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Theses for the doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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**Church building and society in Zetelaka, Udvarhely Seat
(XIX – XX. century)**

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I. Background to the research, problem definition

Zetelaka is one of the largest rural settlements in Szeklerland with nearly 6000 inhabitants, and its church is one of the largest Roman Catholic churches in Szeklerland, designed to accommodate 3000 people when it was built.

As a history teacher in Zetelaka, I have been researching the local history of the village for more than twenty years. In the course of my research, I have found that the studies, monographs and literature that mention the settlement only deal tangentially with the church and church life of Zetelaka. Most of the scarce information from the first half of the modern era can be found in the Szekler Documentary Archives published since 1872, which mainly give us a picture of the composition of the settlement's society in the 16th - 17th centuries. In the 19th century, the landscape writers Gyula Mihály Szigethy, János Fogarasi, Balázs Orbán and Vilmos Hankó wrote a few sentences or pages about Zetelaka. In 1930, the first director-teacher of the church school, Albert Páll published the history of the bells cast in 1925 in a small booklet entitled *How the Great Bell of Zetelaka was rung*, and in 1937 the next director, Árpád Ürmössy published the data he had collected on the history of the settlement in the weekly *Szekler Public Life* in Székelyudvarhely. After the fall of communism, several researchers from Székelyudvarhely presented snippets of Zetelaka's history in their studies. In 2004, for example, Gusztáv Mihály Hermann: *Rafting on the Nagy-Küküllő*, or in 2008, János Mihály: *Studies on the bells of some parishes in Udvarhely Seat*. Mária Vofkori, in her 1999 volume entitled *Social and Economic Changes in Havasalja, Udvarhely Seat, in the 17th-18th centuries*, made a comparative analysis of the society of Zetelaka and the surrounding settlements in the period. Much more detailed is Sándor Ferenczi's 2018 volume on the life of the church builder Mózes

Sebestyén, a parish priest, entitled *A team of power-mongers is trying to take my life*, and János Bárh's 2021 edition of parish punishments in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, entitled *Parish legislation in Zetelaka (1797-1823)*. The most remarkable work is the two-volume monograph of Ferenc Deák, the geography teacher of the Zetelaka school, published in 2000, in which he approaches the settlement mainly from a geographical perspective, in accordance with his profession. In the first volume, entitled *Zetelaka, Landscape and People*, he discusses in great detail the natural conditions and socio-geographical data of the settlement, while the political events are described in a very brief and incomplete way. In the second volume, entitled *Zetelaka, folk life - economic life*, we learn about the town's folk traditions, customs, economic geography and some of its prominent personalities, while some details of church life are given on only two pages.

While searching in the Archdiocesan Archives of the Archdiocese of Gyulafehérvár, among the documents of the Bishop's Office, I came across the inscription of János Hadnagy (1910-1992) addressed to Bishop Áron Márton, in which the parish priest who served the village for 46 years (1941-1987) described the people of the parish as follows: *If we look more deeply into the life of a parish, we notice that each one has certain specificity which differ from the life of other parishes, if not in essential things, then in small nuances. This is the difference that gives the village its soul. Because every community has a soul. The Zetelaka community are characterised by the fierceness of the people of the mounth and the many unwanted outbursts that go with it, but also by a deeply religious spirit. It is often over-indulgent and at the same time submissive to authority. In his vanity he does not allow himself to be humiliated, and at the same time, with a humble spirit, he can become a child.*

This finding led to the suggestion that, in parallel with research into the history of the place and the church, emphasis should also be placed on the examination of the relationship between the priests and the people of the parish.

II. The methodology followed, the source base of the research

The essay is first and foremost a work on the history of regions, places and piety, with ecclesiastical historical aspects. Its main themes are the history of the two churches of the Holy Cross (the one built in 1755, which was too small for the early 20th century and was demolished in 1914, and the one built between 1912 and 1923, which is still standing), the present and the past, and the history of the parish priests who served there, their varied and active work, and their relationship with the people of the parish. The thesis not only details the history of church building and parish history, but also examines the social history of the last 200 years.

