

## Strategies of church building in Hungary during the years of the Communist dictatorship

*Ethnographical instructions of a denominational example*

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The persecution of religion and the hindrance, restriction of the activities of the Churches were part of the ideological bases of the communist regime that came into power a few years after World War II. Several means of accomplishing these goals were available for those in power, from the socialization of the church's property to the persecution of those participating in practising, to the restriction of catechesis or the hindrance of practising. This attitude against religion, and against the church characterized the whole era of the Communist dictatorship, with a shifting intensity. Both in the darkest hours of the personality cult and in the "softer" era, almost till the last hours of the collapse, and still a decade after the political change, this attitude has been and is manifested in the present mentality of the successor organisations. So, it is not surprising that church building activity, which had been part of the Hungarian churches' life for centuries, was stopped almost completely during the four decades of party-state era. Only a very small number of churches were built during these years, as the conditions of building sacral edifices were determined by strict regulations. New churches could be built only to replace church-buildings and school-chapels that were taken or pulled down by the state, or became marred and useless by any other causes.<sup>1</sup> The situation did not change much in the period of "consolidation" after the revolution of 1956.

The persecution of religion was a general practice not only in Hungary, but in the other Communist states as well. However, religiosity could not be stopped immediately by a word of power, it continued to survive. Religious life functioned partly between the permitted frameworks and partly by eluding the authorities of the atheist ruling power, evading the restrictions, and, even if in a muted form, it succeeded in breaking through the impediments. Thousands of ethnographic data

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<sup>1</sup> Magyar építőművészet, 1991/4. 2.

prove how the watchfulness of authorities was circumvented: a whole series of ceremonies and services held in secret, priests hidden by worshippers in many countries, christenings held far away from the dwelling place and nuptial ceremonies in secret indicate those strategies applied by religious people and communities in order to preserve their faith.

In the following paper, through the example of a small Hungarian denomination, I will show the functions of these strategies in an area where the most prominent manifestation of religious life is the building of new churches. The following examples are taken from the Catholics of Byzantine rites, the Uniate Church. This denomination belongs to the Catholic Church and composes 2,5–3% of the population of Hungary. It is quite easy to define it geographically: most of its parishes are situated in the north-eastern part of the country, although more and more Greek Catholic communities were formed in the larger towns of Hungary because of the migration.

Unlike in other Communist states, the Uniate Church was allowed to function here during the decades of the party-state – although it was banned or suspended for shorter and longer periods in almost all the other states.

The Hungarian Greek Catholics faced many hardships of building churches since the formation of the Uniate Church, since their union with the Catholic Church (1646).<sup>2</sup> In the 17-18<sup>th</sup> century the authorities often obstructed the erection of sacral buildings. The Greek Catholic communities were often forced to organize their religious life without a church.<sup>3</sup> According to the available data, the Orthodox people (mainly Ruthenians and Romanians) settling in large numbers in the Eastern and North-eastern regions were eager to build their own churches as soon as possible. Whole communities and villages settled down, bringing their priests with them. There were examples of settlers who had taken their churches of their old home to pieces to make it transportable, and rebuilt it at their new dwelling place. Tales of settlers transporting their old church on a cart from their old country are still within living memory. According to different data, the beams of the dismantled church were floated down the Tisza river, so the community moving to the Eastern verges of the Great Plains could rebuilt it in their new homeland.

<sup>2</sup> The book of J. Botlik cites several sources: *Hármas kereszt alatt. Görög katolikusok Kárpátalján az ungvári Uniótól napjainkig (1646-1997)*. Budapest, 1997. 34.

<sup>3</sup> According to the information of Pirigyi, churches were especially few in the parishes. For example in 1805, only 293 of the 1660 registered parishes had a church on location. I. Pirigyi: *A magyarországi görög katolikusok története, I. Nyíregyháza, 1990. 151.*

For the new communities arriving without a church, problems concerned building a church and they were less worried about organizing their religious life. Their state without a church had various durations. It depended primarily on the size of the community, the attitude of the ecclesiastic magistrates, on the donors' offerings, and several other individual circumstances. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century for example, the permission of the bishop of Eger was required for the united parishes to build a church.<sup>4</sup> In those villages and towns where the number of the Greek Catholic population increased gradually by new settlers and internal growth of the population, it is natural that they did not care too much about building churches.

According to the available data, churches built in the second half of the last century and in this century replaced those wooden churches that had been demolished or burnt down – or in certain cases been deliberately set on fire<sup>5</sup>. Most of the Ruthenian churches, the *cerkós*, were made of wood in the earlier centuries. Some of the wooden churches still functioned during this century, either at their original place or after being moved to another place. Today, Greek Catholic wooden churches are impossible to come across in Hungary, even their memories can rarely be found.<sup>6</sup>

In places where churches were not present before, it is only the historical sources or the similar situations of the present that ground the probability that a chapel, a belfry, a cross, or a graveyard, the crucifix in the graveyard could hold the functions associated with a church. However, there are data concerning the provisional usage of Roman Catholic churches, the sacral usage of schools, masses held at private houses.<sup>7</sup>

After some time following their settling, communities with churches had to face with new challenges: with the growth of population of the congregation and with their growing needs and financial capabilities the erection of a stone church was planned instead of the wooden one. The former wooden churches often burned down, rotted away or simply proved to be too small after a while. Greek

<sup>4</sup> The building of a church with Byzantine rites was allowed only in those places where the commissioners of the bishop of Eger had personally made sure of the necessity of erecting it. Pirigyi: op.cit. 157.

