



From Courtship till the Morning After: The Role of Family, Kin and Friends in the Marriages of László Székely*

Andrea Fehér

Babeş-Bolyai University

feher_andrea@yahoo.com

This study presents the different stages of the eighteenth-century Transylvanian marriage rituals, from betrothal, wedding ceremony, and bedding until the morning after. It also examines the roles played in this process by the “kinship-family.” The study draws on a wide range of published and unpublished biographical works from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among these diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs written by members of the political elite, the unpublished autobiography of Count László Székely stands out, as it provides a considerable amount of data regarding some customs and traditions related to Transylvanian marriages and marriage rituals. Building on the count’s very personal and emotional narratives, we offer a sketch of the ways in which Transylvanians entered into marriage. We consider marriage a long process rather than a single act, in which family, friends, and kin played a significant role.

Keywords: kinship-family, marriage, betrothal, nuptials, László Székely, eighteenth-century Transylvania

Introductory Considerations

Over the course of the past half-century, research regarding family history, either from demographic or emotional perspectives, has become very popular, and as time has passed, studies on the subject flooded both sides of the so-called Hajnal line with contradictory results. Arguments which seem to have been shaped largely by the source types suggested either that the history of emotional ties in families should be understood as a long and ever changing process determined by social norms or just the opposite, that it should be seen as a process marked largely by continuity.¹ In the debates concerning the Early Modern and Modern

* This paper was supported by the MTA BTK Lendület Családtörténeti Kutatócsoport [Lendület Integrating Families Research Group] and is in part a revised version of an earlier publication: Fehér, “Lakodalmak.”

1 Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*; Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood*; Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*; and those who argue for the continuity of emotional attachments, see Laslett, *The World We Have*

family, the supporters of the continuity interpretation came out victorious. However, more recent research has suggested that there is good reason to be more skeptical of the notion of motherly, fatherly, and marital love that lasts through the ages (or at least through an adult lifetime).² Therefore, regarding the nature of our sources and the available analogies, the most promising approach would probably be to consider the subject from the perspective of emotions, but we will refer to the emotional communities in which the marriages came into being only to a very limited extent. In this study, the primary focus will not be on the question of whether marriages between people belonging to the nobility in eighteenth-century Transylvania were based on love, the will of parents, or personal sympathy, but rather on how the marriages came into being (from the first encounter to the wedding ceremony), who were the people involved, and what roles these people played in the conventional stages according to which courtship was structured and what functions they performed during the wedding ceremonies. By analyzing the autobiography of László Székely (1716–1772),³ the study offers insights into the customs involved among Transylvanians who were choosing a marriage partner and the nuptial regulations. It sketches the stages of the long process during which a marriage came into being. We also reflect on the marriage customs in Transylvania by presenting the earlier marriages in the Székely family, in part simply because we have an abundance of data concerning the three individuals who fulfilled the family's marriage goals (László Székely the Elder [1644–1692], Ádám Székely the Elder [1679–1730], and László Székely the Younger). Our paper is based entirely on retrospective personal narratives,

Lost; Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin*; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*; Pollock, *Forgotten Children*; Ozment, *Ancestors*; Tadmor, *Family and Friends*.

2 Dekker, *Egdocuments and History*.

3 László Székely was an educated Transylvanian aristocrat, book collector, translator, and memoir writer. The family's courtship, which it had only recently acquired a few years before he was born, and in particular the disdain of Transylvanian society for the "homines novi" exerted a decisive influence on his life. With the early death of his parents, his opportunities narrowed, thus he never received important functions and only observed the transformation of Transylvanian society from the outside. At the age of 47, still without an heir, he decided to edit his previously written and continuously amended notes. This circa 1,000-page memoir is the primary source for this study. Székely László élete azaz eredetének, eleinek, születetésének, neveltetésének, ifjúságának, megélemedett idejének s ez idők alatt lött világi viszontagságainak leírása [László Székely's description of his life, origins, birth, upbringing, youth, and the vicissitudes he faced during this time] OSZK. Quart. Hung. 4312.

such as memoirs, autobiographies, and histories, as it was in these sources that we found many relevant analogies.⁴

Székelys Seeking Marriage Partners

Transylvanian narrative sources repeatedly emphasize the importance of the harmonic coexistence of husband and wife, and the sources suggest that the authors themselves also sought successful marriages. Reading the literary works of the period, one might think that with the exception of Péter Apor (1676–1752),⁵ everyone lived in a happy marriage⁶ and got married according to his or her wishes, as in the century we study (at least according to the literature), the marriages were loving.⁷ Of course, reality is much more nuanced. Memoirs also tell of tragedies, divorces, and spouses chosen by kin. Memoir writers, however, also looked at arranged marriages with disapproval,⁸ and so did the Church, which tried to emphasize the role of free will in the nuptial ceremonies.⁹

The sources, however, suggest that numerous factors influenced the expectations of kin, and this is how László Székely the Elder managed to gain the hand of Sára Bulcsesdi (ca.1656–1708), who was a member of a prominent family, against a number of aspirants who were better off and were from families with more distinguished lineages. The autobiography of Miklós Bethlen (1642–1716)¹⁰ contains information concerning the antecedents to the marriage,

4 On this question in detail, see Fehér, *Sensibilitate și identitate*, 163–201; Fehér, “Lakodalmak,” 118–29. A comprehensive overview of the problem by Margit S. Sárdi is also based on the memoir-literature. Sárdi offers a discussion of discussing circa 75 marriages: Sárdi, “Leánykérés, házasság, szerelem.” For more on Early Modern Hungarian marriage customs, see: Szabó, “Betrothal.”