In the first part, the medieval and modern history of the settlement is discussed - only at the level of introduction and mention -, then the reconstruction and furnishing of the old church is discussed until the death of the parish priest József Andrásy in 1894. The second, and main chapter, presents the work of the parish priest Mózes Sebestyén (1858-1918) in Zetelaka (1894-1918), including his main work, the building of the church, as well as the events of the First World War in Zetelaka and their consequences from the first romanian invasion (1916) to the tragic death of the parish priest (26 November 1918). The third chapter discusses the church's interior and the changes in church life during the "short twentieth century" (1918-1989), including the events of the Second World War and the persecution of parish priest János Hadnagy (1910-1992) during the communist era.

The first part of the first chapter, which goes back to the founding of the parish, is written mainly with the help of sources already discovered and analyzed by researchers. The results of my own archival research are presented in the course of writing about the events from the eighteenth century onwards. The research of the history of a village settlement sometimes encounters difficulties due to the lack of documents, since in the material of the state archives concerning the rural settlements of Szeklerland, we only find pieces from the 17th and 18th centuries in an index. In contrast, the regional catholic archives contain a much larger number of documents dating back to the 18th century or even earlier.

In the Harghita County branch of the Romanian National Archives in Csíkszereda, I have compiled data on the parish priests of the settlement and demographic movements from the registers kept from 1705. In the same archives, I also searched for documents relating to the communist period. The majority of the information comes from the Székleyudvarhely Collecting Archives of the Archdiocese of Gyulafehérvár, where the archival material of Zetelaka was collected in 2008 and kept in the church tower room. From the abundant 9.35 metres of documents, dating from 1735 to 1987, the parish correspondence, school and economic documents, the minutes of the parish council and school board between 1870 and 1939, the membership lists of the Living Rosary Society from 1886 to 1913, and the personal legacies of the parish priests were processed. The Archdiocesan Archives of the Archdiocese of Gyulafehérvár also have good resources, having weathered the storms of history better than the collections of state archives. Here I studied the canonica visitations from the 18th and 19th centuries, which tell about the history and structure of the village, the parish priest and the church servants, the school,

the population, the church, the church buildings, their equipment and the church estates. I also searched for documents from the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly relating to Zetelaka, in the group of bishop's documents.

The documents preserved in parishes are also important sources for research into the social history of village-type settlements. My research included the *historia domus* of the parish of Zetelaka, kept continuously since 1862, several volumes of 20th century registers necessary for everyday administration, the minutes of the meetings of the church council from 1939, the register of members of the Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary Rosarium from 1728 and several other documents. The most important of these is the house history, which includes the historical memory of Zetelaka. At the same time, it deals with the changes in the administration of the municipality and gives a detailed description of the major events in Zetelaka.

In addition to archival sources, I have analysed information from 15 press publications of the period, and I have also used oral history for contemporary events.

III. Main results of the research

As a result of the investigations, we can gain insight into the advantages resulting from the privileges acquired in 1622, the relationship between the sekler people and the forest, and the kepe habits of the 19th and 20th centuries. The complex and multifaceted relations between the priests and the people of the parish, and sometimes the lay leadership of the settlement, are analysed.

While researching the Living Rosary Society, I found out that the first Rosary Society of Udvarhelyi Seat was founded in 1728 by János Mihályfi, archdeacon-parish priest, in Zetelaka, influenced by the missionary activities

of two Jesuit monks, Pál Kolosvári and János Berzeviczi. As a result, a significant number of pilgrims from various parts of Szeklerland came to the village on the feast of St. Mary, establishing the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady (8 September), which is still the main feast day in Zetelaka. The Living Rosary Society was organized in 1886 by parish priest József Andrásy. The membership of the Society, which is still active today, has grown very dynamically, and in 1913 it had 1,020 members, which represented 35.5% of the Roman Catholic population over 15 years of age.

The First World War did not escape Zetelaka either, the first time the population of the village was directly confronted with the horrors of war was during the romanian invasion, between 17 September and 7 October 1916. I found that, in addition to the romanian army, the local mob also “helped” in the looting, and that most of the losses were suffered by families who had fled the village. The action of collecting war metal had its consequences, the church lost the organ pipes as well as the bells, but the copper roof of the tower was saved by the time delay due to the resilience of the parish priest Mózes Sebestyén. During the riots triggered by the "Aster Revolution" at the end of the war, on the night of 26 November 1918, the parish priest Sebestyén was murdered.

