

*HEGYI Ádám*¹:

The Idol Moloch in the Church. The Interconnection of Calvinist Identity and the Memory of Reformation in the South- Eastern Part of the Hungarian Kingdom in the 18th Century²

Abstract.

In Vadász, Arad County, in the second third of the 18th century, the statue of Moloch in the village church caused a conflict, as the local Reformed minister had had it destroyed around 1769. At first glance, the situation seems simple since it is not customary in Reformed churches to have the decoration typical of Catholic churches, so it is not surprising that the minister removed it. Yet the situation is not clear-cut because we do not know why it had not bothered anyone in the two

¹ Associate Professor at the University of Szeged, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Cultural Heritage and Human Information Science, e-mail: hegyi@bibl.u-szeged.hu.

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hundred years since the Reformation began. In our study, we describe – through the example of the statue destruction in Vadász – what Reformed identity was like in the Kingdom of Hungary in the 18th century. In our analysis, we find that the development of Reformed conscience was delayed compared to the western half of Europe. The same is demonstrated in the 18th-century Reformed Church history writings, as the events of the Reformation had not been put on paper in most congregations up until then. Most congregational histories are based on oral traditions, with little historical literature being used to support them.

Keywords: collective memory, Reformed church, oral tradition, historiography, Calvinist identity, history of reading, idol demolition, history of Reformation, Hungarian Kingdom

In the Hungarian Kingdom, the Holy Society in between the Körös and Maros Rivers (hereinafter as: Holy Society of Körös and Maros; Hun: *Körös Maros közti Sz(ent) Tarsaság*) was the name of a diocese of the Reformed Church of Hungary located on the territory bordered by the Körös rivers, the River Tisza, the Lower Danube and the ranges of the Carpathians. The history of the diocese goes back to the Age of Reformation, but in fact it was established in 1734 on the basis of the *Carolina Resolutio*, when the borders of the dioceses were determined in the Reformed District of the Transtisza (Tiszántúl). At this time, the Reformed Diocese of Békés consisted of 22 parishes (Makó, Hódmezővásárhely, Szentés, Algyő, Békés, Gyula, Öcsöd, Szentandrás, Gyoma, Tarcsa, Fás, Vésztő, Doboz, Vári, Gyarmat (Iermata Neagră), Nagyzerind (Zerind), Bélzerind (Zerindu Mic), Vadász (Vânători), Ágya (Adea), Erdőhegy (Chişineu-Criş), Gyorok (Ghioroc), Sebes (Sebiş)), among which the parishes of Algyő and Fás later ceased to exist.³ Despite the fact that after 1734 the diocese renamed itself as the Reformed Diocese of Békés,⁴ its

³ BARCSA János (1908): *A Tiszántúli Ev. Ref. Egyházkerület története*, 2. kötet 1711–1822. Debrecen, Debrecen szabad kir. város Könyvnyomda Vállalata. 86; KIS Bálint (1992): *A helvéciai vallástételt követő Békés-bánati egyházi vidék vallási, polgári, tudomány és földleírasi történeteinek emléke*. In: Kis Bálint: *A Békési-Bánati Református Egyházmegye története (Dél-alföldi évszázadok 5)*. Békéscsaba–Szeged, Csongrád Megyei Levéltár. 69–70, 87–91.

⁴ TtREL I.29.a.1. KIS 1992, 69.

vice-deacon, Sámuel Szentmiklósi Sebők, was still using a seal in 1791 the inscription of which said that he was the leader of the Holy Society of Körös and Maros.⁵ This can be explained by an internal controversy of the diocese. In this period, an awkward situation developed in the diocese because of Benjámín Szőnyi, who was to be removed from his office. Szőnyi refused to resign voluntarily, and he did not hand the documents in his inventory over to the competent authorities either. Probably, the seal with the inscription of the Reformed Diocese of Békés on it was also left with him, which is why Szentmiklósi used the earlier denomination.⁶

The state suppressed the Reformed Church in the Hungarian Kingdom during the 18th century. However, the coming into force of the Edict of Tolerance in 1781 and the XXVI Act of 1791 fundamentally changed the status of the Reformed Church. Catholic suppression gradually lessened, and the Reformed Church started to prosper. Evidently, this process can also be seen in the case of the Reformed Diocese of Békés since more and more congregations were established on its territory after 1781. Besides the above-mentioned parishes, further congregations were annexed to the deaconry by the end of the 18th century, namely the parishes of Debeljácsa, Kispereg, Liebling, Magyarittebe, and Rittberg.⁷

In one of the congregations of the diocese, Vadász, a statue located in the church of the village caused an interesting conflict in the second third of the 18th century, because the local Calvinist pastor had it demolished around 1769. At first sight, the situation seems simple, since it is not customary to place ornamentation characteristic of Catholic church interior in Reformed churches. Therefore, it is no wonder that the

⁵ TtREL I.29.c.12. A Békési egyházmegye Békésszentendrason 1791. július 13-án tartott közgyűlése. [General Assembly of the Diocese, Békésszentandrás, 13 July 1791].

