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History, Local Stories, and Power Dynamics: The Changes of the 20th Century and the Counts of Bethlen of Bonyha/Bahnea²

Abstract.

The Bethlens acquired an estate in Bonyha/Bahnea located by Kis-Küküllő/Târnava Mică River at the turn of the 16th century, but their presence can be documented with certainty starting 1545: they remodelled their manor-house the very same year. However, the over 400-year-old local history of the family took a sudden turn and was almost completely disrupted in 1946 and the subsequent years as being moved to an assigned residence. Apart from the introduction and some theoretical and methodological considerations, this study is divided into three parts and aims both at tracing what the 400 years meant, the role of the family in the life of the village, and the area and the macro - and microprocesses that accompanied the liquidation of the family's estate in Bonyha. Finally, the most important part of the paper attempts to examine the way in which the Bethlens are still present in the life of the village. This study starts from the premises that the major political events (wars, regime changes, border changes) represent the environment of everyday life, and people should react to these apparently external and remote conditions in order to shape their own day-to-day horizons. In this context, the seemingly objective

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statement that an agrarian reform took place in the year 1921 meant for the Bethlen family of Bonyha the first stage in the tragic process towards the liquidation of the estate and ultimately the family's disappearance. Thus, this study analyses the dynamic interrelationship between macro history and the small, local stories.

Keywords: *history, local stories, everyday life, regime change, counts of Bethlen, Bonyha.*

Introduction

This study starts off by analysing the presence and the absence of the Bethlens in Bonyha/Bahnea from a double cross-sectional perspective: in order to make statements about the connection of major historical events with the local processes, the intertwining of the two, it seeks to supplement the data obtained through the fieldwork method of classic cultural anthropology (participant observation, interviews) by using historical research and historical sources. Thus, one cross-section focuses on the dynamic relationship between macrohistory and small stories, while the other focuses on the complementary nature of historical and anthropological research.

The purpose is to explain the presence of the Bethlens in the village as well as their disappearance as tangibly as possible and make sense of the contradictory statements concerning the presence of the noble family that – reflecting a kind of Marxist historical outlook – depict a count (his family) dominating the village on the one hand and, on the other hand, quite the opposite: they depict the count as a kind of benevolent father attentively following the matters in the village. Another important question is to what extent local environments, whether in the distant or in the more recent past, have been involved in the processes of history, to what extent they are sufferers or shapers of the stories.

Several high-impact historical trends of the 20th century raise the very question of how history appears in everyday life³, how history becomes perceptible, palpable,

³ See, for instance: GYÁNI, Gábor (1997): A mindennapi élet mint kutatási probléma. In: *Aetas* 1. 151–161; KASCHUBA, Wolfgang (2012): *Einführung in die Europäische Ethnologie*. Munich, C. H. Beck. 115–132, esp. 125–128.

and recountable to (everyday) people.⁴ While we often assume –or science has assumed – that history takes place in the centres of civilization, royal palaces and battlefields, and we tend to operate with these timeless and spaceless notions or the assumption of existence outside of civilization,⁵ it has become increasingly proven that everyone has a history,⁶ and at best it must be approached from another perspective than the history of royal families and the battles of great powers. We will be precisely concerned about how a noble family connected to the centres of power but still lived in the countryside, in this sense away from the centres of power, how it participated in these processes and involved in these processes those around them and whom our outlook on history often tends to forget.

The following issues are related to the above: the historical interest in cultural anthropology based on fieldwork and the researcher's presence on the field, springing from the Malinowskian tradition of the 20th century, although a very important component of the study of historical aspects of early anthropology, is not a primary aspect (as the history of peoples studied by structuralist and functionalist schools is primarily oral), but the historical perspective still plays a highly significant role in the European research on historical anthropology, microhistory, and social history, focusing on peasant communities, workers, or other groups.⁷ This is especially true about the research carried out in the Eastern European, socialist era, where taking the major historical events or local historical processes into consideration makes a very important part of the explanation.⁸

⁴ See: JAKAB, Albert Zsolt (2012): *Emlékállítás és emlékezési gyakorlat. A kulturális emlékezet reprezentációi Kolozsváron*. Cluj-Napoca, Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság – Nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézet. 15–52; KESZEG, Vilmos (2011): *A történetmondás antropológiája*. Cluj-Napoca, Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság – Magyar Néprajz és Antropológia Intézet.