5 Péter Apor was a baron from Háromszék, comes, royal judge, and prolific memoir writer. Of his Hungarian vernacular, Latin, verse, and prose works, the most valuable from the point of view of literary and intellectual history is a nostalgic work in which he describes Transylvanian customs. In English, see: *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae*.

6 Fehér, *Sensibilitate și identitate*, 165–66.

7 Even otherwise skeptical historians (who argue that this history was marked by discontinuities of affections and attachments) such as Lawrence Stone admits that by the eighteenth century marital relationships were shaped more by emotion, and grandchildren loved in totally different ways than their grandfathers had. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 658.

8 Fehér, *Sensibilitate și identitate*, 165–72. In addition to memoir-literature, legal and ecclesiastic sources also condemned bad and violent marriages. Péter, *Házasság*, 123–38.

9 Bárth, *Esküvő, keresztelő, avatás*, 68.

10 Miklós Bethlen, chancellor of Transylvania, was the most erudite Transylvanian dignitary of the time. He pursued studies at Heidelberg, Utrecht, and Leiden, during which time he visited a number of Western European countries and saw a number of European noble courts. His travel experiences had an impact

as Sára Bulcsesdi had originally been promised to Bethlen's younger brother, Pál Bethlen (1648–1686). To the astonishment of Transylvanian society, however, the engagement was broken off because of the stepmother of the Bethlen sons, Klára Fekete. After this, Miklós Bethlen visited Sára Bulcsesdi once more to propose a match. This time, he tried to win her hand for Boldizsár Macskási (ca. 1650–ca. 1700). His reasoning followed the traditional view of the Transylvanian nobility: "I found the opportunity of saying, among other things, to István Jósika, her stepfather that I would rather give my daughter to a true-blue nobleman of ancient lineage than to a postmaster."¹¹ The courter, however, did not succeed. One might think that László Székely the Elder's promising political career and the significant wealth he had accumulated in a short period of time overwritten the social rigidity and seclusion of his contemporaries.¹² This is not so obvious, however. Transylvanian society still regarded the *homines novi* with a certain disdain, and therefore it is no surprise that almost every personal narrative from this century mentions the fortunate marriage of László Székely the Elder.

According to historical studies of the modern marriage market, the first-generation marriages were the most important ones, as they laid the foundation for the future of family members who have not had a grant of arms before and they paved the way to better and better marriages (from the perspective of social prestige and security).¹³ In the case of the Székely family, this can be best seen in the case of the son Ádám, who announced his desire to marry into one of the most influential Transylvanian families with his freshly granted countship (1700). However, his marriage to Anna Bánffy (1686–1704), the daughter of governor György Bánffy (ca.1660–1708), was soon brought to an end by Anna's death. Ádám Székely then proposed to Sára Naláczy (ca. 1670–1760), whom she later divorced. This was followed by his marriage to Katalin Rhédey (1700–1729), from which the autobiographer was born. Ádám Székely developed a very

on his tastes and played a crucial role in his political ideas. He was a confidante of both János Kemény and Mihály Apafi, princes of Transylvania, and he actively participated in the preparation of the Diploma Leopoldinum. After having earned the displeasure of Leopold I, however, he spent last 12 years of his life in custody. The autobiography he wrote in exile in Vienna is one of the best pieces of Transylvanian memoir-literature, and it has been translated into a number of languages. In English, see: Bethlen, *The Autobiography*.

11 Ibid., 283–84.

12 This also seems to have been a common practice in eighteenth-century France, where there was a clear intention to complement the nobility, which by then had minimal financial assets, with a bourgeoisie which would had a more stable financial background. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility*, 123–25.

13 Ibid., 122.

good kinship network, friendships, and ties which would be important to the course of his life even years later. For instance, he had good relationships with the family of his first wife, as indicated by the fact that at his second wedding ceremony his former brothers in law stood by him in the roles usually filled by close kin.¹⁴ István Wesselényi (1673–1734)¹⁵ was groomsman and Dénes Bánffy (1688–1709) was bridesman.

The situation is entirely different in the case of László Székely, who thanks to the estate acquisitions of his grandfather accumulated significant financial capital and thanks to the marriages of his father gained important social capital. He did not have to demonstrate anything with his marriages, since by the time he chose a partner he had been orphaned and therefore was left to decide for himself.¹⁶ However, he also strove to create new ties, to some extent with the same families. This is why, as had been true in the case of his father, his first choice fell on a member of the Bánffy family, the niece of the first wife of his father, Kata Bánffy (1724–1745), who by then had also been orphaned.

Kata Bánffy (who as the dates given above indicate died quite young) embodied the ideal wife, so it is no surprise her place proved extremely difficult to fill. According to his own testimony, László Székely was averse to the idea of remarrying. As he wrote in his autobiography, “nuptiae secundae raro secundae,” or second marriages are rarely lucky.¹⁷ However, as his brother Ádám Székely the Younger (1724–1789) did not want to wed, the 32 year-old László had to ensure the survival of the family. Trusting himself to the grace of God, he started to seek a wife who could fill traditional female roles and embody traditional female virtues, i.e. chastity, religiosity, and good housekeeping. When writing on his second marriage, Székely also discusses the question of rearing girls. More precisely, he disapproved of the fact that the abovementioned traditional roles and virtues had come to be seen as dated by the middle of the eighteenth

14 Radvánszky, “Lakodalmak,” 229.

15 Baron István Wesselényi de Hadad was a politician who supported the Habsburg House, comes of Közép-Szolnok and Kolozs Counties, and president of the Deputatio. His diary from the years he spent in Szeben during Ferenc II Rákóczi's war of independence is the most detailed account of events in Transylvania during the so-called Kuruc period, i.e. the period between 1671 and 1711, when armed anti-Habsburg rebels called “Kurucok” fought against Habsburg rule. Wesselényi, *Sanyarú világ*, vol. 1–2.