⁶ IMRE Mihály (2012): Küzdelem a fiziko-teologizmus örökségével – Szőnyi Benjámín elfeledett öregkori műve (Istennek Trombitája... , 1790–91). In: Imre Mihály (ed.): Az isteni és emberi szó párbeszéde. Sárospatak, Hernád. 394–396, 405–407, 412–413; IMRE Mihály (1984): A város művelődéstörténete a XVIII. Századig. In: Szabó Ferenc (ed.): Hódmezővásárhely története, I. kötet, A legrégebb időktől a polgári forradalomig. Hódmezővásárhely, Hódmezővásárhely tanácsa. 667; NAGY László – CS. SZABÓ István (2000): A Békési Református Egyházmegye múltja és jelene. In: Havassy Péter (ed.): Világnak világa. Egyházak a Körösök vidékén (Gyulai katalógusok 8). Gyula, Erkel Ferenc Múzeum. 55.

⁷ Kis 1992, 79–81, 85–91.

newly elected pastor had the ornamentation removed. However, the situation is not self-evident because it is not clear why nobody was bothered by the decoration for two hundred years after the beginning of the Reformation. What is more, there is no authentic evidence that the statue was demolished in 1769, since the “Idol Moloch” was first mentioned only in 1832. It was the year when some reminiscences were recorded in the parish register that did not originate from the pastor of Vadász but from the pastor of Ágya, which is located not far away from Vadász. János Dávidházi served in Ágya from the second decade of the 19th century, and he was the pastor who heard rumours from a 91-year-old inhabitant of Vadász, presumably Mihály Albert, about the pastor, János Szilágyi, who had had the statue demolished in 1769. Therefore, the only evidence for the existence and demolition of the statue is the recollection of an old man.⁸

Art history has long discovered the church of Vadász, because from the second half of the 19th century various studies set out to examine the medieval origins of the church. Unfortunately, however, it has not yet been clarified what János Dávidházi meant by the “Idol Moloch”, as the remnants of the statue could not be recovered either, so nobody knows what it looked like exactly.⁹ At the same time, it is well known that the cult of Moloch appears several times in the Old Testament, in the course of which children were sacrificed in order to satisfy Moloch. The Mosaic laws, however, strictly banned idolatry of this kind, and the prohibition also appeared repeatedly in the New Testament. In common parlance, Moloch is often identified with the devil, but the Bible does not contain any evidence that sacrifices were offered to him because he was the lord of the netherworld (2Kings 23:10; Acts 7:43).¹⁰ Nevertheless, in the context of the church of Vadász, the

⁸ AML fond nr. 2077. fol. 71r. BUNYITAY Vince (1884): A váradi püspökség története alapításától a jelenkorig. 3. kötet. Nagyvárád, Franklin, 1884. 477–478; BARCSA 1908, 191.

⁹ EMÓDI Tamás – LÁNGI József (2010): A vadászi templom és Keresztrefeszítés-képe. In: Kollár Tibor (ed.): Építészet a középkori Délmagyarországon. Budapest, Teleki László Alapítvány. 807–828; RÓMER Ferencz Flóris (1874): Régi falképek Magyarországon. Budapest, Eggenberger. 108. SZ. MÁTHÉ Márta (1975): Rómer Flóris bihari munkássága (A bihari útinapló). In: Debreceni Déri Múzeum Évkönyve. 55, 311; SZÁRAZ Antal (1892): Márki Sándor: Aradvármegye és Arad szabad kir. város története. In: Archaeológiai Értesítő. 12, 3. 258–260. [book review].

¹⁰ MINOIS, Georges (1991): Histoire des enfers. Paris, Arthème Fayard. 92–103.

Calvinists were annoyed by the fact that the statue bore the features of “Catholic idolatry” rather than by its connotations of diabolic representation. However, local residents were aware of the fact in 1832 that the church harboured more than a statue because the building was full of “blind windows, and carved as well as painted pictures” (*vak ablakokkal, faragott és festett képekkel*).¹¹ Consequently, in the 18th century, the medieval church of Vadász had still retained its rich internal decoration (sedilia, statues, frescos), among which only the picture of the crucifixion can be seen today.

In Hungary, Catholics and Protestants were not always segregated in their everyday lives. For example, in Kecskemét, the Reformed and Catholic communities lived together in relative peace from the Age of Reformation. In accordance with that, these communities used the church simultaneously until 1564. Afterwards, the Calvinist church was built directly next to the Catholic one. When the Calvinist church burnt down in 1678, the construction of the new Reformed church was supported by Catholics as well. What is more, in 1739, the Calvinists of Kecskemét erected a statue of the Holy Trinity together with the Catholics.¹² Despite the fact that in the early modern age it was not unheard of that Calvinist congregations left the medieval church ornamentations and decorations untouched, the question arises as to why the religious community of Vadász was not disturbed by the visual and carved representation that was regarded as idolatry. Or more precisely, to whom and why did the Idol Moloch begin to be seen as disturbing? In order to answer this question, one has to examine the development of Calvinist identity, as the strengthening of this identity resulted in people’s increasing unwillingness to observe Catholic traditions. Therefore, this study sets out not only to reconstruct the identity of the parish in Vadász but also to extend its investigation to the whole diocese so that a more complete and more relevant picture could be gained.

¹¹ AML fond nr. 2077. fol. 71r.

¹² SZAPPANOS Károly (2006): A Kecskeméti Ref. Egyház és iskolái története. In: Szabados László (ed.): Fejezetek a 400. tanévét ünneplő kecskeméti református gimnázium történetéből 1564–2006. Kecskemét, Emmaus Kiadó. 15, 34; POLGÁR Mihály (1858): A kecskeméti reform. Ekklézsia rövid historiája. In: Kecskeméti Protestáns Közlöny. 1, 1. 45–46.

