priest rebuked them and the priest barely escaped a lynching.⁵

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2 As an example, see studies by Muntagné Tabajdi, Zsuzsanna.

3 SIMA 1914. 145–146.

4 *Carolina resolutio*: a decree of King Charles III ordering the situation of Hungarian Protestants (1731). Among the most important measures it extended the rights of big landowners also to the exercise of religion, imposed harsh punishment on anyone converting from Roman Catholicism to a Protestant faith, and made it compulsory for all denominations to respect the Catholic feast days. MAGYAR KATOLIKUS LEXIKON II. 175–176.

5 SIMA 1914. 223.

In the 17th and 18th centuries Csongrád was denominationally homogeneous, all of its inhabitants were Roman Catholics.⁶ The first known data indicating a Calvinist moving into the town dates from 1827. We can read in the protocol of an episcopal see interrogation the name of a 30-year-old Calvinist hajdú⁷ István Ibolya performing service in Csongrád but born in Szentes. According to his confession, István Ibolya witnessed the scene where the parish priest of Csongrád rubbed lard on his sick housekeeper. The parish priest declared with indignation that the hajdú only wanted to take petty revenge on him because the priest had forbidden him to see his beloved, a servant of the clergy house. The priest was afraid that “bastardry would cause a scandal in the priest’s house”.⁸ A document written in defence of the parish priest cites another ignominious case to discredit the words of the witness:

“The above-named Calvinist Istvány Ibolya, as a kind of hajdú, shot a dog that belonged to the master’s workers. He ordered János Dányi, a resident of Csongrád to cut up the dog and cook it with cabbage for the Catholic workers who ate the dog meat and they all fell sick”.⁹

The story was known throughout the town and it appears from the terms used in the account that they regarded it not as an isolated, individual prank or a case of a hajdú outwitting the peasants, but as an *interdenominational conflict*: the story of a Calvinist who makes Catholics eat dog meat. In the statement he made, Antal Eszes 70-year-old council member, in addition to the weak morals and character of the hajdú, summed up his greatest sin in the following words: “He’s a Calvinist – it’s not worth keeping him in Csongrád.”¹⁰ The hajdú was also questioned at the hearing; he claimed that he was prospering in Csongrád and went to hear mass in the Catholic church almost every day.¹¹

István Ibolya was tied to Csongrád by his service, his name does not appear later among the inhabitants of the settlement. The census held not long after in the settlement, in 1828, does not record the presence of a single Calvinist or Lutheran family.¹²

6 The records of contemporary Canonical Visitations clearly state that persons of other religions had not previously lived in Csongrád.

7 *Hajdú*: Employee of the county or a landlord with security or magisterial function in the 17–19th centuries.

8 Vác Episcopal and Capitular Archive, Acta Privatorum (hereinafter: VPL APriv.) – János Mátyus 22 June 1824. Document signed by several witnesses.

9 VPL APriv. – János Mátyus, 22 June 1824. Document signed by several witnesses.

10 VPL APriv. – János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Record of interrogation, evidence given by János Eszes.

11 “Although I am a Calvinist, I appear here in the Catholic church almost every day”. 10 July 1823. Record of interrogation, evidence given by István Ibolya. The practice was far from unusual around that time also among Lutherans living in the Tés filial of Csongrád where – in the absence of a preacher – they took part in Roman Catholic devotions and spiritual instruction. Vác Episcopal and Capitular Archive, Acta Parochiarum (hereinafter: VPL APar. Cs.) 2 July 1815. Letter from Tés tobacco farmers to the diocesan bishop.

12 BARTA 1980. 198.

From the mid-19th century the number of Protestant inhabitants in the town gradually increased. The daughter of Lajos Lendvai, an estate manager of Calvinist faith and his Catholic wife, Jozefa Draskovits was christened in 1849 – that is, in keeping with the practice of the time, the father had given a letter of mutual concession.¹³ In the 1850s we find among the inhabitants of Csongrád József Csajági, a Calvinist noble and József Hering, a Lutheran bookbinder.¹⁴ In the years following the Compromise of 1867 the Csongrád parish priest recorded, in addition to the 16,772 Roman Catholics living in the inner town, 517 Jews, 56 Augustans, 9 Helvetians and 2 Greek Catholics.¹⁵

The first Calvinist midwife appears in the records in the mid-1860s. Mrs Gáspár Magdits, qualified midwife was paid 50 forints a year by the town. She carried out her work without hindrance right up until 1888, when parish priest Antal Hegyi forbade her, as a person of a different denomination, to enter the sacristy of the Catholic church which meant that she could not attend the christening of infants she had helped bring into the world. However, Mrs Magdits was well aware that Catholic mothers regarded the christening as a task of outstanding importance and if it was not held they would not use her services. The midwife brought a civil case in which she attempted to prove that banning her from the sacristy was equivalent to depriving her of her position.¹⁶