16 In European and especially Western societies in which people married at later ages frequently the people getting married had lost either one parent or both parents, hence the importance of kin and friends. Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag*, 136; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 244.

17 *Székely László élete*, 653.

century.¹⁸ By then, balls, card games, and salons had become fashionable. In a word, noble women became more worldly. Young women were not very fond of reading, perhaps with the exception of romantic novels. Ecclesiastical literature was perceived as boring, and such reading was considered useless for a qualified lady. The long moralizing part of the autobiography regarding the ideal wife almost seems humorous if one thinks of the life Zsuzsánna Toroczky (1733–1788), László Székely's second wife, led in Szeben (Sibiu/Hermannstadt). She entered into the memoir-literature because of her lifestyle, which shocked many.¹⁹

The Visit

The first step to take to enter into marriage was the visit. According to the autobiography of László Székely, this was not preceded by any great preparations on the part of the bride's family, nor did it involve a large entourage, as Péter Apor's²⁰ nostalgic description of the customs of Transylvania, *Metamorphosis Transylvanicae*, indicates. Rather, the arrangements were made mostly with the help of young bachelors and friends,²¹ as is confirmed by earlier Transylvanian memoirs.²² It is clear from the memoirs that the choice, even if it required the consultation of kin, was made first and foremost by the prospective bride and groom, as were the arrangements concerning the visit paid on the girl and the assistance in courting her, since courtship was a collaborative enterprise. László Székely got to know his first wife, the orphan Kata Bánffy, with the assistance of the sons of her foster parents, Ádám (1719–1772) and Gábor Bethlen (1712–1768). However, the first visit did not go perfectly, as Székely, who had no intention to marry, got confused by the responsibility he had to overtake. The Hungarian term used for the official bride-visit is *watching* or *seeing*. If the autobiography is reliable on this point, *watching* or *seeing* did not even mean what the words imply, as the two young people, raised to be chaste, did not even look at each other, but rather chatted with other members of the household. The

18 Ibid., 654. International secondary literature keeps emphasizing how difficult it was for women in the eighteenth century, as they mostly had contradictory advice on how to find a balance between traditional values and modern expectations. Olsen, *Daily Life*, 38.

19 Rettegi, *Emlékezetre méltó dolgok*, 163–64, 269–70, 377.

20 Apor, *Metamorphosis Transylvanicae*, 55.

21 The intervention of friends and kin in these private matters was not only possible but was required “because of the conventional stages that structured courtship.” O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*, 30–31.

22 Sárdi, “Leánykérés, házasság, szerelem,” 51.

tradition required that the visiting bachelor be induced to stay for dinner, where the prospective pair sat facing each other so that they could indeed observe each other.²³

The situation was obviously different in the case of a second marriage. The people who advised the girl were again friends. During a hunt, Farkas Kun praised the Toroczkay daughters (who had come of age), especially the personality and beauty of the younger, Zsuzsánna Toroczkay. The visit was organized by the ex-brother-in-law Dénes Bánffy (1723–1780) in Szeben, where he invited the Toroczkay family, who were at that time residing in town, to his garden for dinner, where after some time László Székely also showed up. Székely, who by this time was somewhat more courageous and in the third year of his widowhood, was no longer a chaste observer, and the event did not remain in the control of the girl's house, because a third party organized it. Both visits were followed by a conversation. In the case of his first marriage, Székely was interrogated about the girl by the two Bethlen boys, and with regard to his view of the Toroczkay girl, it was Dénes Bánffy who asked his opinion on the match and also offered his services to his former brother-in-law.

From Proposal until Answer

After the visit, Székely first went to see his otherwise not terribly beloved guardian, Dániel Jósika, as the tradition required that under the circumstances the most powerful member of the kinship network negotiate the marriage.²⁴ Székely had put aside his childhood prejudices when he visited Jósika again, who proposed to Kata Bánffy for him. The answer, however, was delayed by four months. Finally, it was Farkas Bánffy (1701–1761) a relative of the fiancée, who urged things forward at the girl's house and appeared for the engagement gifts (a ring and 200 gold coins) on January 2, 1741.

The second marriage faced challenges from the outset. The reason was simple: the mediator, Dénes Bánffy, in his thoughts already preparing for widowhood, had begun to like the younger Toroczkay girl himself, so he did not try to initiate negotiations with the girl's parents on the subject of the marriage intentions of his ex-brother-in-law.²⁵ László Székely finally got unexpected help

23 Apor, *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae*, 55; Radvánszky, "Lakodalmak," 219.

24 Radvánszky, "Lakodalmak," 221. The Western European nobility followed similar steps, if in a somewhat more complex form. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility*, 119–20.