The development of the identity of each and every small community can be best explored through the sources created by these very communities. In the case of Reformed congregations, these are the documents written by the parishes. Written sources of this kind started to appear first among Calvinists of the south-eastern part of the Hungarian Kingdom in the 18th century. They were mostly registers of births, marriages, and deaths containing notes which could provide a glimpse into the identity of the parish, since these sources recorded the origins and history of the congregation. They are all the more significant as they contain data that give information about the contemporary Calvinist identity as well.¹³

In my opinion, the chronicle of the Szentes parish is a high-quality product of congregational literacy. It documented the history of the congregation year after year from the mid-18th century to 1825, similarly to the *historia domus* used in the Catholic Church.¹⁴ In line with the practice of the Szentes parish, remarkable products of literacy can also be seen in Hódmezővásárhely, which is mostly due to the activity of Benjámin Szőnyi.¹⁵ In the century of the Enlightenment, in the Holy Society of Körös and Maros, the following parishes kept historical records besides them, which might help draw conclusions on the memory of the Reformation and on Calvinist identity: Békés, Békésszentandrás,¹⁶ Doboz, Erdőhegy, Gyoma, Gyula, Köröstarcsa, Makó, Nagyzerénd, Öcsöd, Vadász, and Vésztő.

¹³ JÁVOR Kata (1971): Egy 19. századi presbiteri jegyzőkönyv tanulságai. In: Népi kultúra – népi társadalom. 5–6. 71. MOLNÁR Ambrus (1987): A tiszántúli református falusi társadalom forrásairól. In: Erdmann Gyula (ed.): Kutatás, módszertan. Konferencia, Gyula, 1987. augusztus 27–28. Gyula, Békés Megyei Levéltár. 328–333; TÓTH Krisztina (2007): Katolikus és protestáns egyházlátogatási jegyzőkönyvek. In: Levéltári Szemle. 57, 3. 56.

¹⁴ TAKÁCS Edit (ed.) (2001): A szentesi református eklezsia története 1700–1825. Szentes, NKA, <http://www.szentesinfo.hu/cd/ekklezsia/>. BAGI Zoltán (2005): Szentes város református közössége a 18. században a Béládi István, Gál István és a Kiss Bálint által írt eklezsiatörténet alapján. In: Szabó András (ed.): Mezőváros, reformáció és irodalom (Historia litteraria 18). Budapest, Universitas. 185–205; FILEP Antal (1971): Szokásleírások a 18. és a 19. századból. In: Népi Kultúra – Népi Társadalom. 5, 6. 115–134.

¹⁵ SZEREMLEY Samu (1890): Szőnyi Bénéiamin és a hódmezővásárhelyiek 1717–1794. Budapest, Hornyánszky Viktor.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that in Békésszentandrás the data the Calvinists used to justify their past were entered into the proceedings of the parish later than in a letter they wrote to the squire

The growing interest in the past was also represented by the appearance of the so-called “peasant chronicles”. Unfortunately, no data are available in the examined diocese, which can be related to either the Reformation or Calvinist identity. However, they need to be mentioned because their emergence sheds light on the need in the world of peasants in the 18th century to define the identity of the family and the community in a historical perspective. The *Petrák Chronicle* in Szentes can be considered a document of this sort. Its writing started in the mid-18th century, and it was copied by the inhabitants of the city until the beginning of the 20th century. No copy of it survived from the 18th century unfortunately; the earliest copies known were compiled in the mid-19th century.¹⁷ In Hódmezővásárhely, a local farmer, Mihály Hódi, kept a diary, whose first entries were dated to the turn of the 18th-19th centuries and that contained family history entries.¹⁸ Nevertheless, well beyond the examined period, peasant chronicles were written that discussed the relations of the Calvinists and the Catholics, as well as the origin of the church. The history of the market town of Békés was documented by such an unknown chronicler during the period of the Dual Monarchy.¹⁹

I think that it can be regarded as an important stage in the quest for identity when the intellectuals of a market town start to research the history of their place of living. This happened in the case of the Holy Society of Körös and Maros only in the Age of Reform (around the 1820s and 1830s in Hungary). However, the precondition of this development was that the regular compilation of historical records started in the 18th century in the given settlement, which these amateur historians could later analyse.

in 1804. GOMBOS János (1989): A XVII-XVIII. századi felvidéki népességmozgás és Tótkomlós újratelepítése szlovákokkal. In: Erdmann Gyula (ed.): Békés megye és környéke XVIII. századi történetéből. Gyula, Békés Megyei Levéltár. 19. BSZREL I.65.b.1.

¹⁷ TAKÁCS Edit (1997): *Petrák-krónika*. Szentes–Szeged, Csongrád Megyei Levéltár; TAKÁCS Edit (1998): *A Petrák-krónika keletkezése, fennmaradása és tartalma*. In: Takács Edit (ed.) (1998): *A XVIII–XX. századi polgári írásbeliség produktumai a Dél-Alföldön* (Szentesi Műhely Füzetek 2). Szentes, Csongrád Megyei Levéltár. 43–58; KATONA Imre (1998): *A Petrák-krónika változatainak néprajzi vonatkozásai*. In: TAKÁCS 1998, 59–68; SZABÓ Ferenc (1998): *A várostörténeti krónikák és feljegyzések születése és hatása az Alföldön*. In: TAKÁCS 1998, 5–14.