⁵ Cf. COHN, Bernard S. (1980): History and Anthropology: The State of Play. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, 2(Apr.). 198–221; FABIAN, Johannes (1983): *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Objects*. New York, Columbia University Press; MEDICK, Hans (1995): “Missionaries in the Rowboat”? Ethnological Ways of Knowing as a Challenge to Social History. In: LÜDTKE, Alf (ed.): *The History of Everyday Life. Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. 42–71.

⁶ WOLF, Eric R. (1982): *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

⁷ HANN, Chris M. (2009): The Theft of Anthropology. In: *Theory, Society and Culture* 26, 7–8. 126–147; KASCHUBA 1202, 202–203.

⁸ See, for instance: VERDERY, Katherine (1983): *Transylvanian Villagers. Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Starting from these two very broad but extremely inspiring backgrounds, the study ultimately seeks the find an answer to –also referring to Bernard Cohn’s idea: “The anthropological historian therefore should have the working experience of both the field and the archive.”⁹ –how great historical cataclysms of the 20th century shaped people’s lives, even on an individual level, how individual people may or may not be able to respond to these challenges; and the question also arises as to how to use different research methods, data collection procedures, data and data types to help explain these local processes.

Bonyha: The Field and the Fieldwork

I visited Bonyha in 2006 for the first time. We were conducting a fieldwork in the neighbouring Héderfája/Idrifaia, and I was exceptionally interested in Bonyha as a location: I found very exciting the urban yet halfway modernized character of the village centre, the peculiar castle –imposing in the Transylvanian context even in its deteriorated condition –, the merely imaginable former castle garden around it, and, last but not least, an ethnically colourful world where Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma have lived together but where the Saxons alongside the Jewish and Armenian merchants still had a living memory. As it later became clear: Bonyha is a small-scale reflection of the formerly ethnically diverse region located between Balavásár/Bălăușeri, Erzsébetváros/Dumbrăveni, and Dicsőszentmárton/Târnăveni, wherein it did not succeed in acquiring a genuinely central role precisely due to the emergence of Erzsébetváros and Dicsőszentmárton.

According to the 2011 census, there are 2,000 inhabitants in Bonyha, roughly 42% of them being Roma, 31% Hungarian, and 27% Romanian, while the economic, social, and power positions are exactly the opposite, the gap between the Roma and the non-Roma inhabitants being quite significant. Bonyha is also the centre of the community, but its role –based on interviews and historical data –may have been much more significant: it also functioned as a market centre in the area (its fairs are still visited not only by locals but also by people from more remote areas), to which a significant number of craftsmen, artisans, and merchants in the village meeting the needs of visitors to the

⁹ COHN 1980, 221.

fair also contributed. This already explains the widening street in the village centre and the unusual constructions standing out from the vernacular architecture of the area: the houses also functioning as shops feature a door on the street front. The Bethlens managing their properties in Bonyha and in the neighbouring areas from here and being involved in maintaining the local market presumably played a role in the operation of the fair.

Between 2009 and 2014, we carried out fieldwork several times here (field trips, participant observation, interviews, focus group interviews, questionnaire surveys), and, due to the nature of the research, we also tried to map historical sources (archives, historical works, archival press materials) that could help us answer our questions about the current state. As it can be seen above, the role of the family in the village was of particular interest to us, so this also came up during the interviews, but perhaps we would have touched on these issues without myself asking about it. We also tried to review the historical materials related to the village and the family, which is why we conducted research in the archives of Budapest and Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş, summarized the data of historical statistics, reviewed the local newspaper articles published at the turn of the 20th century, and also tried to compare all these with the data in the interviews.¹⁰

1545–1946: 400 years, the Bethlens and Their Presence

The Bethlens, both the Iktár/Ictarés Betlen/Beclean branches, were one of the most important aristocratic families in Transylvania. Over the centuries, princes, statesmen, politicians, soldiers, artists and patrons, school sponsors have emerged from this family. The Bethlens of Bonyha could probably not be top-ranked personalities in this respect,