25 *Székely László élete*, 657–59.

from his former college mate, András Barabás, who at the time was in the service of the Toroczky family, and in the end it was Barabás who brought the good news to Székely. The exchange of the engagement gifts again took place without the presence of the prospective bride and groom. The Toroczky family in this matter were represented by the fiancée's sister, Klára Toroczky (died 1753), wife of Ádám Teleki. The exchange of gifts in the case of both parties was done with the help of an intermediary.²⁶

The autobiography does not present the sequence of proposals exclusively from the point of view of the bachelor. László Székely also discusses in detail instances in which his friends could approach a girl's house with his help and mediation. He proposed to Klára Bánffy, the sister of his first wife, on behalf of Sámuel Szentkereszti, and he had to win the hand of Kata Toroczky (†1788), the sister of his second wife, for István Radák (†1773). Each of these cases involved undesired complications, as Szentkereszti changed his mind twice after the proposal, while Radák's proposal was overshadowed by the romantic feelings of Kata Toroczky for Miklós Kemény (1723–1775). In the end, commonsense prevailed. In the first case, both the Szentkereszti and the Bethlen families (the guardians of the Bánffy daughters) tried to put pressure on the irresponsible bachelor. In order to save the reputation of the two families, the two young people were married in the end. The Toroczky family chose security over uncertainty, as Kemény never took any concrete steps towards Kata Toroczky.²⁷

The cases discussed above show that in numerous instances the people who influenced a marriage were not necessarily members of the biological family, but rather of the extended kinship-family, or they were friends, mostly because in the contemporary society the “fictive kinship network,” i.e. a network based on sentimental relationships and economic or intellectual attachments, played a more significant role in everyday life.²⁸

Proposals, however, did not always work out the way they were planned. As we have seen, in a number of cases, sending a bachelor or a widower (or a person who was about to be widowed) to a girl's house might actually pose a threat to the envisioned union, and the reputation of the negotiators was also exposed to dangers because of irresponsible young people. The rather long waiting times after the proposals were meant both to provide time for the consideration of

26 Promises were always made through intermediaries and then were repeated face to face. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 238.

27 *Székely László élete*, 641–52, 693–94.

28 Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, 167, 171, 212–14.

the social, financial, and moral background of the bachelors and to resolve these uncertainties. At first, the proposal of the bachelor was considered by the head of the kinship network, certainly the more powerful men, but as is also clear from the autobiography, the opinions of the women were also taken into consideration. How much parents or foster parents could influence their (foster) children (especially their daughters) in their choice of partners still remains an open question among historians who are dealing with families.²⁹ It is clear that in case of members of the nobility or within the royal elite the influence of the parents was much more decisive.³⁰ Still, with only a few exceptions, the final decision was made by the prospective bride and groom, at least based on the information found in the memoir-literature.³¹

Betrothal, Vows

The visit and the proposal—if met with a yes—were followed by the exchange of engagement gifts.³² This in many cases meant the exchange of the rings themselves, but in Calvinist communities this lacked liturgical functions, since the ring had only a symbolic value and was considered rather a gift. This was followed by the vows. László Székely, as already noted, held to the Transylvanian traditions. He admired families which raised their daughters in this spirit, though he disapproved of the rigidity of the moral strictures according to which the

29 Western scholarship emphasizes that female members of aristocratic families were subject to the will of the family and that the “less property was at stake the greater the freedom of choice.” Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 304–19, 321; Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag*, 139. This is true in large part because with marriage, a woman acquired the status of her husband. Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*, 97–98. The Hungarian secondary literature, in contrast, emphasizes data which indicates a shift of power over choices in marriage from parents to children. Sárdi, “Leánykérés, házasság, szerelem,” 54. Béla Mihalik’s study adds further valuable data to the problem. Mihalik, “...nemcsak anya, hanem atyai gondjukat is viselvén.”

30 Dekker, “Sexuality, Elites, and Court Life,” 95.

31 This is also suggested by the legal collection of Farkas Cserei, according to which girls do not have to follow the orders of their parents in every matter and parents should keep in mind the wishes of their children. Cserei, *A magyar és székely asszonyok törvénye*, 44. Anglo-Saxon scholarly literature also seems to reinforce the notion that at least by the eighteenth century, the absolute control of the parents was weakening, and except for people who belonged to the highest layers of society, the choice was made by the prospective bride and groom, who may have consulted their parents, but who did not base their decisions entirely on their parents’ suggestions. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 270–71.

32 Bárbth, *Esküvő, keresztelő, avatás*, 127–30. The gifts given during the courting and the betrothal were very important because they were evidence of matrimonial intent. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 263–64; Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag*, 141–43.

wife of Ádám Bethlen (1691–1748), Klára Bánffy (1693–1767), raised her foster daughter.³³ For instance, following the exchange of gifts, according to Hungarian customs, Székely could neither see nor talk to his bride for three months, and subsequent meetings, at least at the beginning, were kept under strict supervision. Even the first conversation took place only after a couple of months, and at least according to the account in the memoir, with considerable difficulty. The vow was delayed until May 12, 1741, almost six months after the proposal had been accepted. The event took place in the fiancée's family home in the presence of the near kin.³⁴ The exchange of vows was preceded by a church service, and this is where a sort of exchange-of-vows carpet, recurrently mentioned in the *Metamorphosis*, was used. So the betrothal was the symbol of the commitment to marry, which like every event of extraordinary importance was followed by a lunch or a dinner in the presence of the near kin.³⁵ Székely departed on the third day under very strict instructions, as the family insisted that he would not ask the wedding being held for another year.³⁶ So the process dragged on, as the wedding had to wait until August 7, 1742. His second betrothal was somewhat faster, as after clearing up the complications caused by Dénes Bánffy, the exchange of the rings and gifts took place in July and the exchange of vows was again held in the presence of the near kin in October.

The autobiography highlights a number of significant details, for instance, that the vows and even the mere promise carried huge importance.³⁷ The exchange of vows had legal weight, and not just in Transylvania, and even after the exchange of the gifts it was improper (and quite complicated) to break off an engagement.³⁸ For the latter, the Church's consent was necessary.³⁹ There are,

33 Constant control by parents was a part of the cultural life of every social group; sources indicate that households with daughters were under continuous supervision. These moral communities may have differed from region to region, but they equally put pressure on the families in their spheres of interest. O'Hara, *Courtship and constraint*, 31; Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag*, 136.