¹⁸ SZENTI Tibor (2008): *Parasztvallomások*. Budapest, Századvég. 318, 482, 490.

¹⁹ TtREK R 2986 nr. 1–2.

With regard to the Reformed Church, the work of Bálint Kis has to be mentioned, which discussed the past of the Reformed Diocese of Békés. Nonetheless, the Calvinist pastor of the town of Gyula, Gábor Ecsedy, also carried out a similar work when he published his book entitled *Gyulának polgári és egyházi állapotja a régibb és újabb időkben* [The Civil and Ecclesiastical Status of Gyula in the Older and More Recent Times], in the Scholarly Collection (*Tudományos Gyűjtemény*) in 1832. In addition to this, Miklós Szirbik, the Calvinist pastor of Makó, wrote down the history of the town of Makó and its churches. Also, Sámuel Dávidházy Bekes published the history of the Reformed church of Gyoma between 1834 and 1837.²⁰

Furthermore, there is a consensus among the researchers of the history of the Reformed Church in Hungary concerning the question from which period one could pinpoint the beginning of a definite Calvinist identity and of a rigid seclusion from the Roman Catholic Church. According to these scholars, the specific denominational consciousness and the memory of the Reformation can hardly be evinced in Hungary at the beginning of the 17th century. On the contrary, a well-identifiable Calvinist identity developed only after the Peace Treaty of Linz (1645) and the Trial of the Galley Slaves (1674). Therefore, due to this belated development of identity, a number of customs forming denominational identity took shape mostly in the 18th century.²¹

²⁰ KÓSA László (2011a): Történetkutató kisvárosi értelmiség a reformkorban. In: Kósa László (ed.): *Művelődés, egyház, társadalom*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó. 49–66; SZABÓ 1998, 5–14.

²¹ During the period of the Peace Treaty of Linz (1645) and the Trial of the Galley Slaves (1674), Calvinists had to undergo numerous hardships in Upper Hungary because Catholics and Calvinists fought against each other in a series of bloody encounters in the 17th century. PÉTER Katalin (1999): A felekezetek felett álló Magyarország a reformáció után. In: Illés Pál Attila (ed.): *Felekezetek és identitás Közép-Európában az újkorban* (Sentire cum ecclesia 1). Piliscsaba–Budapest, PPTE BTK–METEM. 9–25; MURDOCK Graeme (2002): Calvinist Catechizing and Hungarian Reformed Identity. In: Maria Crăciun–Ovidiu Ghitta–Graeme Murdock (eds.): *Confessional Identity in East-Central Europe* (St Andrew's Studies in Reformation History). Aldershot, Routledge. 81–98; EVANS, Robert J. W. (1999): Die Grenzen der Konfessionalisierung. Die folgen der Gegenreformation für die Habsburgerländer (1650–1781). In: Joachim Bahlcke–Arno Strohmeier (eds.): *Konfessionalisierung in Ostmitteleuropa. Wirkungen des religiösen Wandels im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert in Staat, Gesellschaft und Kultur* (Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Mitteleuropa 7). Steiner, Stuttgart. 395–412.

In the early modern period, Calvinists were hardly surprised to see someone praying on their knees, even though they regard this custom as a Catholic deviation now. So, it follows that this kind of cleavage appeared sometime in the 18th century.²² The century of the Enlightenment witnessed the gradual development of denominational identity. In 1718, the Lutheran Mátyás Bél noted about one of his students that he was a most stubborn Calvinist. He obviously described him in this way because his student, Gábor Gellén, openly propounded his Calvinist conviction.²³ In addition to this, further evidence also showed that Calvinists secluded themselves more and more from Catholics in the field of their ordinary practice of religion.

In the Hungarian Reformed Church, the symbolic use of the cross also disappeared in the 18th century, as members of the Reformed Church felt a growing antipathy towards the use of the cross during the times of the silent Counter-Reformation. This had an obvious reason, since the movement of re-Catholicization reoccupied space symbolically by the use of the cross, as they tended to erect crucifixes in more and more settlements, which clearly showed that the Catholic Church expressed its wish to oversee the members of the congregations in the given settlement. In opposition to this practice, the Calvinists consciously refused the use of the cross, and, in exchange, they placed a rooster or a star on the very top of their churches. This custom had grown so strong that several congregations vainly tried to reinstate the cross on the top of their churches; they were simply not allowed to do so.²⁴ But if the Calvinists were so adamantly protesting against the use of the cross, how come that ornamentation characteristic of Catholic churches could be found in the church of Vadász?

²² DIENES Dénes (2002): „Melyeket én az én Uram Jézus Krisztusomtól tanultam”. A református kegyesség jellemző vonásai a 18. században Magyarországon (Sárospataki Református Kollégium Teológiai Akadémiájának kiadványai 31). Sárospatak, Sárospataki Református Kollégium Teológiai Akadémiája. 56.

²³ TÓTH Gergely (2007): Bél Mátyás pozsonyi tanítványai: a pozsonyi evangélikus líceum anyakönyvének vonatkozó részei Bél és utódai megjegyzésével. In: *Lymbus – Magyarságtudományi Forrásközlések*. 5. 186, 203.