In general, the Protestants living in Csongrád belonged to the more prosperous stratum of civil servants or engaged in valued trades. In 1895 the chief administrative officer of Csongrád and the district administrative officer were both Calvinists, as was the municipal assistant physician, János Borsos. Borsos's son, Imre recalled the state of affairs in the 1890s as follows:

“The town was 99 per cent Catholic. My father, Antal Szomodi a cutter, and József Bagossy a merchant constituted the Calvinist Church in Csongrád. The three of them requested the drawing teacher Ferenc Vannay to give instruction in the Calvinist religion, and for this my parents paid him 5 forints a month. He had only two pupils: Pista Szomodi and myself.”¹⁷

Ferenc Vannay was also a talented painter, so the parish priest Antal Hegyi commissioned him to paint the Assumption of Mary (1894) and the Saint Anne (1896) altar paintings in the Church of Our Lady.¹⁸

13 Archive of the Parish of Our Lady, Csongrád (hereinafter: NPI) Registers of births, 14 February 1849.

14 NPI Registers of births.

15 NPI *Historia Domus*, Csongrád Vol. I, 113.

16 For detail on the activity of Mrs Magdits, see: Gyöngyössi 2014. 188–192.

17 Jánosi 1983. 70. The local decision on religious instruction for Calvinist children was approved by the school board in 1896. See: Hungarian National Archive, Csongrád County Archive, Csongrád Archive, Municipality of Csongrád, 1865–1872 and 1880–1923 Municipality School Board, from 1897 documents of the State Elementary and Higher Elementary School Boards 1869–1919 (1925) (hereinafter: MNL CsML CsL School Board protocols), 23. 10. 1896. No. 7.

18 VPL APar. Cs. 27 August 1898. Record of episcopal see interrogation, evidence given by Ferenc Vannay.

The work connection between Antal Hegyi and Vannay is of particular note because the Csongrád parish priest regularly voiced his deep antipathy towards members of other denominations. Writing in the columns of *Csongrádi Közlöny* [Csongrád Gazette] he called it outrageous that Jews and Calvinists held the most important leading positions in the Roman Catholic town.¹⁹ He described measures taken by district administrative officer Ferenc Réti as a series of offences against religion that he – as Catholic spiritual leader – had to strongly oppose. An instructive example in the series of articles is the ban on gathering twigs and on festive canon shots on Corpus Christi day.²⁰ When Ferenc Borbás, an employee of the district administration converted before his marriage to his fiancée's Calvinist denomination, parish priest Hegyi tried to shame him through the press and to link his "disloyalty" to the Catholic religion to his professional diligence.²¹ He refused to enter László Lászlóffy Jr, a landowner among those to be married because his fiancée was a Lutheran woman.²² That the views taken of Calvinist intellectuals in Csongrád in this period were very contradictory was seen in the strong protests on the grounds of her religion made by parents when Zsella Pepich, a Calvinist teacher took up her position.²³

At first Protestants in Csongrád could attend religious services only in Szentes. However, by the turn of the 19th to the 20th century Zoltán Futó and Lajos Gerőc, ministers in Szentes, and on major feast days Lajos Pap, district preacher? (körlelkész) preached in the Central Elementary School or in the Girls' Higher Elementary School.²⁴ The Csongrád Calvinist filial church was officially established on 31 October 1904 in the art room of the Girls' Higher Elementary School.²⁵

Although around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century the number of both Jews and Calvinists in Csongrád increased, their numbers were nearly insignificant compared to the Roman Catholic majority (approx. 21,000 to 500). As a consequence, the main possibility for improving social integration was to change religion or denomination.

The rules for converting and change of religion in the period examined were set out in the relevant sections of Law No. 53 of 1868. According to the main provisions of the law, such a procedure could only be initiated by persons over the age of 18. The person concerned had to appear with two freely chosen witnesses

19 *Csongrádi Közlöny*, 22 December 1895. Vol. II, No. 51, p. 3.

20 *Csongrádi Közlöny*, 23 June 1895. Vol. II, No. 25, p. 3.

21 "His soul will give account before God and the Catholics do not lose nor the Protestants gain with people of this calibre who leave their faith for a woman, but we cannot suppress our sense of disapproval that Catholic employees of a Catholic community undertake such services. What can people who think this way about religion feel in the matter of their sense of duty?" *Tiszavidék*, 21 May 1983. Vol. IV, No. 21, p. 3.

22 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 14 March 1892. Letter from residents of Csongrád to the Vác Episcopal See.

23 *Csongrádi Újság*, 22 October 1905. Vol. III, No. 43, p. 2.