34 Trumbach also came to similar conclusions when studying the noble wedding customs. He contends that the stages involving church ceremonies were also held mostly at one of the private properties of the family. Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*, 115.

35 Radvánszky, "Lakodalmak," 221.

36 Long betrothals were difficult for young people all over Europe: Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 243.

37 Sárdi, "Leánykérés, házasság, szerelem," 56.

38 Under special circumstances, an engagement could be broken, e.g. if either the potential bride or groom remained abroad for a longer period of time, lied about his or her origins, had a venereal disease, or was discovered to have stolen something. Cserei, *A magyar és székely asszonyok törvénye*, 46.

39 Kiss, "Matrimonialis causák," 46. Sometimes fines were connected with the breaking off of a betrothal. Cserei, *A magyar és székely asszonyok törvénye*, 46.

however, a few examples of instances when the people involved did not adhere strictly to tradition or expectation, for instance, the broken off betrothal of Székely's grandmother, Sára Bulcsesdi.

The Church attempted to make the exchange of vows a ceremony held within a physical church itself, but László Székely and his father Ádám made their vows at their fiancées houses with the involvement of the priest, mostly in the morning (in part to ensure that the people taking part in the ceremony would remain sober).⁴⁰ Székely did not have conversations with either of his wives between the exchange of gifts and vows. The prospective bride and groom said only had a couple of words during the lunch which followed.⁴¹ So with the exchange of rings or gifts, which was not the same as the exchange of vows, the period of betrothal began.⁴² We know numerous of examples when the members of the Transylvanian or Hungarian aristocracy waited one or even two years before the wedding was held in the case of a first marriage. This period may have been somewhat shorter in the case of a second marriage. Neither Ádám Székely, László Székely's father, nor his son waited a full year (his son organized his wedding after only six months had passed since the proposal).

On a Memorable Wedding

The preparations for László Székely's first wedding can be compared to his father's wedding, which thanks to Péter Apor probably is one of the best-known weddings to have taken place in Early Modern Transylvania. László looked on it with a sense of nostalgia, and he thought that no other weddings had been organized similar to the one in Bonchida (Bontida), as by then the Transylvanian nobility held their wedding ceremonies according to German tradition, namely in towns.⁴³

This part of the autobiography begins with a description of local customs, i.e. a description of *wreath running*. Several versions of this nuptial game are mentioned in Apor's *Metamorphosis*, and the *ring running* ritual is also one of these

40 Bárh, *Esküvő, keresztelő, avatás*, 45–47, 53.

41 The data collected by Réka Kiss from ecclesiastic records suggest that in Transylvanian society, after the exchange of vows, the bride and groom slept or lived together in a number of cases. Kiss, "Matrimoniális causák," 47.

42 Bárh, *Esküvő, keresztelő, avatás*, 128–29.

43 *Székely László élete*, 221.

customs, as was *fir climbing*, mentioned in the context of Ádám Székely's wedding ceremony.⁴⁴

As the bachelor's house was in Zsuk (Jucu) and the girl's was in Bonchida (two settlements which were relatively close to each other), in order to have a bigger parade the wedding guests took a detour through Válaszút (Răscruți) to get to the site of the wedding ceremony. Only the bearer of the good news, Sámuel Szentkereszti (1721–1772) and Pál Rhédey (1716–1764), who were friends of László's, went directly to Bonchida.⁴⁵ The detour to Válaszút also had to be thrown in because of the *wreath running* ceremony. The highly spectacular competition was followed attentively by both groups of wedding guests. The running had a master of ceremony, in this case Imre Bethlen (1698–1765), who summoned the 24 mounted bachelors, 12 from the side of the groom and 12 from the side of the bride. The prize (an embroidered handkerchief, a ring, and money) was held by a horseman in the middle, at an equal distance from the two groups of wedding guests. The competition, to the great chagrin of the bride's household, ended with victory by one of the groom's men, Mihály Vásárhelyi. The competition seems to have been taken seriously by both houses.⁴⁶ In the weeks preceding the wedding, the newly acquired horses were given a try on the spot. They were foddered, and they competed against each other. The seriousness of the competition is also reflected by the watchers placed on haystacks erected

44 The ring-running was a version of wreath running: "Then, when they approached the village where the wedding-feast was, the chief steward sent out the ring, or sometimes two or three gold pieces instead; they stopped with it at a certain point and a number of horses were specially lined up on behalf of the bridegroom; likewise horses were brought out from the bride's house and set in line when the word was given as to where they had stopped with the ring they raced thither, for they had stopped with the ring at a good distance, and he whose horse reached the ring first, the rider of that horse won the ring, and it was to honor and renown." The fir-climbing had the same purpose as the ring- or wreath-running, namely that of entertaining the guests. Unlike the later, this game took place in the second feasting day of the wedding: "And when breakfast was being prepared a pine-trunk (which had been cut down in readiness) was set up outside the hall (sometimes two were fastened end to end), and at the top of it a hole was made, and in that hole a piece of wood was fixed so that any that could climb to it could rest up there; but the pine-trunk was heavily greased with tallow and grease, and at the top were two, three or four gold coins and four or five ells of cloth and a flask of wine; many would try to climb it, and the gentry were amused as they made the attempt, but of the many one would be found that could climb up, cling there to the above mentioned cross-bar, drink the wine from the flask and took possession of the gold and the cloth." Apor, *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae*, 58–9, 66.