²⁴ KÓSA László (2011b): A kereszt jele a magyarországi protestánsoknál. In: Kósa László (ed.): *Művelődés, egyház, társadalom*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó. 15–33.

In my view, one might provide an accurate answer to this question if one examines how collective identity developed in Europe and Hungary and how the relationship of identity and history was formed.

In fact, the invention of the printing press in Europe transformed the general knowledge of the public to such an extent that it started to include information on the wide world, disseminated mostly through geographical descriptions, handbooks, and other printed materials. The publication of the *Great French Encyclopaedia* possibly stands for scholars' intention to record the entire knowledge and memory of humanity in the 18th century.²⁵ Nonetheless, on the level of smaller communities (e.g. parishes), one cannot find a development of a regular collective memory in line with the above-mentioned general changes.

History is not identical with memory because memory is group-specific, while history is universal. Moreover, while history is based on arguments and facts, memory rests on an emotional link to the past. Collective memory is important to the group, as the latter interprets its past through the former. Therefore, collective memory works imperfectly since it often represents the past through the lenses of the aggrieved, woe-stricken party. This is similar to the trauma caused by grief, and the recovery process afterwards, during which people tend to replace the train of unpleasant memories with something else that they later begin to regard as a real event. However, collective memory has a power to form communities, and it often gains its strength from the traumas of each and every community.²⁶ In the 18th century, the Reformed Church had to suffer the repercussions of a series of events in Hungary, which could facilitate the development of such distorted images of memory.

At the same time, it is questionable whether the pastor who wrote the history of the parish in the early modern age created a new tradition of memory or destroyed it.

²⁵ LE GOFF, Jacques (1996): *History and Memory*. New York, Columbia University Press. 81, 85.

²⁶ ASSMANN, Jan (2013): *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*. Munich, Beck. 42–45; ERLI, Astrid (2011): *Memory in culture*, (Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies). Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan. 109–112; RICOEUR, Paul (1998): *Vulnérabilité de la mémoire*. In: Jacques Le Goff (ed.): *Patrimoine et passions identitaires (Actes des Entretiens du Patrimoine)*. Paris, Fayard. 17–31.

According to Pierre Nora, history becomes memory only if it is accompanied by rites. Rituals of these kinds are very often connected to specific sites, for example, the places of well-known people's death or the locations of famous peace treaties. Hence, one of the important features of collective memory is its affinity to places, the particularly high reverence for various sites.²⁷ In the case of parishes, churches can be regarded as such places since the rituals performed there strengthen religious identity. As Catholic symbols were also used in Vadász, so it seems unambiguous how the identity of the congregation was formed during the silent Counter-Reformation.

It is characteristic of all religions that the newly formed religious rituals and dogmas were built upon earlier traditions: they functioned as a kind of link between older and newer customs.²⁸ It is obvious that the Reformed Church developed according to this pattern, but in order to understand how the Calvinist identity developed in the Holy Society of Körös és Maros and how it related to the memory of Reformation, one needs to answer the following questions.

First, it is especially worth investigating what kind of data and sources were used to collect evidence on the origins and past of the congregation. Was the demonstration of a Calvinist past more important than the real events or not? Second, the relationship of the community and the person who records the memories of the community has to be examined. Does the community refuse the church history or does it feel that the story is of its own? Finally, it has to be investigated whether the texts shaping the collective memory emphasize certain features characteristic of the Reformed Church or not.

The church history records of each congregation show a highly diverse picture concerning the use of historical sources. Perhaps, the request of the ecclesia of Békésszentandrás, formulated in 1804, may be regarded as one of the most authoritative contemporary pieces of research because in this letter the Calvinists of Szentandrás describe the history of the settling of the village and that the Catholics took their church away from them, and thereby they need to attend the Lutheran church of Tótkomlós. In

²⁷ NORA, Pierre (1984): *Entre Mémoire et Histoire. La problématique des lieux*. In: Pierre Nora (ed.): *Les lieux de mémoire. I. La République*. Paris, Gallimard. 17–42.

²⁸ HALBWACHS, Maurice (1992): *On Collective Memory*. Chicago–London, The University Press of Chicago Press. 83–87.

order to prove the justness of their cause, they attached to their petition the copy of József Rudnyánszky's letter from 1746, which deprived the Calvinists of their church.²⁹

The local Calvinists tried to verify the Reformed origins of the church in Békés also by copying official documents. In 1732, György Szikszai entered a note on the first page of the parish register in which the sheriff (head of the local administration, the so-called *főispán*) of Békés County certified that a Calvinist church had already been established earlier in the settlement.³⁰

Though it cannot be denied that the Reformation spread in Békés quite early, it did not mean that only a Calvinist congregation existed in the market town. Understandably, those Calvinists who participated in establishing a collective Calvinist identity and memory do not prefer to discuss it. Moreover, Péter Bod straightforwardly claimed that the rejection of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity could never be witnessed in Békés. However, it is well known that there was a religious polemics between Calvinists and Unitarians in Békés in the 16th century with the result that some of the Christian faithful were convinced by the Unitarians and they wanted to invite Miklós Tóth, the anti-Trinitarian leader to be their new pastor. What is more, in accordance with the controversy, the Calvinist pastor of Mágocs declared that he wanted to convert to Unitarian faith with his entire congregation.³¹

The inhabitants of Békés were preoccupied by the origin of their parish later as well; therefore, in 1795, they had a new historical account made. In order to compile this novel book, besides a well-known 18th-century work on church history (Pál Ember), other sources were used, including the church history of Ferenc Pápai Páriz, entitled *Rudus Redivivum*, and the biographies of Máté Skaricza and István Szegedi Kis.³²

A lower number of original sources were used when writing the history of the foundation of the Szentes church, as its history was compiled exclusively from available handbooks. Among these works, the book of Pál Ember was cited the most often. It has

²⁹ GOMBOS 1989, 19. MNL – OL P 590 D. Fasc. No. 607.