¹⁰ Several studies and a book have been published based on my fieldwork in Bahnea/Bonyha (SZABÓ, Á. Töhötöm (2013): *Gazdasági adaptáció és etnicitás. Gazdaság, vidékiség és integráció egy erdélyi térségben*. Cluj-Napoca, Nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézet – Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság). In my book describing and analysing the ethnic-economic conditions in Bahnea/Bonyha and their evolution in history, I already touched on the role of the Bethlens in the village, but the data herein are being presented in a new light and in this scope. Zsuzsanna Fülöp and Márton László were of great help in the historical orientation and exploration of sources, and I would like to thank them here as well. I read the issues of the Kis-Küküllő published between 1891 and 1933 in the University Library in Kolozsvár/Cluj.

but we must still mention that one of our first women (memoir) writers was (Orphan) Kata Bethlen of Betlen/Beclean, who was born in Bonyha in 1700. Her name survived not only as a writer but also as a school and art patron: among other things, she supported Peter Bod, whom then she appointed her court preacher. Several members of the Bethlen family of Bonyha took part in the Transylvanian governance and played an essential role at the county level.

Our first reliable record of the Bethlens of Bonyha dates back to 1545: the family, presumably already living in the village at the time, conducted reconstruction works on the castle. In 1675, following a property ownership dispute of the two local family branches, they built a new castle in the village opposite the still standing old castle (both castles are visible on the military map of the 18th century).¹¹ Most of the data on the management of the count's estate date back to the 19th century,¹² but an inventory dated 1711 published by Zsuzsánna Fülöp also gives us a picture about what economic life was on the estate. The census gives an account of, inter alia, horse stables, piggeries, cowsheds, chicken coops, fishponds, raw and dried fruits, winepresses, wine produced in several neighbouring villages (Bonyha, Bogát/Bogata, Csávás/Ceuș, Leppend/Lepindea, Örményes/Armeniș, Zágor/Zagăr), vegetables gardens and flower gardens, barnyards, orchards, etc., that is to say, the picture of a large and highly diversified estate unfolds before our eyes.¹³ During the division in 1732, the ancestor of the family, Pál Bethlen, also received

¹¹ The newest castle was dismantled between the two World Wars (see more details in later sections).

¹² The sources for the agricultural and historical data were the statistics drawn up at the turn of the 20th century (MKOMS – *A magyar korona országainak mezőgazdasági statisztikája*. Budapest, Pesti Könyvnyomda-Részvény-társaság, 1897; RUBINEK, Gyula: *Magyarországi gazdaczímtár. Magyarország, Horvát- és Szlavónországok 100 kat. Holdon felüli birtokosainak és bérlőinek címjegyzéke, az egyes megyék részletes monográfiájával*. Budapest, Országos Magyar Gazdasági Egyesület Könyvkiadóvállalata, 1911), the land register, and the materials in the archives in Budapest and Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș. Browsing through the memoirs of a local resident and former magistrate, Nicolae Golea, also turned out to be useful (GOLEA, Nicolae (1996): *O viață închinată unui sat. Amintiri*. Târgu-Mureș, Transilvania) just as reading László Péterfy's work on the history of the Bonyha/Bahnea parish (PÉTERFY, László (2000): *Bonyha és egyháza*. Odorheiu Secuiesc, self-released publication).

¹³ FÜLÖP, Zsuzsánna (2012): *A bethleni Bethlen család bonyhai kastélya*. Dissertation paper – manuscript. Babeș–Bolyai University, Department of Art History, Cluj-Napoca.

the estates in Szentlászló/Sănavsii, Szénaverős/Senereuş, Örményes, Dányán/Daia, Csávás/Ceuş, Bernád/Bernadea, and Kápolna/Căpâlna together with the estate and castle of Bonyha.¹⁴ The castles of Bonyha were thus the hubs of extensive estates.

