

## THE 450 YEARS OLD PSALMS FROM GENEVA AND THE ATTEMPT TO TRANSLATE THEM INTO ROMANIAN

CSABA PÉTER<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** In the midst of the written records of protestant missions held among the Transylvanian Romanians we put a great store on translating the congregational songs, mainly the psalms from Geneva to Romanian. With this effort they tried to take the common people into the cultic acts with the use of active and understandable language, in an acceptable form.

**Keywords:** Psalm from Geneva, Calvinist songs, Romanian reformed communities

Before we talk about the Romanian psalms, and the protestant missions among the Romanians, we should observe the country's population and the nationality composition in those days. At the turn of the 16th century the population of Transylvania looked as follows: 200.000 Hungarians (47%), 55.000 Székelys (13%), 70.000 Saxons (16%) and 100.000 Romanians (24%), all together 425.000. These numbers with the following turn of century changed in a way so that the total population size of Transylvania reached 700.000, but the proportion of Romanian people was still below one-third<sup>2</sup>.

The Romanians were first mentioned as half-nomad community, living as shepherds and border-wardens in the northern slope of Făgăraș Mountains. At first they lived free, but in the course of time their already noble leaders, the boyars and voivodes forced them into serfdom. Their territory in the first place were the under populated or totally uninhabited mountains, where they lived as half-nomad shepherds. Later they show up near bigger towns and the suburbs, or among the Saxon communities, where we already speak about immovability and farming lifestyle.

During church service they used the old Slavonic language, which was neither understood, nor spoken by the people. Even among the priests only the more educated ones knew this language. The others had learned

---

<sup>1</sup> Csaba Péter, Calvinist minister, teacher of the Partium Christian University, Department of Theology. E-mail: [csabapeter67@gmail.com](mailto:csabapeter67@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Varga E., Árpád, ed. *Nyárádi R. Károly, Erdély népesedéstörténete*, Központi Statisztikai Hivatal Levéltára, Budapest, 2003, 151–153.

to read and write, so that they could read the mass from the liturgical book, which still was not understood by them.

The Transylvanian Romanians were tried to be reformed as far back as the middle of the 16th century. Among these mission efforts the Romanian printed catechisms<sup>3</sup>, the translation of the Holy Scripture and the translation of the congregational songs into Romanian had an outstanding role<sup>4</sup>.

### **The congregational song or folk song**

The songs sung during Christian church services and the songs used here are called folk songs. This public, congregational song has strophic structure and the whole community takes part in singing. We do not speak only about serving the liturgist' and the cantor's responsorial service, but about serving the whole community's church service. One of the main characteristic of the folk song is the simple melody and lyrics, but this did not mean the destruction of the theological and confessional message.

The song-repertoire that emerged during the centuries has changed in the years after the Reformation. In the first step they kept the melodies and they „reformed” the lyrics. These songs form the collection of the 16-17th century hand-written and printed graduals. As second step, they wrote new lyrics to which new or already existing melodies were added. The two collections were used side by side for a long time, and then the first was gradually crowded out of use.

### **Psalms from Geneva, 1562-2012**

The collection known as Psalms from Geneva is a separate part of the protestant song collection. Of course the basis is formed by the 150 Psalms of Holy Scripture. However the text of the Holy Scripture, using the medieval psalm tones, could not be inserted among the congregational songs. Communities were provided with songs that had memorisable and simple melodies and lyrics. This is the reason why a new translation of the Holy Scripture Psalms was needed. In the case of the Psalms from Geneva we do not speak about a simple translation of the Holy Scripture, but translation of work of arts. The Hebrew texts were translated in a way that the 125 selected and well-known melodies (in many cases melody compilations) from the

---

<sup>3</sup> First in the line is the catechism printed in 1544 in Nagyszeben (Sibiu) with Cyrillic letters about which we were informed from literature, the former account books from Nagyszeben (Sibiu) and the reports. The existence of this catechism is questioned by neither the Romanian, nor the Hungarian historiography. This was the first Romanian printed text. In the second place we should mention another catechism also printed in Romanian but with Cyrillic letters. It was printed by the deacon Coresi near Brassó (Braşov), in Bolgárszeg (Ccheii Braşovului), in 1560-60.

<sup>4</sup> Todorescu-fragment

middle of the 16th century could be sung in a verse form. The translators had to pay attention to two important things: in the first place to preserve the Biblicism of the texts, second to adapt them to the chosen melodies.

The first sketchy attempts were made in 1539 in Strasbourg. 23 years passed away until a bigger group translated the lyrics and prepared the melodies. The consequence of this was that the materials were not solid in respect of neither literary nor musical way. However this did not prevent the Genevian reformer's dream to be fulfilled: psalm singing was the biblical answer of the congregation to God's Word.

The Swiss Reformation and the more strengthening Calvinism that followed got big importance in the Psalms from Geneva. The first, 16th century translations, the Latin, the Ambrosius Lobwasser-made German translation, Philips van Marnix's Dutch edition of the psalms, the Czech translation give proof of this. In this same century Mihály Sztárai also made a Hungarian translation, but because of its limping language it did not last.