<sup>5</sup> R.Kemenyfi: Etno-kulturgeográfiai vizsgálatok két magyar-román faluban. Debrecen, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> The only Greek Catholic wooden church, which occasionally works, is situated near Budapest, in the Open Air Ethnographic Museum of Szentendre. A few Greek Catholic wooden churches can still be found in the areas of the present Eastern Slovakia, Transcarpathia (the Ukraine) and Transylvania (Romania).

<sup>7</sup> A. Hodinka: A munkácsi görög katolikus püspökség története. Budapest, 1910. 783.

Catholic stone-churches were already built by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup> and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup> as well, but the real era of building them was the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Building a church has always meant and still means great expenses for the worshippers. According to the general practice, members of the parish contributed to the building operations with voluntary donations or with work or sums of money assessed by the church council or, before that, the local authorities.

Raising the material and financial funds was done in various ways according to the inventiveness of the locals. They collected contributions-in-kind for the purposes of the church to be built, which mainly meant the agricultural products of the worshippers. The money from selling them was spent on the construction. In other places money was collected in the form of taxes. And according to a different practice, the construction was covered by collective lease-working. However, lease-working could be a means of paying off the credits. The public works in the building operations were considered to be important contributions in all known cases.

Several examples show how state and church institutions and authorities help these building operations as well.<sup>10</sup> Relevant data can be found to such cases from earlier centuries too, and this practice, that the parishes turned to external help to supplement their resources, became more common in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The indirect form of requesting state support is the widely used method to form civic organizations for the building operations and the preferences ensured to these organisations may help the building of the church.

One form of financial aid was the necessary rebuilding of ancient monument churches, which affected several Greek Catholic churches as well. Even the communist state took part in the ancient monument restorations in several occasions. This is not equal to church building, but, in many cases, it makes possible putting the newly claimed churches in practice, which is functionally equal to seizing a new church. Presently, the ancient monument restoration of the parish-church of

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the church of Viszló was built in 1672. János Kisfalusi's (parish-clerk) kind information.

<sup>9</sup> A. Hodinka: *op.cit.* 783.

<sup>10</sup> The further existence of the anti-religious culture policy of the dictatorship is manifested in that political turmoil that was launched by the revival of that earlier practice in 2000 when the Ministry of Environment and Regional Development provided financial contribution to the building of Greek Catholic churches in Szatmár (Eastern Hungary). According to the minister, his office helped the development of the intellectual environment in the region.

Győr, which was in use before, is effectuated by appropriating funds from the state budget along with local resources.

During the sometimes open, sometimes hidden persecution of religion of the party-state decades, the building of new churches has significantly decreased. According to certain data, more than 250 Catholic (Greek Catholics included), Protestant and other churches were built in Hungary from the end of World War II to the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> However, the enhanced post-war building fever of the period before the Communist regime is included in this number.

The most important condition of buildings was the obtainment of permissions, which was not an easy task at all. The permission of the State Office for Ecclesiastical Matters was necessary for the forwarding of the plan-documentations to the building authorities. In this era serious private donations could not be counted on, there weren't any personalities in the country who could have appear as church-founders. The financial part of the construction were covered by the worshippers' donations, the occurrent central support of the Church, and in some cases by foreign aids. Expenses were significantly lowered by the voluntary work of the worshippers. Aiding, skilled labour and carriage were undertaken even by people who did not belong to the building denomination. As Ferenc Török, an architect awarded by the Kossuth-prize recalls it: the cost of building churches under his supervision was extremely low for that fore mentioned reason.<sup>12</sup>

According to the data, authorities attempted to impede, or at least restrain the building of churches on local and on higher levels similarly. This effort is in many traits recalled the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the building of Protestant and Byzantine-rite churches had been obstructed. During the religious commotions of the earlier centuries, especially during the persecution of Protestants, the spire emerging from among the houses often became victim of these endeavours. The applicable means of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were much wider, from the categorical prohibition, to the hindrance of building permission, to limitations and bounds concerning the situation of the building inside the settlement, its size, and its exterior and interior structure. It is typical that prohibitions concerning the spire were common in the party-state era as well. Alleviating the authorities' rigidity often required a great amount of ingenuity of the worshippers, the Church and of the architects designing the church and it often created unusual situations. In the followings I present a few examples from the plentiful data relevant here.

<sup>11</sup> I. Rév: *Templomépítészetiünk ma*. Budapest, 1987. 7.

<sup>12</sup> F. Török: *Templomok Magyarországon*. Szombathely, 1995 The village population participated together with the members of the local collective farm, in building the church of Edelény designed by Ferenc Török. I. Rév: op.cit. 95.