The counts of Bethlen continued to engage in farming with outstanding results in the early 19th century as well, as the sources also mention their beautiful orchards and their horse-powered threshing machines, which were still very rare in Transylvania at the time.¹⁵ According to the agricultural statistics made in 1895, Árpád Bethlen and his family owned 2,235 yokes¹⁶ of land, out of which 202 yokes were arable. But his forest estate was considerable, amounting to 1,329 yokes and hiring over 100 people, being thus the most important employer in the area. The cattle herds were significant, being kept separate in infertile herds and dairy cattle, and his stud farm was also large. The villagers all mentioned his oxen and horses: some remembered thirty and others sixty oxen. Judging by the number of carts, around thirty is more likely. The count also traded his cattle abroad, and after a successful fair the locals were also able to join this trade, whose cattle were also transported from the Bonyha railway station by the merchants arriving here. The count also had a herd of swine and a flock of sheep,¹⁷ as statistics prove it, while residents remember and the archives confirm that he also had flourishing gardens.

The data recorded 15 years later depict an even larger estate in Bonyha and the surrounding villages: in 1910, in Bonyha, in the nearby Bernád, and in the more remote Harangláb/Hărănglab, the noble family owned 2,920 yokes of land, out of which 1,208 yokes were arable, 1,060 yokes were forest, and the rest was used for miscellaneous purposes (gardens, pastures, meadows). This was a significant property in the Transylvanian context. The 1910 statistics also list the count as a tobacco grower, who was in the category of tobacco growers owning over 10 yokes. At the end of the 1890s, there was a situation in which the count tried out tobacco production on 30 yokes, which brought a very good

¹⁴ LUKINICH, Imre (1927): *A bethleni gróf Bethlen család története*. Budapest, Athenaeum R. T. 553. Nicolae Golea mentions that the count owned two watermills, one in Kápolna/Căpâlna and the other one in (Oláh) Szentlászló/Sănavsii (GOLEA 1996, 97). We know that these usufructuary rights also pertained to the estate.

¹⁵ KÖVÁRI, László (1847): *Erdélyország statistikája*. Kolozsvár, Tilsch Jánosnyomdája. 104, 125.

¹⁶ Unit of land area, equal to 0.57 hectares (see Romanian 'iugăr', German 'Joch', and Hungarian 'hold') (editor's note).

¹⁷ GOLEA 1996, 96.

yield, a very good quality, and an income of 100 forints per yoke.¹⁸ But we also get the information from the turn of the century that the count's tobacco was being stolen.¹⁹ Nicolae Golea mentions the count's tobacco barns.²⁰ Adding to this that he had more than one hundred employees, he also had the villagers who came to work for wood and hay and who hoed the sugar beet, he owned a distillery, he operated two water-mills and traded cattle: the image of an intensive large-scale agricultural farm emerges, within which innovation also played a major role as industrial crop plants appeared in Transylvanian agriculture during the time.²¹

The owner of this plant, on the other hand, was not unwilling to help the life of the village and the countryside or even the county whenever possible. The list of major taxpayers was led in general by Jenő Haller of Küküllővár/Cetatea de Baltă followed, second or third, by Árpád Bethlen.²² The count was a member of the county committee, but he was also the vice-chairman of the horse breeding society, the appraiser of the horse classification board.²³ We must also emphasize his role in the construction of the railway along the Kis-Küküllő: he enthusiastically supported the construction of the railway and participated in the board.

His work was also recorded in the press of the time when a journalist put these words into the count's mouth: "as soon as one can smell coal smoke, they are in the very midst of civilization", and then he continued: "Bonyha is already the very centre of the world although it was a terminus until now".²⁴ The count facilitated the building of the old school not only by giving them the plot but also by travelling to Budapest with the supervisor, the head of the B. family, to obtain the permit. The count also donated the plot for construction, and he had the old Orthodox church built,²⁵ which is quite abandoned today because of the population change, standing on the hill above the Roma part of the village, and it is hardly ever used. The castle also hosted

¹⁸ *Kis-Küküllő* 25. Febr. 1894. 4/9, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Kis-Küküllő* 2 Oct. 1898. 8/40, p. 3.

²⁰ GOLEA.

²¹ EGYED Ákos: *Falu, város, civilizáció*. Bukarest, Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1981.