45 These people were called "harbingers" by Apor, and they became bearers of the good news only after visiting the bride's home. By the eighteenth century, the meaning of the two names merged into one. *Ibid.*, 58.

46 Székely bought horses for the running, including the one which then won the competition, which was from a stud owned by István Mikes. Székely purchased it for 70 florins. *Székely László élete*, 227.

at the meadow next to Bonchida. If the horsemen of the bride had won the competition, the groom would have been mocked by goats dressed up in comic attire. After the competition, both cohorts set out for Bonchida separately. The bachelor's procession was led by the horseman who had won the bridal wreath.

The seriousness of the ritual is also indicated by the fact that the bride's family, upset at having lost the bridal wreath, forgot about the groom's wedding guests, and to the amusement of the village, numerous horsemen and chariots were impatiently waiting in the streets of Bonchida. Because of the unpreparedness of the master in charge of the lodgings, there was no time left for changing clothes. Only a few of the women changed attire, and most of the guests attended the wedding in more comfortable but less elegant garb.

The description of the wedding procession and its reception is mostly identical to the descriptions in the *Metamorphosis*, so there is no need to go into it in detail. The request for the bride at her family home caused a bit of confusion, as the head of the house, according to old Hungarian customs, should have delayed the ceremony of delivering the bride with jokes and other tricks. However, to the indignation of the members of the bride's household, László Bánffy (1671–after 1755), who by then was rather old, turned the bride over without any test or game.⁴⁷ Following this, the lady of honor led the bride to the groom's table.

Of the old customs, the only thing missing was the ritual washing of hands. The food was brought in by 12 men belonging to Székely's entourage, but it was Farkas Kun (the captain of Székely's men) who placed the platters on the table. The couple was dressed in white and the bride's hair was let down and was bejeweled with pearls. In accordance with the old traditions, the bride did not eat.⁴⁸ After the groom had drained three cups behind the bride's foster parents, the wedding tables were packed up and the room was emptied and under the lead of the dance-master the guests started to dance. The bride was an exception. As had been the case during the feast, she also did not take part in the dance. The dance was started by the groomsman, the lady of honor, the bridesman, and the maid of honor. The order of the dances never changed. They were performed in the same order at the wedding of Ádám Székely as they were at the wedding of his son the Polish switching dance in Hungarian style, followed by the hat dance, and, finally, the scapular dance, which if one can believe István Wesselényi caused the dancers

47 Ibid., 233. When giving away the bride, it was considered fitting to joke, to bring out another girl, or to ask tricky questions. Wesselényi, *Sanyári világ*, vol. 1., 411; Radvánszky, "Lakodalmak," 236.

48 Bethlen, *The Autobiography*, 352.

back pain even days after.⁴⁹ Musicians took care of the music; separate musicians were hired by the bride's and the groom's household. Along with Saxon musicians, Gypsy musicians were also present, even at weddings held according to German customs, since the former did not know the Hungarian melodies.⁵⁰

The ritual of stealing the bride was also held during the dances. The bridesman and the maid of honor would lead the ride to the groom's bedroom. After the bride had been stolen, it was the duty of one of the men from the bride's household to accompany the groom to the bedroom. In Székely's case, there were complications, as it seems that everyone was at his or her proper place except for the groom. On the side of the bride, the ceremony masters were chosen from the Bánffy family, except for János Toroczky (died in 1745), whose task would have been to lead the groom to the bedroom. However, as he had feelings of antipathy for László Székely, he did not take him to the room, thus the groom was late for the significant ritual. The problem was finally solved by Zsigmond Bánffy. The bride was led to the bedchamber by the maid of honor, who took the bridal wreath from her head, undressed her, and finally blessed her. Instead of the wreath decorated with pearl, a wreath with flowers was given to the bridesman, *Ádám Székely*, the younger brother of the groom. After sticking it on his sword, *Ádám* presented it to the wedding guests and then danced with the maid of honor.⁵¹

This is the moment where the narratives usually end. Although the sources usually mention the “theft” of the bride, they contain nothing concerning the consummation of the marriages.⁵² Székely, however, takes the reader into the

49 Polish dances were part of Hungarian dance culture for centuries. Of these dances, the polonicai was the most popular. This is the dance to which Péter Apor refers as the Polish switching dance. The main feature of the dance was the switching of partners. First the men and then the women switched partners and turned around with the new partner three times and then on their own three times. In the hat dance, the person dancing who held the cap in his hand summoned his partner for a dancing contest. The goal was to get the cap. Apor, *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae*, 18; The scapular was a tag dance. The dancers formed a circle; the pair in the middle was the one who got caught, while outside the circle a man or woman was trying to catch each other with a scapula (a helved wooden tool with a flat head). The dance continued until one of the two was hit. The person hit then continued dancing with one of the people who were in the middle of the circle. Wesselényi, *Sanyarú világ*, vol. 2., 652.

50 Ibid., vol. 2., 651.

51 Apor's description is more detailed here. He explains the symbolism of the wreath, and he also interweaves the laws concerning adultery into the description of the quartering of the wreath. It is indeed true that with the removal of the wreath, the bride stopped being a maiden. Apor, *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae*, 65.