In 1606-1607 Albert Szenczi Molnár made such a great translation that it became the common treasure of the Hungarian Calvinism up to this day. The translation came out in Hernborn, in 1607.

### The Romanian translation of the Psalms

In the manuscript collection of the Academic Library of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) we can find two little books containing translations of the Psalms. The first one is János Viski's work from 1697, the second one István Istvánházi's work from 1703. Both books were copied in South Transylvania, the first one in Alsóboldogfalva (Bodogaia) and Algyógy (Geoagiu), the second one in Malomvíz (Râu de Mori).

Fig. 1

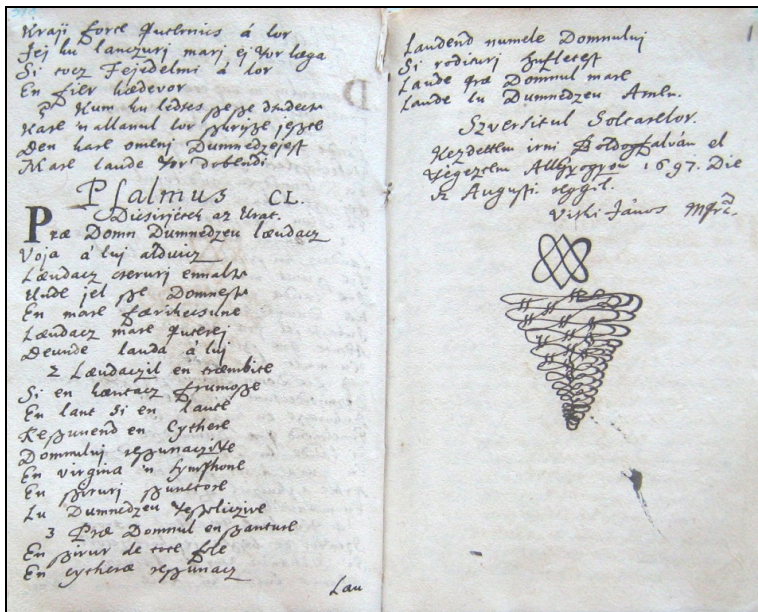


The Title Page of the translation by János Viski

The manuscript from 1697 was presented by more: in 1872 Gheorghe Silasi, in 1884 Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, in 1942 Nicolae Draganu, in 1960 László Muzsnai, in 1973 Alin Mihai Gherman, in 2007 Levente Nagy. Hiador Sztripszky and György Alekszics in their work in 1912, about the Todorescu-fragment also mentioned it.

János Viski's manuscript includes all the 150 psalms in Romanian translation, written with Latin letters, but Hungarian orthography. On the pages after the 150 psalms one can find 34, mainly paeans from the hymn-books of that time, some Romanian prayers, two of these written with Cyrillic letters, and some parts from the Holy Scripture<sup>5</sup>. The place and the exact time of the copying can be determined from the entries between the songs: Algyógy: 19th of August, 1697.

Fig. 2



Inside of the translation by János Viski

The fact that we can find a Hungarian incipit before every psalm and the comparison between the Romanian and the Szenczi translation suggests that it was the Romanian version of Albert Szenczi Molnár translated psalms that were already used in the congregations<sup>6</sup>.

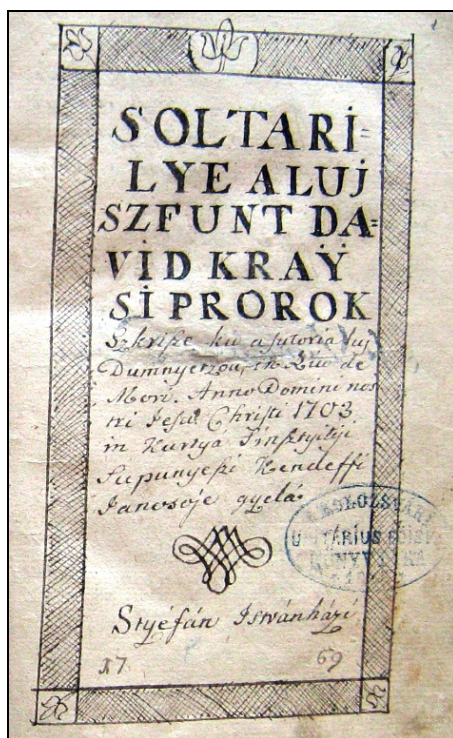
<sup>5</sup> The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer in Greek, but with Cyrillic letters, the 23. Psalm copied from LXX (with Greek letters).

<sup>6</sup> Juhász, István, p. 214.

The maker of the manuscript<sup>7</sup>, János Viski Calvinist minister is not identical with the translator of the text. In the manuscript there are no references to the translator nor to the fact of translating, thus we have to accept the assumption that János Viski was only the copyist of the extant manuscript. He studied in Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca) and while he was making the copies he was serving as minister in Alsóboldogfalva and Algyógy. He was also the preceptor of the Balogh noble family, whose estates were in the neighbourhood.