²² *Kis-Küküllő* 11. Oct. 1891. 1/28, p. 3 and 25. Nov. 4/48. p. 2.

²³ *Kis-Küküllő* 25. Oct. 1903. 13/43. p. 2

²⁴ *Kis-Küküllő*, 2 Oct. 1898. 8/40, p. 1

²⁵ PÉTERFY, 138.

balls, performances, and charity evenings with the participation of local intellectuals and owners. “In the benefit of the school and the casino, the youth of Bonyha shall host an amateur show followed by dancing on 15 June 1895 (in the halls of the old Bethlen castle).” Endre Scheitz, Ida Elekes, Sámuel Kerekes, and Count Ádám Bethlen appeared in the show.²⁶ It cannot be a coincidence either that a reading society was established in the village, and even a casino was planned to be opened.²⁷

1921–1946: A Quarter of a Century and the Disappearance of a Family

With the peace treaties that ended World War I, Transylvania, including Bonyha, was annexed to Romania. And while some aspects of the change were not immediate, they were still final: the noble family remained in the village, the recordings in the land registry were still made in Hungarian after the change of regime, but then they became bilingual, and the agrarian reform board still used Hungarian; nonetheless, a process started closing almost definitively in a quarter of a century the 400-year-old history of the Bethlens in Bonyha. The process sharply raises the issue of the extent to which the major historical events appear in the lives of everyday people.²⁸ The economic drive of the count’s estate was disrupted between the two World Wars. During the 1921 Agrarian Reform, a significant part of their land was taken away, and, although the count’s family retained its economic priority, and – according to the available historical data and the villagers’ memory – it still remained the most important employer in whose estate both Hungarians and Romanians worked, the economic performance of the estate decreased. Of the entire 2,400-yoke estate inventoried in the agrarian reform lists,²⁹ only 420 yokes were left to Ádám Bethlen (he was already the owner as his father died

²⁶ *Kis-Küküllő* 19. Jun. 1895. 5, 23. 3.

²⁷ *Kis-Küküllő* 10 Febr. 1895. 5, 6. 2.

²⁸ The Bethlens were an aristocratic family. But just as kings did, they also had an everyday life (KASCHUBA 2012, 223): the change of the regime in this sense affected not only their public roles but also their everyday life. The word “everyday” is used in this sense here.

²⁹ During the 1921 Agrarian Reform, the noble estate of Bonyha/Bahnea was recorded with 2,369 yokes.

in 1912),³⁰ and thus the decrease in the economic performance is completely understandable. The new castle built in 1675 was demolished during this period, and the distillery was closed down as well.³¹

The count's estate in the centre of the village was divided, houses were built here, and these houses were connected to the main road by a new street so that the inhabitants would not have to walk on the roundabout opening from the roads running up the two valleys.³² Thus, the landscape of the village also changed (and continued to do so after WWII). The poor and/or the Roma and war veterans were given land. The land ownership of the Roma mostly dates back to this time and, later, from the period of reprivatization. The land reform of 1921 clearly shows that the modern (nation-) state highly interferes in the matter and shapes local property and economic relations. In the case of Transylvania, this was accompanied by the peculiar nature of the agrarian reform that it was not simply a social reform (in fact, it seems to have been less of a social reform) but rather a means of creating a Romanian nation-state and economic framework, part of nationalist economic policy.³³

The 1921 Agrarian Reform was also conferred a special character by the two separate laws that applied to the parts newly annexed to Romania (Law of 30 July 1921) and to the territories that had hitherto formed Old Romania (Law of 17 July 1921).³⁴ There is more than one article in the law on Transylvania featuring the obvious intention to reduce the economic power of the Hungarian landowners, and we do know that during the enforcement the primary objective was to transfer landed property to

³⁰ ROLMMI Fond col. de evid. cad. 196 Romanian National Archives Mureş County Directorate, Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş – cadastral collection.

³¹ A plot of land and a building belonging to the Bethlens was registered as the property of the distillery in Szamosújvár/Gherla in 1937 (LAND REGISTER – Excerpt from the land register of the Bethlens of Bonyha/Bahnea. In the possession of the Reformed Church District of Transylvania, Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca.).

³² GOLEA 1996, 104.