³⁰ BREL I.62.a.2.

³¹ BALÁZS Mihály (1998): *Teológia és irodalom (Humanizmus és Reformáció 25)*. Budapest, Balassi. 36–39; MOLNÁR Ambrus (1999): *Békés pusztulása és újjászületése (Protestáns művelődés Magyarországon 3)*. Budapest, Mundus. 25–27, 33–36.

³² BREL I.62.a.3.

to be noted, though, that this parish chronicle is relatively well balanced and reserved in its claims, since it states that there is not much to know about the reformation process of Szentés, only that it had been most probably carried out already in the 16th century, and that the local Reformed church continuously served the local inhabitants.³³

However, a considerable problem was posed in the lives of the parishes by researching when the Calvinist congregation had been established in the given settlement. The pastor of Vésztfő sadly noted in 1786 that there were not any written documents on the origin of the church. In addition to this, the local collective memory could not recollect “[...] which religion those people confessed who built this church, and what nationality revered God in it, nobody remembers” („mitsoda vallású emberek építették ezen templomot, mi féle nemzettség tisztelte benne az Istent arra senki nem emlékezik.”).³⁴ A similar situation emerged in Borossebes as well, because in 1806 the pastor could reveal the names of the pastors who had served the congregation only from 1765, all other names and information having been lost in the mist of time due to the lack of literacy.³⁵

In several parishes, no written documents were used to substantiate the origins of the congregation. The past existence of the local Reformed church was only corroborated by the oral confessions and recollections of local elderly people. For example, in Öcsöd, research into the past of the congregation began only in 1806, but for obvious reasons, the contemporaries could not recall anything from the period of the Reformation.³⁶

In Gyulavári, the history of the congregation was first written in 1826, even later than that of Öcsöd. However, it has to be noted as well that the primary aim of the work was not to prove that the origins of the parish go back to the Age of Reformation but rather that the village became entirely Calvinist with the emigration of the inhabitants with Romanian nationality.³⁷

³³ TAKÁCS 2001. <http://www.szentesinfo.hu/cd/ekklezsia/image1/nagy/011.JPG>.

³⁴ VREL I.450.a.1.

³⁵ BSREL b.1.

³⁶ ÖREL I.325.b.1.

³⁷ GyVREL I.162.a.1.

What kind of sources did the writers of the history of the parish in Vadász use in order to verify Calvinist faith in the settlement the congregation of which had nurtured a Catholic past? The first parish register of the congregation was started in 1768, whose first page contains the line: “Noticing of things worth being remembered” [„Emlékezetre méltó dolgoknak feljegyzése”], written in 1769. This is interesting because the comment on the Idol Moloch can be found in the same register, though a few pages later and in a different handwriting. However, at the beginning of the notes on church history, Moloch was not mentioned at all in 1769. Instead, it was narrated with great importance that “[...] the ecclesia of Vadász was inhabited by Calvinist Hungarians at the time of deacon Janos Almasi Darus [?], as has been mentioned in the History of Sir Lampe” („A Vadaszi Ekklesiat Ao 1597. Reformatus Magyarok laktak Almasi Janos Darus[?] Jenei Esperest idejében, amint Lampe Uram Historiájában meg tettzik”).³⁸ Accordingly, the pastor was satisfied with using a church history handbook, and he did not carry out a thorough research.

The lists of pastors’ names were also compiled on the basis of collective memory. These documents record not only the names and length of service of the pastors, but they also provide detailed biographical data. The year 1675 was the earliest date that could be traced back. According to the chronicle of the parish of Makó, János Bökényi served in the settlement starting from 1675.³⁹ After the conflagration in Gyula, the preacher, István Juhász, wrote the history of the ecclesia on the basis of collective memory, too. He could list the names of pastors serving in the town from 1736, and Juhász also provided detailed biographical data.⁴⁰ The rest of historical accounts only list the names of the pastors. However, a growing historical consciousness is shown by the fact that in Doboz public knowledge preserved the list of the pastors’ names who had served in the village, which could be traced back to 1634.⁴¹ In Öcsöd, only an 18th-century list could be compiled, which contains the pastors’ names from 1715.⁴² In

³⁸ AML fond nr. 2077. fol. 55r.

³⁹ MBREL I.250.b.1.

⁴⁰ GyREL I.160.b.1.

⁴¹ DREL I.124.a.2.

⁴² ÖREL I.325.b.1, 4.