24 MNL CsML CsL School Board protocols, 22. 03. 1896. No. 124. At the request of the Ministry of the Szentes Calvinist Church, the classroom of the boys' first grade in the central school is to be made available on Sundays for religious services to be held for Calvinist residents of Csongrád.

25 *Csongrádi Újság*, 30 October 1904. Vol. II No. 44, p. 2.

before the local leader of the congregation they wished to leave, where they were to declare their intention to leave. This was to be repeated two weeks later. The spiritual leader was to issue a certification on both occasions – if, for any reason, he refused to do so, certification by the witnesses was also sufficient. If the certifications were presented to the minister of the chosen church, there was no further legal obstacle to the necessary ceremonies. Notification of the successful conversion was sent to the leaders of the church that had been left.²⁶

According to data in the archive of the Church of Our Lady in Csongrád, the first person to convert was Mária Bimbó, an unmarried woman, in 1860.²⁷ In the next ten years six men followed her example – three of them unmarried young men. From 1870 up to the end of the century a total of eight Calvinists decided to become members of the Roman Catholic Church. The number tripled in the next three decades (35 conversions), and between 1930 and 1937 there were a further 13 conversions. Written documents have survived in the Csongrád parish for a total of 64 persons between 1860 and 1937. Men and women appear in almost equal numbers (30–34). Of the 34 women, 21 were children or unmarried, three were widows. Among the men it is possible to establish that seven were unmarried young men.

The place of birth of the converts shows great diversity: 17 different place names can be found in the personal documents, mainly in Békés and Bács-Kiskun Counties. The following variants are given for the name of the first religion (that was to be left): *Helvetian* (10), *Evangelical Reformed* (14), *Reformed* (6), *Augustan Evangelical* (5), *Augustan* (3), *Evangelical Lutheran* (1), *Lutheran* (1), *Calvinist* (1). This gives the impression that in reality they were unable to distinguish between the different Protestant churches and trends.

There is very little information on the social status of the converts. Two persons are called gentlewoman or gentlelady, but we also find on the list, for example, the widow of the chief notary of Somogy County, and the wife of the director of the Csongrád higher elementary school.²⁸ The list of names examined includes a surprisingly high number of orphans and children born outside marriage.

Widow Mrs. János Ballai née Mária Soós is the only person of whom it can be said that she converted to the Roman Catholic religion on her deathbed. Because of the state of health of the applicant, parish priest Antal Hegyi exempted her from the need to apply twice.²⁹ In a number of cases we can see that a few years after the decision made, typically by the head of the family, other close family members were christened within a few years. This happened in the case of the three Budai children, whose father was born in Szarvas and left his *Evangelical*

26 Law No. LIII of 1868 on reciprocity among the officially recognised religious denominations. For details, see: <http://net.jogtar.hu>

27 NPI 18 November 1860. Conversion of Mária Bimbó from the Helvetian faith. Examination of the documents filed under *Conversi et apostatae* in the Vác Episcopal and Capitular Archive produced further data to supplement the information gained from material in the local parish.

28 NPI Widow Mrs. Sándor Plachner née Emilia Nádasdi Sárközy, widow of the chief notary of Somogy County, 17 March 1926; Mrs József Krómer née Valéria Dencsi 20 November 1928.

29 NPI Widow Mrs János Ballai née Mária Soós, 9 October 1891.

Lutheran religion in 1912, at the age of twenty.³⁰ Mária Valéria Krómer was christened at the age of ten, two years after her mother converted.³¹ Their Roman Catholic husbands and brothers-in-law were the witnesses at the conversions of Terézia and Ilona Kőrös. The process had to be speeded up because one of the young women was pregnant and, according to the letters of mutual concession, the child would have had to follow its mother's religion.³² Sándor Sütő who was born in Kiskunhalas took the decision to change denomination because of his Csongrád Catholic fiancée.³³ The wife and daughter of Ferenc Vattay, who was born in Törökszentmiklós and converted in 1934, were Roman Catholics.³⁴

A number of persons returned to their original religion in their old age, after the death of their spouses. When Mihály Martinek's wife died, "it removed the last obstacle" in the way of returning to the Roman Catholic religion he had left before his marriage.³⁵ Four other women also took the decision to change denomination after their spouses died.

In the period examined the ministers in Szentes issued the legally required dismissal letters in a total of three cases. The certificates typically had to be drawn up and signed by the two witnesses: if they were unable to read and write they turned to the Roman Catholic presbytery in Szentes where the priest or one of the assistants came to their help. The reason for refusal can be sensed behind the case of the conversion in 1872 of Mihály Bozsik, a soldier. The Szentes parish priest made the following report to the vicar forane:

"The Szentes minister János Filó, angrily attacked the two witnesses, using unseemly expressions: he declared that he does not recognise Mihály Bozsik as a member of his congregation because the Calvinists in Csongrád do not belong to the Helvetian religious community in Szentes. Besides, the person concerned should apply to the representative in Csongrád or go to Kecskemét."³⁶

It seems very likely that the substance of this declaration did not reach the faithful in Csongrád, as no example was found of anyone travelling to Kecskemét in the matter of their conversion.