³³ BÍRÓ, Sándor (2002): *Kisebbségben és többségben. Románok és magyarok 1867–1940*. Miercurea Ciuc, Pro-Print.

³⁴ The law on the newly annexed regions is available at: http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htm?_act_text?id=65850; the law of the Romanian Old Kingdom here: http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htm?_act_text?id=65849 (last accessed on: 14 September 2020).

Romanian farmers.³⁵ At the time, 47 building plots of 400 square fathoms each were allotted to Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma, and 160 people were given one to three yokes of land.³⁶

Despite the disruption in the economic drive, it seems that the count's family was still able to maintain both its courtly lifestyle and his integrative role in the village. The data obtained from the interviews on this period can also be of assistance since we managed to interview several people in Bonyha who knew the count's family personally as children or during their youth. According to interviews, it often happened that the peasant children or the craftsmen's children spent time around the tennis court, picking up the balls, fetched lemonade from the kitchen, and so on. "How was it? We would often go to the counts' place, and they would call us to paint the court, roll it down, and the rope that is the net had to be mounted at 2 in the afternoon as they would start playing. Then we were there, picked up the balls, we would hit some balls now and then... 'Now go and get a ball.' And I would go up to the castle, as we knew where the balls were, and would bring down a whole box" (B. J.).

The count's family did not completely isolate themselves from the village life during this period; there were also instances when the young counts would show up at the village balls. The recollection of the young counts skiing behind the car also dates back to this time. Also remembering this period, many recalled that the count had presents for every child at Christmas and spoke to everyone in their own language. Therefore, it can be argued that the count was, in a sense, above the local ethnic struggles, which is why the count's family and their memory may have played an integrative role in the life of the village.

The count's last cook was a local Romanian man.³⁷ The count and his family found shelter at his place after the war: "...indeed, he was a faithful servant. And the youngsters also liked him as S. was almost their age" (B. A.) "...and they were then accommodated at the old man's place. And the old man hid them away. The old man

³⁵ BÍRÓ 2002.

³⁶ ROLMMI.

³⁷ C. I. (1903–1997) – died childless. According to the interview given by his kinswoman, he was a cook in the count's court for 28 years. He last met the counts in 1996.

hid all their stuff, all their belongings. [...] They didn't have anything to eat, they took away everything. At the end of his field, there were stacks of corn stover; he dug a hole and hid it there" (G. O.). The cook was then allegedly often harassed by the Securitate to hand over the count's hidden treasures: "...he was taken to Târgu-Mureș; I don't know whether he was beaten. And then he came back home, and he cried his eyes out. 'What happened?', I asked. I must go to Hátszeg/Hațeg... where the count's grave was [...], they said he had the golden hen with the chickens" (G. O.).³⁸

The count's last steward was also Romanian. His daughter, who is over eighty now, also has nice memories of the count. In the village, however, they say that the steward's three daughters married thanks to the count's estate; so, of course, "they think highly of them", they add. The old lady, on the other hand, claims that the count sold his property after leaving the village, leaving only the empty castle behind. This is highly unlikely knowing that the count was exiled to a forced residence after World War II and being aware of the nature of the following regime and its relationship to the former aristocracy and bourgeoisie.

The villagers' recollections of the period after WWII are contradictory. The count's family was evicted in 1946, moved to an assigned residence in 1949; the crumbling outer walls of the castle began to be torn down, and houses were built from it.³⁹ Russian soldiers were accommodated in the castle during World War II. Later, it functioned as the office of the agricultural cooperative, a boarding school, and then the town hall. The library and records that remained in place, including the documents of the cooperative, were destroyed. It might be too exaggerated, but it can be still stated that in 1946, after a short but eventful quarter of a century featuring world wars, border changes, changes of regime, agrarian and social reforms, and economic crises, a four-century story was disrupted.

³⁸ The cook kept a relatively vast photo album of the count's family, which he bestowed upon one of his relatives after his death. In these pictures, the aristocratic life is displayed in its old splendour.

³⁹ Cf. BICSOK, Zoltán – ORBÁN, Zsolt (2011): „Isten segedelmével udvaromat megépítettem...” *Történelmi családok kastélyai Erdélyben*. Miercurea Ciuc, Gutenberg Kiadó. 162.