Gyoma, the names of the rectors were collected in the same manner. This list was written by many “hands”, and it includes a lot of interpolations on the basis of which the name of the first rector serving in Gyoma is known from 1763. This fact reflects a quite feeble collective memory, because the list was written in 1794; in other words, they could recall a timespan of only 30 years.⁴³ The collective memory of Nagyzerénd is even weaker, as the writer of the parish register that had been opened in 1790 did not even endeavour to collect the names of the pastors having served in the village earlier. Instead of this, the list of pastors’ names was continued from the year of starting the register until 1907.⁴⁴

Compared to the above-mentioned sources, an entirely different group is constituted by those historical accounts that explored specifically the contemporary financial situation of the parish. Thus, accordingly, for example, in Nagyzerénd the mill lease agreement of 1777 was copied into the register in 1790.⁴⁵ In 1784, the foundation stone of the new church was laid in Erdőhegy. On the basis of the written form of the note on this occasion, it cannot be unequivocally decided if Mrs János Bíró’s donation of 20 Hungarian kreutzers (a coin and unit of currency, 19th c. [~ penny]) could be related to the building of the new church. However, the fact that they considered important to record a donation of such a small amount attests that the construction of the church played a central role in the life of the ecclesia.⁴⁶ Similarly, in Köröstarcsa, the sums of money offered to the congregation between 1777 and 1801 were also documented. In spite of the fact that these donations were entered into the section of the register, entitled Matters of the Ecclesia Worth Mentioning (*Meg jegyzésre méltó Ekklesiái Dolgok*), they cannot be considered real historical data because – just like in the case of the pastors of Nagyzerénd – they were not reconstructed from past materials but were compiled only after the register had been opened.⁴⁷

⁴³ GyOREL I.157.a.5. fol. 1v

⁴⁴ AML fond nr. 2081. fol. 6r.

⁴⁵ AML fond nr. 2081. fol. 1r.

⁴⁶ AML fond nr. 2046.

⁴⁷ KREL I.232.a.1.

Did these church history records depict real events or did they distort available information? When answering this question, it is worth mentioning that the reading material of public libraries in Hungary in the 18th century was not modern and up to date. So, if someone could read and wanted to keep up with recent cultural trends in Western Europe, s/he could not do so either. Only private book collections (private libraries) were appropriate for this purpose. The potentially available book collection rather fostered locking oneself into the past, which meant the preservation of orthodox doctrines as far as religious communities were concerned.⁴⁸ Though it would be an exaggeration to call the libraries of congregations public libraries, they still functioned similarly. It is substantiated by some conclusive data that almost at the same time as the appearance of congregational literacy the parish managed to establish a modest library as well. Thus, for example, the collection in Erdőhegy consisted of two volumes in 1801, which were Péter Nádudvari's book of sermons and a work of Pál Ember.⁴⁹ Copies of the Holy Scripture were purchased in Szentes for use in the church in 1747 for the first time.⁵⁰

Therefore, it can be seen that the available range of books did not make it possible to engage in deeper historical research. More fortunate congregations, such as the communities of Békésszentandrás and Békés, where documents had survived, were accounted as rare exceptions. In other places, the recollection of the elderly had to suffice; hence, these records should not be regarded as deliberate distortions but rather as the best possible results under the given conditions. However, this did not mean that collective memory could be rendered consistent with history writing. Why?

An interesting, even odd relation can be pinpointed between the historian of the ecclesia and the members of the parish of Vadász. When examining this aspect, the paper also draws on the second research question: how is the relationship of the person who "inscribes" memory and the community?

⁴⁸ MONOK István (2005): Az olvasott örökség – hagyomány és megújulás. In: György Péter – Kiss Barbara – Monok István (eds.): Kulturális örökség – társadalmi képzelet. Budapest, OSZK – Akadémiai Kiadó – BME. 83–91.

⁴⁹ EREL C.1.

⁵⁰ TAKÁCS 2001. <http://www.szentesinfo.hu/cd/ekklezsia/image1/nagy/104.JPG>.

As it has already been mentioned above, writing the parish's chronicle in Vadász began in 1769. The text consisted of three major parts. The first part was written by János Szilágyi, the local pastor. This text was continued by Szilágyi, with occasional abruptions, until the end of his service in 1797. At the beginning of the 19th century, nobody set out to go on with the work of Szilágyi for a long time, and then in 1823 new entries were made. Finally, in 1832, the new pastor reopened the entries and continued writing the chronicle. As it is known, the Idol Moloch was mentioned in the 1832 text. But why was not it mentioned in the first entry? – since, according to the testimony of the text, the demolisher of the statue and the first writer of the chronicle was the very same person? Moreover, the first part deals with the description of the church particularly lengthily, as Szilágyi discusses the remodelling of the church in 1713 and its renovation in 1768, but he never mentions that the interior of the church would have had Catholic ornamentation. Furthermore, Szilágyi also omits to impart that he would have had the Moloch statue removed. Instead, he meticulously describes what kind of curse was incanted into the new knob of the tower against those who would seek to destroy the church.⁵¹

Art historical research has proven that the fresco in the church had been deliberately painted over negligently, as it was barely damaged and its contours could be easily seen under the painting.⁵² It is interesting, however, that not far away from Vadász, in Feketegyarmat, the Calvinists also used a church of medieval origin that was richly ornamented. Nevertheless, in this case, the Calvinist brothers were so successful in erasing the fresco that its existence was only revealed in the 20th century. Unfortunately, no historical records survived among the early modern documents of the parish in Feketegyarmat.⁵³ Therefore, it is unknown why the faithful of Gyarmat related to Catholic symbols differently than the Calvinists of Vadász. However, if one compares the experiences of the restorer with historical sources, then it turns out that Szilágyi did not boast of his deed. He did not wish to commemorate the destruction of the statue. Obviously, the fear of Catholic retribution might have also stood in the background, but it is much

⁵¹ AML fond nr. 2077, fol. 55r.