52 The secondary literature also mentions the noisy and frequently vulgar behavior of those who waited outside the room. Olsen, *Daily Life*, 40. Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*, 113; Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag*; 155. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 374–76.

bedroom. In the room appointed for the consummation of the marriage, two beds were placed. One was an ordinary bed, the other was lavishly decorated with pillows and fine cloths. The two beds were made up so that the young couple would not have to sleep together, but the groom did not want to postpone the consummation.⁵³ Klára Bánffy, the foster mother of the bride, tried to hinder the actual consummation of the marriage. She even ensured that the bride would have a guardian, but the handmaid whom she sent was thrown out of the room by the groom, and then his men chased her from the doorstep, where they told her to remain to guard the door. So from the perspective of its furnishings, the room was reminiscent of the formal traditions surrounding the consummation of a marriage, but the furnishings also reflected Székely's reasoning, according to which this act had fallen out of fashion. Consummation, that being symbolic or actual in all circumstances had to take place at the nuptials.⁵⁴

The next morning, the room was crowded with women, who under the guidance of the lady of honor dressed Kata Bánffy up in the clothes she had received from László Székely as gifts.⁵⁵ The groom also dressed up in new clothes which had been made for him by the family of the bride.

The next day of the wedding was spent with dancing and feasting. The two groups of guests had breakfast separately and then continued dancing together. This was followed by the lunch and the symbolical *pie-breaking* ceremony, which was considered the highlight of the day. This could pose major difficulties for an inexperienced bridesman, as, according to the autobiography, Ádám Székely was. In order to avoid humiliating his brother, Székely spent some money on the game, trying to bribe the baker to give some sign indicating which pie he had baked the cloths, wires, and horseshoes in.⁵⁶ Apart from the dancing of the wreath, this was the main duty of the bridesmen. The secondary literature contains the persistent claim that when a widower wedded, there was no need

53 *Székely László élete*, 242.

54 In the period of Ottoman incursions, there were nuptials and consummations that required special solutions. Sárdi, "Leánykérés, házasság, szerelem," 56. But the situation was not better in the eighteenth century either. Wesselényi notes that in the overcrowded city of Szeben, László Szentkirályi had to consummate his marriage in a small cottage. Wesselényi, *Sanyarú világ*, vol. 1., 412.

55 Farkas Cserei understands the wedding dress as a gift offered in exchange for the consummation of the marriage, i.e. in exchange for the bride's virginity. Thus, a widow or divorced woman could not expect this kind of gift. Cserei, *A magyar és székely asszonyok törvénye*, 54.

56 Székely gave several handmaids as gifts during the three days he spent at the houses of the bride, the baker, the bed-maker, the musicians, the master of the kitchen, the cup-bearer, and the coffee maker. *Székely László élete*, 247.

for a groomsman or bridesman.⁵⁷ The Székely marriages, however, contradict the account given in Miklós Bethlen's autobiography, as there was both a groomsman and a bridesman at the wedding of Ádám Székely and Sára Naláczy, while at the second wedding of László Székely there was only a groomsman and not a bridesman, as there was no plan to steal the bride. Thus, the bridesman, apart from but connected to the wreath-dancing and the pie-breaking ceremonies, had an actual role in the stealing of the bride.

In the presence of witnesses, the dowry of the bride was also transferred at the end of the second day. In the description of his first marriage, Székely referred to the third day as the bun-combing day, although in the description of his second marriage he placed it on the second day, as other sources indicate. The bride certainly said goodbye to her foster parents on the third day and went to the house of the groom, where the celebration continued.

This time, they approached Zsuk not via the detour, but by the shortest possible route. The related literature frequently indicates that the ceremony masters of the bride and the groom had to be from different kinship networks. That this was indeed the tradition is confirmed by the griping of the bride's family, who resented the fact that a number of masters from Bonchida who played the same roles were present in Zsuk. Although a representative of the emperor did not make it to the wedding at Zsuk (unlike in the case of the wedding of Ádám Székely, which was attended by a representative of the emperor), the gubernator did. Of course, he spent the night in the most beautifully carpeted room and took a place at the table laid with silverware.⁵⁸ As at the bride's house, the celebration lasted three days at the groom's house, and members of his kinship network extended the celebrations by a week.

The description of the second wedding is rather succinct; indeed, one could say that it is fully in accordance with the expectations one would have regarding Transylvanian memoirs, as it is restricted to a short list of the guests, kin with more important tasks, and friends. The consummation here is only a blurred biographical experience, as the author chastely remains silent about the bedroom, bringing up only the connected child births. The laconic narration of the second marriage can be understood structurally as well. While the description of the

57 Bethlen, *The Autobiography*, 352; Radvánszky, "Lakodalmak," 229; Sárdi, "Leánykérés, házasság, szerelem," 58–59.

58 It was not simply a matter of prestige, in the case of the weddings of members of the Székely family, to have members of the elite attending; this was widespread practice, independent of social strata and time period. Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag*, 150.

first marriage follows the so-to-say usual scheme of framed narratives, in which the different biographical moments are given their own titles as chapters, the second marriage unfolds as an ongoing experience which unfolds day by day.

Instead of Conclusions

In this study, we presented the stages of the long process during the course of which a marriage came into being. In this process, alongside the close kin, a significant role was played by more distant kin and friends, who with their advice and arrangements helped the prospective bride and groom.

The investigation also addressed the clearly identifiable moments which preceded the wedding, such as the visit paid on the girl, the proposal, and the exchange of vows. Based on the text we investigated, the proposal, the exchange of gifts, and the exchange of vows were the three defining moments that set the stage for the wedding. Of these, the last was of primary significance, because of the church ceremony and because it could happen years before the wedding ceremony, which involved the consummation. The betrothal was the symbol of commitment to marriage, which like every event of extraordinary importance, was followed by a lunch or dinner with the close kin. Weddings which required major pomp and preparations and which lasted days, however, took place with major publicity. Different representational elements and regional traditions had their roles and served to ensure the participants would be entertained. They also clearly reflected the rivalry between the two households whether in ceremonies like the *wreath-running* or through the gifts that were exchanged, the fine dresses, and the variety of food.