Presence, Disappearance, and Reappearance

The distinctive nature of the Bethlens' presence in Bonyha and in the area of the village is indisputable. Not only the inhabitants of Bonyha but also the residents in the area, all the way to Balavásár, worked for him. Nicolae Golea recalls that very few in the village did not work for the count, but virtually the whole village depended on him. He had several tenant farmers in the village, Hungarians and Romanians alike, for whom he also provided supplies and arable land. Because the forest was almost entirely owned by the count, those who asked for the wood had to pay for it in working days, or for the hay they wanted to mow. The count used the working days for mowing and hoeing, for instance, for beet hoeing.⁴⁰ The interviews also highlight that labour force was needed as well in his 45-yoke vineyard, and it is worth noting that 45 yokes of the village's 52-yoke vineyard were in his hands.

As mentioned above, the count's family also owned a car, which was quite rare in the area at the time: there were three in total in the area from Balavásár to Dicsőszentmárton. The count was also at the villagers' service with the car, and if needed he made the car and his chauffeur available to the inhabitants for urgent local matters.⁴¹

The interviewees who were children at the time recall this era as a time when the count managed the affairs of the village and its people as a benevolent father, handed out gifts for Christmas, and so on.

He was a good man, on the people's side. On New Year's Day, he would gather all the village children together, the countess would come out and would give everyone [*ne slobozea*] a present. [...] [*And didn't he make any distinction between Romanians and Hungarians?*] No, no, all the children in the village can tell that, all those my age we would go so that that the count would give us a gift [*aiandec*]. This is how he would say it... He gave us oranges... but you know what he gave us most often? Figs. (T. M.)

⁴⁰ GOLEA 1996.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The departure of the count's family, the demolition of the outbuildings and the fence of the castle did not mean that the family had definitively disappeared from the village. As we have already mentioned: building plots and arable lands were given away from his land. New roads were built, new houses were erected from the building materials remaining from the dismantled walls. The local memory preserves this information. "Bonyha's existence was defined by the count's court as around 50 families received their daily bread from the count. Well, now the count's estate was parcelled out and divided among them by right of being soldiers or I don't know for what kind of merits, or the plots were given away for war heroes and veterans" (B. A.).

As they say, many houses between the centre and the railway were built from this building material: "This street was built from it. The bricks were cleared away from there. It happened that a girl was a servant there. She got married and did not have a place to stay, and then they were given a building plot by the state or the village. And the houses were built from there. All from there, all of it... There was a big stonewall around, they would hit it with hammers and carried it away" (B. R.). There are many things from the castle that were taken away by the inhabitants of Bonyha, as stated by several residents, but these artefacts will probably never surface again.

The marketplace that still operates today used to be the count's estate. The practice of selling and buying on the market was largely determined by the farming and animal husbandry existing on the count's estate. Today's merchants, in a sense, see themselves as heirs to this practice. The count played a decisive role in the construction of the railway as well as presumably in the fact that the first section of the branch line went up to Bonyha, which was then the centre of the area. The name of the meadow between the castle and Kis-Küküllő preserves the memory of the outstanding horse breeding and the count's stud farm: the *Lókert* [Horse Park], where the count supposedly kept his horses. The name of *Lókert* appears both in the toponymic material (Bernád, 1711) and the archive sources (Bonyha, 1713).⁴² The memory of their former vegetable garden is preserved through the *Bulgárkert* [Bulgarian Garden] toponym,

⁴² HAJDÚ, Mihály – SEBESTYÉN, Zsolt (2003): *Kisküküllő és Nagyküküllőmegye*. Szabó T. Attila kéziratoss gyűjteményéből közzéteszi. SZABÓ T. Attila, *Erdélyi Történeti Helynévgyűjtése*. 4. Magyar Nyelvtudományi Társaság, Budapest. 23; MOL P1951 – National Archives of Hungary, Archives of the Bethlens (P 1951). Estate administration and management documents. Doc. 43.

whose continuity was ensured by the intensive and financially successful cooperative farm.⁴³

With the political and economic changes, the opportunities of the count's family were first reduced and then became impossible. The integrative role played by the count's estate was held for a few decades by the cooperative, which was basically established on the count's estate. The consumer cooperative, shop, confectionery, and bakery built on the count's estate also played a similar role. The so often forced and violent modernization brought by the second half of the 20th century transformed both production structures and distribution chains, so that the doors that once opened on the street front for the street fair also lost their function.