Another translation manuscript<sup>8</sup> from 1703 was made in the same area. Its maker was István Istvánházi, minister of Malomvíz and court priest of the Kendefi family. This manuscript is not complete.

**Fig. 3**



**The Title Page of the translation by István Istvánházi**

The third translation can be found on the blank pages attached to Infant Christian, owned by Mihail Halici Jr. According to the handwriting it comes from Mihail Halici the elder, presumably from the 1640s. Here we speak about the Romanian translation of only two psalm sections.

<sup>7</sup> Academic Library of Cluj Napoca, Ms-R-1502 manuscript

<sup>8</sup> Academic Library of Cluj Napoca, Ms-U-579 manuscript

Comparing the three manuscripts we accept Alin Mihai Gherman's conclusion according to which there is no direct connection between the three translations. Neither of these is a copy of the others. They were made independently of each other; nevertheless there was a big distance between the proveniences of the two big psalm-books neither locally, nor in time<sup>9</sup>.

Supposedly an oral translation already existed, known by the Romanian reformed communities of the area and probably they used it as well. The written form of these can be both the Viski, and the Istvánházi manuscript. This can be concluded from the similarity between the two manuscripts and the minor difference between the time and place of making.

The translation of the psalms from Geneva occurred in the second half of the 1640s. The Calvinist synod held in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș) in 1643 ordered the use of the psalms from Geneva during the church services. Some communities were already singing them from the beginning of the century, even during services, but from this year the use of the psalms was compulsory<sup>10</sup>. The translation made for the reformed Romanians could be the consequence of this, since in that age the Transylvanian Romanians' church was subordinated to the Transylvanian Calvinists' synod, therefore they were also obligated to use the psalms during services.

The Halici manuscript was probably made before the synod's decision, because according to N. Draganu it was made in 1640<sup>11</sup>, hence it came prior to the decision of making compulsory the singing of the psalms.

Taken all around we can assume that people needed the Romanian translation of the psalms from Geneva and Calvinist songs, because more reformed Romanian communities lived in the southern, south-western part of Transylvania. From the fact that there are some differences between the Viski and Istvánházi translations we can conclude that near the above mentioned oral songs they also had an already non-existent written form of the songs.

All in all we can assume that the psalms from Geneva struck root in the religious, congregational practices of European peoples<sup>12</sup>. After 450 years, when a new Romanian translation is in the making, it makes a bridge among the cohabited people, nations and religions.

Translated by Noémi Kiss

---

<sup>9</sup> Gherman, Alin Mihai, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> Păclișan, Zenove, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Draganu, Nicolae, *Mihail Halici*, in: Dacoromania IV, 1924–1926, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> As curiosity we mention that Albert Szenczi Molnár's psalms were also printed in Eastern Slovak dialect in Debrecen, in 1752. This is the earliest printed record of the Eastern Slovak language.

## REFERENCES

- \*\*\*, *The Psalms from Geneva*, translated by István Istvánházi, Academic Library of Cluj Napoca, Ms-U-579 manuscript.
- \*\*\*, *The Psalms from Geneva*, translated by János Viski, Academic Library of Cluj Napoca, Ms-R-1502 manuscript.
- Drăganu, Nicolae, *Mihail Halici*, in: Dacoromania, Anul IV, 1924 – 1926, p. 77-162.
- Gherman, Alin Mihai, *Despre cronologia și tipografia textelor lui Dosoftei (About the Chronology and Typography of Dosoftei's Texts)*, in: Annales Universitatis Apulensis, Series Historica, 12/II, 2008, p. 164-175.
- Juhász, István, *Reformáció az erdélyi románok között (The Reformation among the Trensylvanian Romanians)*, Kolozsvár, 1940.
- Musnai, László, *Új adatok Halici Mihály életéhez, hagyatékához (New Data on Mihály Halici's Life and Legacy)*, in: Nyelv – és irodalomtudományi közlemények, IV évfolyam, 1-2, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1960, p. 58-81.
- Nagy, Levente, *Szenczi Molnár Zsoltárok román kontextusban (Szenczi Molnár's Psalms in Romanian Context)*, in: *Zsoltár a magyar irodalomban*, szerk. Petrőczy Éva-Szabó András, KRE-L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2011, p. 213-225.
- Păclișan, Zenove, *Biserica românească și Calvinismul de la moartea lui Gavrilă Bethlen, până la Unirea cu Roma (The Romanian Church and Calvinism from the Death of Gavrilă Bethlen until the Union with Rome)*, in: Cultura Creștină, Anul II, nr 6-7, Blaj, 1912.
- Varga E., Árpád, ed., *Nyárádi R. Károly, Erdély népesedéstörténete (Transylvania's Demographic History)*, Központi Statisztikai Hivatal Levéltára, Budapest, 2003.