In choosing his mate, László Székely, who had often suffered disdain because of his origins, tried to catch up with the old Transylvanian families. He aimed to adapt to the related values in the decisions he made concerning his private life and to pass on these values to subsequent generations in his autobiographical work. This explains the elaborateness of the description of his first marriage and the related ceremonies. In this nostalgic remembrance, he seems to have been motivated by the same thoughts as Péter Apor. They both tried to contribute, by recording their own life experiences, to the reconstruction of a world that was about to fade.

Archival Sources

Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Kézirattára [Széchényi National Library Manuscript Collection] (OSZK)
Quart. Hung. 4312.

Bibliography

Printed sources

- Apor, Péter. *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae*. Translated by Bernard Adams. London: Kegan Paul, 2010.
- Bethlen, Miklós. *The Autobiography of Miklós Bethlen*. Translated by Bernard Adams. London: Kegan Paul, 2004.
- Cserei, Farkas. *A magyar és székely asszonyok törvénye* [The Statute of Hungarian and Székely Women]. Kolozsvár, 1800.
- Rettegi, György. *Emlékezetre méltó dolgok* [Things Worthy of Remembrance]. Edited by Zsigmond Jakó. Bukarest: Kriterion, 1970.
- Wesselényi, István. *Sanyarú világ: Napló 1703–1708* [Wretched World. Diary: 1703–1708]. Edited by András Magyari. Bukarest: Kriterion, 1983.

Secondary literature

- Badinter, Élisabeth. *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*. London: Souvenir Press, 1981.
- Bárth, Dániel. *Esküvő, keresztlő, avatás: Egyház és népi kultúra a kora újkori Magyarországon* [Wedding, Baptism and Initiation: Church and Popular Culture in Early Modern Hungary]. Budapest: MTA and ELTE, 2005.
- Chaussinand-Nogaret, Guy. *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment*. Translated by William Doyle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Cressy, David. *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Dekker, M. Rudolf, ed. *Egdocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in Its Social Context Since the Middle Ages*. Rotterdam: Uitgeverij, 2002.
- Dekker, M. Rudolf. “Sexuality, Elites, and Court Life in the Late Seventeenth Century: The Diaries of Constantijn Huygens, jr.” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 23, no. 3 (1999): 94–109.

- Dülmen, Richard, van. *Kultur und Alltag in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Vol. 1, *Das Haus und seine Menschen 16.–18. Jahrhundert*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005.
- Fehér, Andrea. “Lakodalmak a Székely-családban: Adalékok a 18. századi erdélyi házassági szokásokról” [Weddings in the Székely Family: Contributions to the Eighteenth-Century Wedding Customs in Transylvania]. *Erdélyi Múzeum* 79, no. 1 (2017): 118–29.
- Fehér, Andrea. *Sensibilitate și identitate în izvoarele narrative maghiare din secolul al XVIII-lea* [Sensitivity and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Transylvanian Narrative Sources]. Argonaut and Mega: Cluj-Napoca, 2012.
- Kiss, Réka. “Matrimoniális causák a küküllői református egyházmegye jegyzőkönyveiben: Házasság, válás egy 17. századi erdélyi egyházmegyében” [Matrimonial Causes in the Protocols of the Protestant Church of Küküllő: Marriage and Divorce in a Seventeenth-Century Bishopric of Transylvania]. In *Fiatal Egyháztörténészek Kollokviuma* [The Colloquium of Young Church Historians]. Budapest: ELTE, 1999.
- Laslett, Peter. *The World We Have Lost*. London: Methuen, 1965.
- Macfarlane, Alain. *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, a Seventeenth-Century Clergyman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Mihalik, Béla Vilmos. “...‘nemcsak anya, hanem atyai gondjukat is viselvén.’ Anyák és fiaik egy kora újkori erdélyi nemesi családban” [“...taking care of them not only mothers but also fathers:” Mothers and their Sons in an Early Modern Transylvanian Noble Family]. *Sic Itur ad Astra* 64 (2015): 95–115.
- O’Hara, Diana. *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Olsen, Kristin. *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Ozment, Steven. *Ancestors: The Loving Family in Old Europe*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Péter, Katalin. *Házasság a régi Magyarországon, 16–17. század* [Marriage in Old Hungary, Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries]. Budapest: L’ Harmattan, 2008.
- Pollock, Linda. *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500–1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Radvánszky, Béla. “Lakodalmak a XVI–XVII. században” [Weddings in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries]. *Századok* 17, no. 3 (1883): 223–42.
- Sárdi, Margit. “Leánykérés, házasság, szerelem” [Proposal, Marriage, Love]. In *Ámor, álom és mámor: A szerelem a régi magyar irodalomban és a szerelem ezredéves hazai kultúrtörténete* [Cupid, Dream, and Lust: Love in Old Hungarian Literature and the Millennial

- Hungarian Cultural History of Love], edited by Géza Szentmártoni Szabó, 49–65. Budapest: Universitas, 2002.
- Shorter, Edward. *The Making of the Modern Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*. New York, Harper&Row, 1977.
- Szabó, András Péter. “Betrothal and Wedding, Church Wedding and Nuptials: Reflections on the System of Marriages in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Hungary.” *Hungarian Historical Review* 3, no. 1 (2014): 3–31.
- Tadmor, Naomi. *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Trumbach, Randolph. *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England*. New York: Academic Press, 1978.