The family members visited the village back in the 1990s. According to the photographs, they also met their former cook (they had been in contact with him in the meantime, sending photos). But they were not particularly interested in the estates – the reclaimed castle, fractions of lands and forests were all donated to the Transylvanian Reformed Church District. The preservation of the castle has started (a new roof has been built), and it is known from the reports of the representatives of the church district that concrete plans have been made in connection with the utilization of the castle: the castle was taken over by the Reformed Women's Association, and, according to the report of one of the leaders of the church district, the reclaimed lands will also be put at its service. A castle day is held in the castle and its garden at the beginning of each summer.

Closing Remarks

Those growing up in socialism considered it perfectly natural for the history textbooks to claim that the nobility, i.e. the exploiting class, was most preoccupied with sweating the peasantry in addition to leading an idle lifestyle. The truthfulness of the statement is indisputable, but it needs to be nuanced: the history of the relationship between the peasantry and the nobility featured several moments and occasions of cooperation. Ákos Egyed quoting Sándor Újfalvy reports about such cases,⁴⁴ although he also

⁴³ See: SZABÓ 2013, 147–148.

⁴⁴ EGYED 1981, 29.

notes that such mass events were not necessarily frequent.⁴⁵ If we take a closer look at some of the cases, we can definitely nuance these images: in the village, I also rarely encountered negative opinions about the count's family, for the most part the opinions being rather positive. And, in general, they believe that the family's presence in the village was a positive one.

At the same time, moving closer also helps us become even more aware: these sites are not necessarily described by the discourse of the white spot, the edge of civilization or atemporality,⁴⁶ even if they sometimes apply this to themselves as the head of the count's family once did during the construction of the branch line. Anyone who moves closer to these cases using the methodological tools and sources of different disciplines can see that the image of people living independent, autonomous lives gets shaped during the study. Local life is a complex set of meanings, whose part, but still only *one* part, is the connection to the outside world. Even without the counts of Bethlen, the people of Bonyha would have their own lives connected to these outside worlds. The Bethlens reorganized these relationships at most, influencing village life at the level of these relationships but also in terms of the organization of inner life.

The final, important question, however, remains valid: to what extent are the local worlds the victims and to what extent are they the shapers of these stories? Or, in other words: how people participate in all these processes and whether the individuals can shape their own destiny. The examples presented above perhaps show that these local worlds are indeed part of their own history, which in turn is part of the great history. The presence of the Bethlens exemplifies this connection very nicely and shows not only that history takes place in these apparently remote places in space and time but also that local people can be shapers of this process themselves: the count experimenting with the new, but the craftsman, the merchant, or the peasant trading animals all point in the direction of the individuals actively shaping their lives.

However, there are moments in history when an individual is left with reduced room for manoeuvre: the quarter of a century, which eventually resulted in the disappearance of the count's family, gradually narrowed down these spaces. And this, again, sheds new light on the issue of shifting the focus of power centres, the evolution of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Cf. FABIAN and MEDICK.

dynamics between power centres and local worlds. Undoubtedly, the Romanian state, interested in hard-line nationalization, had radically new ideas on these issues, and on the path to achieving their ambitious goals they acquired some or a significant part of these sources as well as of their own legitimacy, both after WWI and WWII, by way of more or less violent deprivations committed against the old classes, by calling their representatives' position into question, and often by their physical destruction.

A century has passed since the peace treaties ending the First World War: these regime changes, the transformation in the relationships between the domestic world and the outside world, the change in the structures of the local world indelibly occurred. However, the four-century-long presence of the Bethlens has not passed without a trace: not only the castle that still stands today reminds us of them and not only the inhabitants' memories otherwise constantly subject to change but also their presence in the history of Bonyha, manifested in the rural structure, place names, and social structures.

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