



FERENC POZSONY

The Functions and Meanings of the Saxon Lutheran Cemetery from Tartlau¹

Introduction

Transylvania continues to be a multi-ethnic region even in our days. It has been inhabited in the past centuries by large Hungarian, Romanian, Saxon, Roma (Gypsy), Armenian, and Jewish communities. Although these communities of different languages and denominations each had their specific cultural traditions, the neighbouring ethnic groups mutually stimulated and enriched each other's lives (Pozsony 2009a: 221–234). The Saxon urban and rural communities all disappeared in the second part of the 20th century (due to various political, economic, and social causes), but their eight centuries presence, as well as their exceptional culture is still represented by their extraordinary built heritage, preserved in Transylvania (Fabritius-Dancu 1980).

Conceptions, rituals, symbols, objects, and places related to passing and existence beyond death are part of the deep layer of ethnic communities and cultures (Bartha 1992: 69–74, Berta 2001: 117–142, Erdélyi 1980, Kiss 2014, Kunt 1983: 8–13, Hoppál–Novák 1982: 243–256). Hungarian, Romanian, Saxon, Armenian, Jewish, and Gypsy communities living in Transylvania all formulated specific answers to the questions of passing and life beyond death. Their worldview, as well as their cultural and social traditions fundamentally determined the structure, elements, and rituals of their respective cults of the dead, as well as their characteristic cemetery culture (Balassa 1992, Deák 2009, Gaal 2010, Gangolea 2014, Gergely 2000, Kinda 2016a, 2016b, K. Kovács 2004, Péterfy 2005, Pop L. 2013, Popp 2006, Polgár 2012, Schullerus 1926, Scola–Acker-Sutter 1991, Virág 1994).

Cemeteries were primarily the resting places of the deceased in Transylvania, too, and their special sacred functions and meanings found their expression in countless religious and magical practices, such as the consecration of the graves, commemorations organised by the family, the church, and the deceased's friends, the offering, the consumption or donation food and drink sacrifices, as well as in the installation of consecrated objects (catkins, candles, flowers, water) (Bartha 1992: 69–73). In this region, too, cemeteries represent special spaces that enable the basic functioning of the cultural remembrance of families as well as of the confessional and the local communities. "It is communicative insofar as it represents

1 Editor's note: village in the South-Eastern part of Transylvania: Tartlau (German), Tuartlen (Saxon), Prejmer (Romanian), Prázsmár (Hungarian).

a universal human form, and it is cultural to the degree in which it produces its particular carriers, rituals, and institutions.” (Assmann 1999: 61.) In this study, I will focus exclusively on the functions of a Saxon Cemetery from the Burzenland (Hungarian: Barcaság, Romanian: Țara Bârsei) region of Romania.

Historical Overview

The ancestors of Transylvanian Saxons arrived in this region at the turn of the 12th and 13th century and played an important role throughout the centuries in defending its southern and eastern borders, as well as in the development of the crafts practiced within the trade guilds, in commerce, and in Transylvanian viticulture and viniculture. At the beginning of the 16th century, their entire community converted to the Protestant faith, and founded an autonomous Lutheran church. Since the Saxons of this region have always maintained excellent relationships with the Germans of the old country in areas of ecclesial, educational, cultural, economic, and social life, they have continually transmitted to Transylvania the most recent elements of Western European culture and have played an important role in the embourgeoisement process as well as in introducing urban culture and life patterns (Pozsony 2009b).

Funeral Traditions and Burial among Transylvanian Saxons

The funeral customs of Transylvanian Saxons reflected their basic values and life patterns in a nuanced manner. Their cult of the dead was very well organised and structured, following urban, bourgeois patterns from a relatively early age. The neighbourhood associations (*Nachbarschaft*) played a decisive role in preparing and conducting funerals in their villages. Internally, Saxon settlements were structured in local, social, and ritual units of smaller dimensions (the *Nachbarschaft* units, i.e. neighbourhoods). These had an important function in the mutual assistance of their members, in the maintenance of public safety, in economic, social, ecclesiastic, and ritual life, as well as in the respectful burial of the dead until the end of World War II. They usually functioned according to written statutes authorised and validated by the local church and elected their leaders freely (Pozsony 1997).

If someone died in a Saxon village, his or her relatives first informed the local pastor and then the head of the neighbourhood, who spread the sad news from house to house using a draft board. The grave was dug by the men belonging to the neighbourhood association based on a rotation principle. They were also the ones who carried the coffin to the cemetery and buried it there. Since these communities were very fond of horn music, the members of the local brass band usually accompanied the coffin of the deceased to the grave. Up until the beginning of the



20th century, the participants at the funerals, with the exception of the Lutheran pastor, circumambulated thrice the grave decorated with flowers and wreaths. The funeral ceremony was immediately followed by a common meal organised in the courtyard or in the rooms the family or the neighbourhood association. Transylvanian Saxons also used to commemorate their dead on the 1st of November, carefully cleaning and decorating the graves with flowers before the festival (Schullerus 1926: 124–136, Scola–Acker-Sutter 1991: 160–161, Pop 2013: 168).