After the Second Vienna Award (30 August 1940), the 43rd Infantry Regiment from Miskolc moved into Zetelaka. During their two-week stay, they established close contact with the population, unfurled the national flag, and officers baptized several boys. After their departure, regimental commander Alajos Hajnal collected donations in the Miskolc area and sometimes personally delivered them to help the population living in more modest circumstances.

The World War II front crossed this part of Udvarhelyi Seat between 3-14 September 1944. Zetelaka was hit by an air attack on 3 September, as a result of which part of the village was burnt down. As a result, the parish priest János Hadnagy suggested to the people of the parish to retreat to the forest farms, so that the majority of the population did not encounter the Soviet troops that arrived on 13 September in the wake of the retreating German and Hungarian troops.

The communists, who came to power soon after the war, did their utmost to eliminate the clergy from the everyday life of families and small communities. I have found that the communists in Zetelaka also saw in the parish priest Hadnagy their main enemy and did everything to make his work impossible. He was arrested five times between 1947 and 1953, and was held in Samosújvár and Marosvásárhely prisons.

I have established as a fact that the life of the people of Zetelaka from the 17th century onwards was decisively influenced by the communal forest, which became the driving force of the economy of the settlement. I found the same for the church, which also had a large forest area (7200 cadastral acres). From the second half of the 19th century, when wood suddenly became more valuable in Széklerland, the wood of the church forest sold by the church council provided the financial cover for the start of large-scale construction. As part of the process of proportionalisation that began in the mid-1870s, which led to the creation of public estates with legal personality in the municipalities that completed it, Zetelaka had a public estate with clearly defined ownership of public land from 1886. It was thanks to the good relationship between the parish priest and the management of the communal property that this economically strongest organization of the village always

provided the timber for the major church buildings: in 1899 for the school extension, in 1913 for the roof of the new church and in 1925 for the roof of the new parish house. At the same time, the public landowners also supported the initiatives of the parish priests with considerable sums of money, to mention only the two most important ones: in 1922 they gave 16.000 lei for the purchase of the church's furnishings, which was then equivalent to the price of 160 wagons of wood, and in 1925, in addition to providing the wood, they paid half of the construction costs of the parish house. This relationship has also led to conflicts between the parish priest and the population. For example, when in 1928, in the case of overcutting in the communal forest, the parish priest Bartos Mihály took the president of the communal community into his arms on the square in front of the church, the angry crowd shouted at him: *go inside, Mr. parish priest, or we will take you inside!*

The main focus of the research was on church building and furnishing, and in the process, the relationship between the parish priests and the people of the parish. On the basis of the priestly behaviours, I found that parish priests who accepted the community's established set of rules could persuade their parishioners to implement their ideas, to give, to do community service or even to defy the secular leadership of the settlement, while priests who defied community norms, despite all their implementation, were classified as "bad priests".

It is due to the deeply religious spirit of the people of Zetelaka that, although there were attempts, protestant religions failed to take root in the settlement, and from the mid-17th century Zetelaka became the strongest catholic settlement in Udvarhelyszék. Between 1690-1792, 5 of the 8 archdeacons of Udvarhely were parish priests of Zetelaka. During my research

I came to the conclusion that the parishioners of the parish understood, accepted and tried to adapt to the mountain wildness of the people of the village and the overcrowding that went with it. It is also thanks to this that from the second half of the 19th century most of the parish priests were able to serve in the village for many decades. József Andrásy was the parish priest of Zetelak for 32 years (1862-1894), Mózes Sebestyén for 24 years (1894-1918), Mihály Bartos for 16 years (1925-1941) and János Hadnagy for 46 years (1941-1987). Andrásy and Sebestyén served in the village until their deaths, while Hadnagy until his retirement, all of them were buried in Zetelaka. If, for whatever reason, the harmonious relationship was disrupted, there could quickly be a breaking of bread between the parish priest and the faithful, with tragic consequences. This was experienced by Péter Szabó, a parish priest born in Zetelaka, whose plans to build a church were thwarted in 1844 because he disagreed with the church council about the location of the new church. A sad example of this is the case of Moses Sebestyén, who was highly respected throughout his ministry, but who became a collateral victim of the sudden popular anger that arose in the heat of the "Aster Revolution".