⁵² EMÖDI Tamás – LÁNGI József (2010): A vadászi templom és Keresztrefeszítés-képe. In: Kollár Tibor (ed.): *Építészet a középkori Dél-Magyarországon*. Budapest, Teleki László Alapítvány. 807.

⁵³ KIREL IV.

more probable that the inhabitants of Vadász did not agree with the act. They reluctantly painted on the picture of Christ, but it did not disturb them in practising their faith. That is why the contemporary chronicle seems to omit to mention anything regarding the internal ornamentation of the church, as the pastor felt the tension between Calvinist doctrines and the religious needs of the inhabitants. In the long run, this case must have had such an impact on the relationship of the pastor and the congregation that only the pastor of Ágya managed to find elderly people in 1832 who told him what had happened in the 18th century.

So far, there has not been any data uncovered to show that the Catholic Church had tried to retrieve the church of Vadász – even if one takes into consideration that the Catholic Bishop of Nagyvárád, Ádám Patachich, took the project of church building very seriously. Not only did he deal with reinforcing the episcopal seat, but he also intended to support the parishes of the diocese. Patachich was the head of the Bishopric of Nagyvárád in the period when the fresco was painted over in Vadász. It is currently unknown why this church was not “spotted” by the Catholic Church, while other Calvinist communities were constantly being kept under pressure by the Catholics. For instance, in the Holy Society of Körös and Maros, the Calvinists of Szentés were obliged to hand over their church to the Catholics. In the case of Vadász, the Catholic origin of the local church might have perhaps faded from the collective memory of the Catholics.⁵⁴

Last but not least, the question has to be answered as to whether or not the texts shaping collective memory emphasize features characteristic of the Reformed Church.

It is not surprising in the 18th century if Calvinist communities thought of the Catholics with anger and fear. As it has been shown above, this was the period when the Calvinists deliberately excluded the use of the cross in their religious practice. Did the strengthening of Calvinist identity took place the same way in the Holy Society of Körös and Maros as well? Did the cultivation of the memory of the Reformation play a role in this?

A number of local church history records suggest that the settlement had converted to Calvinism already in the Age of Reformation. Scholarly literature has demonstrated this most convincingly in the case of Hódmezővásárhely, but one might find

⁵⁴ BUNYITAY 1935, IV: 317–350. TAKÁCS 2001. <http://www.szentesinfo.hu/cd/ekklezsia/image1/nagy/022.JPG>.

similar sources elsewhere as well.⁵⁵ After the great conflagration in Gyula, István Juhász wrote down not only the biographies of the pastors serving in Gyula from 1736 but also the history of the early reformation of the local parish. These works are obviously not consistent with the most recent results of the research, but Juhász may have regarded these events and data very important since he inserted them into the chronicle in 1822, when he had not been serving in Gyula for more than a decade.⁵⁶ What is more, in 1824, the pastor of Borossebes, Mihály Kerekes, claimed that the ecclesia of Sebes had already been Calvinist since 1547.⁵⁷ In addition to this, the chronicle of the congregation of Szentes formed a very similar statement to that of Kerekes in relation to the history of reformation in Szentes.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the chronicles of Hódmezővásárhely and Szentes many times discussed what kind of persecutions local Calvinists had to endure on the part of the Catholics in the 18th century. The inhabitants of Szentes were mostly desolated because of the loss of their church.⁵⁹

However, there is no evidence that the memory of the Reformation would have been cultivated beyond defining the time of the establishment of the Reformed parish in the given settlement. Nonetheless, this does not contradict the results of other scholars' research because, according to others as well, the congregations did not celebrate the jubilee of the Reformation in the Reformed Church in Hungary in the early modern age. Available evidence attest that the first congregational celebrations took place only in 1817. The cultivation of collective memory, as outlined above, was rather characteristic of Western Europe, where a whole series of publications appeared already in 1617 celebrating the centenary of the Reformation.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ SZEREMLEI Sámuel (1927–1938): A hódmezővásárhelyi református egyház története 1–2. Hódmezővásárhely, Roth Nyomda.

⁵⁶ GyREL I.160.b.1. CSEPREGI Zoltán (2017): A gyulai uradalom egyházi viszonyai a brandeburgi korszakban (1510–1530). In: Héjja Juilanna Erika – Erdész Ádám (eds.): Város, uradalom, vár. Tanulmányok Gyula 15–18. századi történetéből. Gyula, Békés Megyei Levéltár. 53–63.

⁵⁷ BSREL B.1.

⁵⁸ TAKÁCS 2001. <http://www.szentesinfo.hu/cd/ekklezsia/image1/nagy/011.JPG>.

⁵⁹ SIMA László (1914): Szentes város története. Szentes, Szentes város közönsége. 229–230.

⁶⁰ HOWARD, Thomas Albert (2016): Remembering the Reformation. Oxford, Oxford University Press. 14–16.

In my opinion, the “imagined origins” of these church history chronicles reinforced the religious identity of the communities, but they disregarded any intensive cultivation of the memory of the Reformation. The best example for this is the case of the congregation of Vadász, which held on to Catholic symbolism even in the second third of the 18th century as well.

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