Examining the persons of the witnesses we find that if a young woman of Calvinist religion converted to the Catholic faith of her husband, she was accompanied to the minister by her father-in-law or brother-in-law. It is also typical that women friends served as witnesses for women, but there are no records of female witnesses for men. Anyone who was unable or unwilling to take witnesses from

30 NPI Erzsébet, Terézia and Ferenc Budai, children of Mihály Budai and Teréz Leirer, 18 January 1915.

31 NPI Mária Valéria Krómer, 26 August 1930.

32 NPI Mrs József Papp née Ilona Kőrös and Mrs Rókus Győri née Terézia Kőrös, 30 July 1931.

33 NPI Sándor Sütő, 1 November 1875, 16 November.

34 NPI Ferenc Vattay, 28 March 1934

35 NPI Mihály Martinek, 24 April 1933.

36 NPI Mihály Bozsik, 23 October 1872; 2 February 1873.

Csongrád went out to the market in Szentes to find someone willing to perform the task. This is what Márton Lucza, a navy did in 1882; the minister “as usual” dismissed him, but his witnesses were illiterate and were unable to write the certificate. When they realised this, the group dispersed, the witnesses returned to their business. The validity of the first declaration was confirmed by the second witnesses.³⁷ The documents also suggest the presence of a “specialist” figure: Mátyás Juhász must have acquired a reputation as someone who knew how such a statement must be made, what had to be done and how to formulate the certificate. The experience of such a witness must have strengthened the courage of anyone considering a change of denomination.

In the following we examine how many persons in Csongrád decided to leave the Roman Catholic Church. From the mid-19th century to 1937 a total of five women and ten men converted to the Calvinist Church. Three of the women from Csongrád moved to Szentes as brides, two of the men had settled far from their place of birth. The Csongrád parish priest was informed after the conversion. In the other ten cases we find older people, in their fifties and sixties, who decided to change denomination. In the case of Rozália Fekete it could be worth mentioning that she became a Lutheran in order to be able to obtain a divorce from her first husband more easily. However, she never practised her new religion and as she approached death she wanted to return to the Roman Catholic Church.³⁸

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On the whole it can be said that in the majority of cases the Roman Catholic Church in Csongrád absorbed new arrivals, typically Protestants born elsewhere. Joining the Catholic Church was a step of key importance for the integration of persons regarded as rootless outsiders. It signalled their readiness to remove obstacles in the way of their integration and their desire to participate in the important occasions of community representation, solemn church feasts and holy mass. It also reflects the desire to overcome at least part of the multiple social handicaps (for example, in the case of Calvinist orphans). If someone was born elsewhere, or born out of wedlock, or was an orphan, such circumstances could not be changed – but denominational allegiance could be.

It can also be seen that there are many young people, single girls and young men in their twenties, who decided to change their religion or denomination. In Csongrád, belonging to the Protestant congregation significantly reduced the chances of marrying: mixed marriages were the least favoured. In the case of such a marriage, the Letters of Mutual Concession were always made out in favour of the Catholic partner, children born of the marriage would all be Catholics. Older women and widows are the other typical group: when pressure from the family or spouse ceased, they immediately decided to make the gesture of assimilation, and shed the burden of otherness. The transition was significantly facilitated by

37 NPI Márton Lucza, 2 November; 6 November 1882.

38 NPI Rozália Fekete, 18 August; 6 September 1927.

the fact that for Calvinists in Csongrád there were serious obstacles to practising their faith: they could attend religious services only in Szentés but that town was too far away to make the journey every week.

How little pull the Protestant churches had on Csongrád could be seen very clearly in the 1890s. At that time the town's Roman Catholic priest was a man with political ambitions and a forceful, difficult personality who strongly divided the faithful: they either hated or adored Antal Hegyi. There were even some who were so dissatisfied with the parish priest that they left the Roman Catholic Church. In 1897–98 a total of 11 people took this step, nine of them expressing their intention on the same day, in a group.³⁹ Another denomination was not an alternative for these disenfranchised individuals.

It can be said that those who converted to the Roman Catholic Church in Csongrád made a declaration of intent to the community: they left behind what they could, their religion, the sign of their otherness and status as an outsider. In the absence of opportunities, their ties to their religion had worn thin and before the Csongrád Calvinist Church was built in 1937 they had very little chance of nurturing and strengthening those ties.

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³⁹ NPI 25 April 1898.

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