Of course, due to the different priestly attitudes, there were also parish priests who either defied the unwritten rules of the parish or tried to impose their will on the people of the parish. But there were also some who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Such a "bad priest" had to reckon with the resentment of the faithful, with all sorts of accusations, which always ended in the resignation from the parish. Béla Gáspár's life, in an atmosphere of social tensions, was so bitter that he lasted barely two months in Zetelaka (from 17 August 1919 to 9 October 1919), and Dénes Kiss was accused of excessive materialism, and he left after one and a half years of service (October

1919-May 1921). His successor, Gustáv Fuchs, was commissioned by Bishop Károly Majláth Gusztáv to finish the church and build the planned parish house. The charismatic parish priest, who did everything for his mission and defied the will of the faithful, eventually cursed himself and, after 4 years of service (1921-1925), asked to be relieved of his parish leadership.

Financially, the parish priest - whose main income was the kepe - was heavily dependent on the parishioners. Another result of the research is an analysis of the changes in the quantity and quality of the kepe (a kind of church tax in Szeklerland), and the complications surrounding its conversion into money and its collection during the 19th and 20th centuries. I found that in the case of Zetelaka, the main source of conflict between parish priests and the community was the size of the kepe and the way it was collected. One of the reasons for József Andrásy's popularity was precisely his opposition in 1885 to the compulsory conversion of the kepe, which had previously been paid in produce, into money. Finally, after a lot of discussion, Mózes Sebestyén managed to arrange the change into money in 1898. He, although insisted on the exact payment of the kepe every year, was understanding in difficult times: he forgave the people of the parish for not paying any kepe at all during the First World War. In 1920, inflation and the devaluation of money meant that the amount of kepe was a fraction of what it had been before the war. Dénes Kiss, who urged the implementation of the bishop's rectification decree and called for the amount of the kepe to be adjusted to the real price of grain, had to face the fact that the population, already living in very modest financial circumstances, was not willing to accept the modification of the kepe. As a result of several parish meetings, sometimes to the point of blasphemy, the parish priest finally managed to secure a partial kepe-lifting, but relations with

the faithful had soured to the point that he became exasperated and asked for a transfer. Another reason for the resignation of Mihály Bartos after 16 years of service was the issue of kepe debt. At the beginning of 1941, at the time of the establishment of *the small Hungarian world*, he hoped that the people of the parish would finally settle the arrears of the kepeh that had accumulated in the previous years. He offered to waive half of the debt if the huge arrears of 576.000 lei (equivalent to 19.200 pengő) were cleared by the end of the year. The parishioners, however, were less than impressed by the generous offer of the parish priest, who resigned in desperation and requested a transfer. Public antipathy towards kepe payment eased after the communists who restricted religious freedom came to power. The practice of religion, going to church, maintaining the church, became a way of opposing the regime, and the financial contribution for this purpose became a church tax.

The present work only partially explores the history of the nearly 1000-year-old parish of Zetelaka. Further research may cover other aspects of the life of the parish, such as a detailed analysis of the process of ecclesiastical education or a summary of the activities of religious associations. All this could eventually lead to a major monograph on the parish.

IV. Publication activity on the topic

- "Where is destiny taking you?" Life in Udvarhelyi Seat after the second Vienna decision. In: J Újváry Zsuzsanna–Mezei Emese (szer.): *Lifestyle-historical snapshots I*. Piliscsaba, 2018, 165–178.
- Szekler emigration in the early 20th century. In: *Society-Science-Culture*, Vol. XLIX, No. 3, Forum Book Publishing House, Novi Sad, 2019, 85-100.

- "Argentina is not my country of birth". Emigration from Udvarhely County in the early 20th century In: Tötös Áron–K. Markaly Aranka–Koloh Gábor–Horváth Illés (ed.): *A Thousand-Faced Transylvania. Politics, Society, Culture*. Transylvanian Museum Association, Kolozsvár, 2019, 236-253.
- Miklós Bartha's struggle for the establishment of the Transylvanian Hungarian Public Culture Association. In: *National politics in the mountainous region*. Volume of the conference held in Székelykeresztúr on 3 November 2017, MONDIF Association, Budapest, 2019, 61-103.
- "The autumn breeze brings the smell of burning ashes". The passing of the front in Udvarhely in the autumn of 1944, in the light of priestly records. In: *Life behind the front lines. Studies in honor of the military historian Péter Szabó*. Hungarian Military History Institute and Museum, 2019, 413-428.