Up until the 18th century, the Saxon cemeteries laid in the immediate vicinity of the churches and were relocated following the instructions of the Viennese regime, issued in 1787, outside the inhabited area, near the villages, usually on a hillside or on the top of a hill (Popp 2006: 234, Pop 2013: 155). I would like to emphasise here that the Saxon cemeteries were much better organised than their Hungarian counterparts. In most of the villages, the cemeteries had a linear ground plan. As for the funeral monuments, these have begun to follow bourgeois models from early on, and the Saxons of Transylvania sculpted their inscribed obelisks from stone or marble already from the 18th century.²

Their communal funeral traditions have been preserved up until the middle of the 20th century. However, due to the significant loss in human life during World War II and subsequently, because of the effects of forced relocation and mass migration, their local communities were suddenly scattered, their numbers have decreased, and their customs changed, which led to the abandonment of the cemeteries. The Lutheran Church of Transylvania, as well as the Saxons living in Germany pay particular attention to the care and protection of the Saxon cemeteries of this region (Scola–Acker-Sutter 1991: 160–161).

Since there are less than ten thousand, mostly elderly Saxons still living in Transylvania today, increasingly fewer funerals are held in their former settlements. Most of the villages are inhabited by Saxons who, during the persecutions following World War II, have married Romanians settled in their localities. Thus, more recently, Romanians are also buried in the Saxon cemeteries, disrupting their former confessional and ethnic homogeneity.

Because there are less and less fresh burials in the Saxon cemeteries, their former functions have radically changed as well. In most of the localities, they already function as “closed” memorial sites reminding the Saxons who visit their Transylvanian homeland of their loved ones, family members, relatives, former institutions (the Lutheran church, the neighbourhood and fire fighting associations, and the singing societies), their rural Transylvanian Saxon communities beautified by nostalgia, of their traditions and customs, as well as of the victims of the World War.

2 See Dimény 1997, Gaal 2010. Their appearance within the 18th century common popular cemeteries of Transylvania and later spread was also aided by the carved tombstones of the aristocratic families. See Kinda 2016a: 171.



The main entrance of the cemetery from Tartlau



The inner yard of the cemetery



Saxon mourning wreath ribbons in red and blue



The Orthodox cemetery cross of a Saxon woman, married to a Romanian husband



Old tombstone

The Saxon Cemetery of Tartlau

The Saxon cemetery of Tartlau lies far from the Lutheran fortified church, in the southern border area of the village, and a busy road passes in front of it. The cemetery is surrounded by a tall brick fence. Thus, similarly to the courtyards of Saxon families, one cannot peak into its enclosed space from the street. Beside the entrance, there is a building that serves as the home of the cemetery grounds-keeper, who thus continuously ensures its protection.

Along the eastern, northern, and western wall of the cemetery, there are family crypts covered with slate, opening to the central part of the cemetery. Relatively few of these crypts are protected with low wrought iron fences. On the floor of the crypts open to the front, cement boards of larger dimensions cover the graves containing the coffins of the deceased, while on the vertical back walls one can see inscribed plaques made of stone and marble, the framed photographs of the deceased under glass protection as well as the inscribed ribbons prepared for their funerals, and lately even coloured plastic flowers.

The commemorative plaques to the victims of World War II along with the marble tablets and printed pages containing the names of the people who died during the deportations following the war or in the Soviet camps were installed in this special and, until recently, ethnically homogenous sacred space.

It is also worth emphasising that the photographs of the people who were buried by their relatives in their new home country, in Germany, are also exhibited in this valorised space, since their families wanted to commemorate them through these family photographs in the graveyard of their native village.

The inscribed tablets mounted on the walls of the crypts, the old and more recent photographs, the ribbons showing the “national” colours of the Transylvanian Saxons, the drawings of the more famous buildings and fortified churches of the Burzenland (the Bârsei depression), and other visual media recreate the former local community through their specific means, as well as express and represent the existence, cohesion, and mutual relations of the Saxon families, kinship groups, and neighbourhoods that lived here during the 20th century. It is worth noting that the pictures installed on the walls of the crypts have no place in the postmodern world of the emigrants’ new home country, but can only state and communicate jointly their specific messages here, in the Transylvanian Tartlau.

Closing Remarks

Due to the richness of its visual elements, the cemetery of Tartlau counts as an invariant even within the region known as the “Royal Lands” or “Saxon Lands” (German: Königsboden; Hungarian: Királyföld; Romanian: Pământul crăiesc). In fact, it is not only a resting place of the deceased, filled with sacred meanings, but also the memorial and commemorative space, with an emphatically ethnic and



confessional character, of the Saxon Lutheran communities that were expelled, sold off from, or simply left Transylvania. It preserves and manifests to this day not only the fundamental confessional and ethnic symbols of the individuals and families of Tartlau, but also those of the local community that once lived here, while at the same time it provides the emigrants from this village who visit home with a particular identity (Assmann 1999: 63–64). “Group and place take on a symbolic sense of community that the group also adheres to, when it is separated from its own space...” (Assmann 1999: 40.)

The Jewish cemetery from Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and the Hungarian-Armenian cemetery from Szamosújvár (Gherla) function similarly to the Saxon graveyard from Tartlau. Although their respective local communities disappeared, their descendants scattered around the world still maintain and visit the resting places of their ancestors, since they consider these spaces as an organic part of their heritage and self-identity (Erdélyi 1980, Balázs-Bécsi 2002).

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