The building of the church of the Little St. Theresa of Lisieux Greek Catholic Parish of Diósgyőr-Vasgyár was carried out in the 1950s and 1960s in vicissitudinous circumstances from its designing until the completion of the building operations. The builders had to overcome many hardships from the several requirements of re-designing and modifying plans to moving the location and to the continuous harassment from the police's part. Finally, the competent authority permitted only an edifice without the spire so as to prevent the sacred building becoming too conspicuous. The parish even had to ask for the permission of the municipal council to allow the worshippers' help as public works. The poor conditions of the building operations are well characterized by the fact, that the necessary amount of water was taken from a nearby public well of the villagers and were carried to the location of the construction by a commuting cart pulled by a donkey. The widely recited argument was enounced by a local representative of the ruling Communist party (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) too, that 'it is useless to trouble with the building of the church, as religion will cease to exist in a few years time'. The answer of the parish-clerk was the following: "the candle of the Mother-Church has been burning for 2000 years, we'll see whose candle lasts longer..." The furnishing of the church, and much of the internal and external works could only be accomplished long after its consecration in 1961 – they had to wait 12 years with the plastering of the walls.<sup>13</sup>

The chapel in Edelény was built in the 1950s, in the darkest era of the persecution of religion. A private house was transformed according to sacral purposes. The main problem was not simply to raise the necessary money, but to keep the workings in secret until the end of the building operations. The secret was kept successfully while the tradesmen working at the building operations had their snacks at the canteen of the nearby party-house. The purpose of the building became public only after the first mass when it would have been embarrassing for the authorities to intervene.<sup>14</sup> Here, a church was also built in 1983, which the locals regarded to be an important step for the village to become a town.<sup>15</sup>

The Greek Catholic worshippers of Bodrogkiszalud wanted to build a chapel in that very period too. However, they received a permission of building only for a dwelling house, so they built a smaller chapel inside the building.

<sup>13</sup> B. Horzsa: A Lisieux-i Kis Szent Teréz tiszteletére emelt Diósgyőr-Vasgyári Görög Katolikus Egyházközség története 1929-1997. Miskolc-Diósgyőr, 1997. 8-13.

<sup>14</sup> Kind information of Dean Miklós Telenkó, former chaplain of Edelény.

<sup>15</sup> I. Rév: op.cit. 93-95.

The church of Selyeb was built in 1972 and was consecrated in 1973. Before that worshippers used the chapel in the castle. But it was too small for size that the congregation did not have enough space inside it during the Holy Liturgy and many of them stood outside while the ceremony lasted. The sum to cover the expenses of building the church was bequeathed to the village in the testament of a former resident who had left for America. The locals mainly contributed to the building with their work. Those who were not able to perform such tasks brought at least a jug of wine to the workers. The masons and carpenters were tradesmen from Múcsony, and Greek Catholics as for their creed. It is part of the history of building the church that at the beginning, the locals did not want a spire on their church *so as to prevent its becoming so ostentatious*. Finally they received the permission, but only for a

spire not much higher than the corona.<sup>16</sup>

The Greek Catholic church of Erdőhorváti was built in 1977. According to the information of the villagers at that time and their later recollections, they received a permission for a spire smaller than the one planned, and they received that with much trouble.

The church of Pálháza was consecrated in 1979. An unusual reaction from the worshippers' part, that many of them despise the building and are not satisfied with the quality of work either – "*it was built as possibilities allowed it*".<sup>17</sup> As the villagers recollect it, the building had to be redesigned three times before it obtained its present form – which reminds them a theatre or a community centre. Many believe that the authorities wanted to permit a building that can be used for other purposes as they expected the withering or cessation of religious life. According to the worshippers' opinion, the fact that a cross had already been on the parcel near the street played an important role in obtaining the permission, *as they were obliged to permit it*.

Before the party-state era, peculiarly, it was the Soviet occupation that made the first steps of building the Greek Catholic church of Ózd possible. Before the building of the church the first vicar of the congregation forming at that time said his masses in the chapel of the hospital. As the vicar spoke Russian he was often asked to interpret for the Soviet command in 1945 and the Soviet commander of the city donated him a house to have a place for saying masses. After several transformations, the church of today was built out of that house, with a sanctuary and

<sup>16</sup> Collected by Tímea Türk.

<sup>17</sup> After two decades, water soaked through the walls of the building.

two aisles added later to that. The iconostasis with the 14 icons was finished last.<sup>18</sup> A new church has been built since then, which was consecrated in 2000.<sup>19</sup>

The inclination for building churches has increased by leaps in each post-communist country since the political change. Relieved of the oppression, the historical Churches have been building hundreds of new churches all around Hungary, the numbers of which are reinforced by the churches, houses of prayer and little Bethels of the new denominations that appeared in the past decades. Exploring these new processes, as well as the more thorough ethnographic treatment of party-state church building, will be the task of the coming years.

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<sup>18</sup> L.Dobosy: Szagrális emlékek a Hangony völgyében. Debrecen, 1991. 48-49.

<sup>19</sup> Kind information of Prof. Istvan Ivancso.