

ARMENIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN TRANSYLVANIA AND ITS PERSPECTIVES IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD¹

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Abstract: *Armenian community and their heritage are an important part of Transylvania's cultural landscape. From the beginning of the 17th century, when this community migrated, established and developed in Transylvania, Armenian presence and contribution to cultural, social and economic life are well known. From a partial contribution to the welfare of Transylvanian cities, to the building of their own settlement (Gherla or Armenopolis), Armenian community integrated into the landscape of daily life and the proof of their role in Transylvania's society is the valuable heritage that they left behind. In nowadays context of globalization and cultural interaction, every aspect of cultural life is under pressure and creating an atmosphere where the cultural heritage could survive is more important than ever was.*

For the following, the paper will identify and create a frame for the instruments used in these days for preserve cultural heritage and ethnic values. The Armenian minority has not the advantage of demographics and their cultural heritage can survive only if the instruments of modern age are used for it. Virtual space, digital instruments are only few of these which need to be integrated with classic instruments, on the other hand the problem of cultural heritage needs to be moved in the frame of public-private, academic and non-academic cooperation for a better use of resources. Because of this the present study will try to elaborate and identify a roadmap or frame strategy related to Armenian community that could be applied to the Transylvanian multicultural space.

Keywords: *Armenian community, cultural heritage, globalization, Transylvania, Armenian identity.*

Introduction

The present paper main aim is to identify the major cultural heritage elements and their use in preservation and promoting of Armenian culture in Transylvania. This study is based on the need created by the globalization and its cultural dimension, where small ethnic communities are subjects of cultural degradation and integration into the majority's culture. In the first instance I will catalogue the main elements of the Armenian community from Romania which can be use as pillars of cultural preservation. In the second instance, I will

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analyze the instruments usable for a successful cultural preservation and promotion based on the context offered by the contemporary society and globalization process. In the case of the Armenian community from Romania the identification process and usable instruments for cultural heritage preservation are framed in the somewhat interesting historical context because, due to regional development, the Armenian community is divided in two groups. The first group is represented by the Armenians from Transylvania and the second group by the Armenians from pre-war Romanian Kingdom. These two groups have different confessional affiliation and due to the political context somewhat different social development. On the other hand, the current day's Armenian community is facing the same problems regardless of their religious and political past and the issues of cultural heritage is subject of the same register of problems.

Short inventory of Armenian cultural heritage

The first Armenians settled in the Romanian geographical region at the end of the middle ages. In the early centuries we can find them mostly in the larger villages of Moldova and in the next centuries in Walachia and Transylvania (part of the Kingdom of Hungary)². From the first moments of their presence in these regions, Armenians started to create consolidated communities which, in short time, became integrated in the socio-economic landscape of Romanian villages. Due their main professional affiliations (merchants, artisans and craftsmen), they possessed a relatively high economical power which, in short time, became the back bone of the social and cultural development. Thanks to these factors they managed to become consolidated and strong communities despite their small percentage in the population of the principalities.

In the case of Transylvania, Armenians represented an important ethnic group more for their input in the evolution of cultural and economical issues of the province. The role of this community started to be a significant factor from the last decades of the 17th century³, when a large number of Armenians settled in Transylvania, especially in Armenopolis (Gherla), Dumbraveni, Gheorgheni and Frumoasa. One of the elements that are characteristic for this ethnic group is their religion and the fact that, wherever they settled, among the first constructed buildings were churches. This fact can be clear seen in every part of the world

² Sergiu Selian, *Schiță istorică a comunității armene din România*, Editura Ararat, București, 1999, pp. 16-18.

³ During the reign of prince Mihai Mihaly Appaffy when they are permitted to settle in Transylvania. See Grigorian Tigran, *Istoria și cultura poporului armean*, Edit. Stiințifică, Bucharest, 1993, pp. 382-390.

where Armenian communities are because of the attachment to the ancestral religion that keeps the community flare lightened. So, among the most important cultural heritages of the Armenian community are represented by churches from Gherla (Sf. Solomon Church and The Trinity Cathedral), Frumoasa (Holy Trinity Church), Dumbraveni (St. Elisabeta Church) and Gheorgheni (St. Mariam Church). Although with their own strong cultural identity, Transylvanian Armenians assimilated indigenous elements in a very special way, adapting those elements to their own cultural luggage. Thus, although they firstly belonged to Gregorian Apostolic Church, in the context of religious policy of the Habsburg Empire from the end of 17th century and beginning of the 18th, Armenians from the Transylvanian converted to Catholicism under a specific form of, as a separate church, Armenian-Catholic⁴. This decision was a pragmatic one and its consequences were positive for the future development of the community. As a small minority they needed all the strings of power to create for themselves the prosperity and cultural independence. On the other hand, this decision to align to the imperial political and religious trend managed to open the doors for further benefits as artisan and merchant community. In this historical context, Oxendius Verzerescu, by intense lobby, obtained the permission of the emperor to establish a new village in Transylvania (Armenopolis/Gherla)⁵.

Gherla, baroque style settlement, was the first one of Transylvania built accordingly to a strategic street plan in which streets run at right angle to each other. In this way the community used all the space at their disposal in the most efficient way and created a well organized community. In the center of Gherla was built one of the biggest Armenian-Catholic churches in Diaspora which became a contemporary symbol for the Armenian community from Transylvania. Due to their special relation with spiritual life, the churches will represent one of the pillars of the community not only in Gherla, but in Dumbraveni, Gheorgheni and Frumoasa too. As Virgil Pop described, these types of buildings are the most prominent of the Armenian community even in villages where their secular heritage is modest⁶. Solomon Church from Gherla in the oldest Armenian-Catholic Church in Transylvania and the first stone church from Gherla, build between 1723 and 1724 and dedicated to the Annunciation (Buna-Vestire). Another significant heritage building from architectural and spiritual ways is

⁴ Lucian Nastasă, *Armenii din nord-vestul Transilvaniei în anii instaurării comunismului (1934-1953) Mărturii documentare*, Centrul de Resurse Pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală, Cluj-Napoca, 2008, p. 11

⁵ Kristof Szongott, *Orașul liber regal Gherla, vol. I Generalități*, Editura Ararat, București, 2014, pp. 343-346.

⁶ Virgil Pop, *Armenopolis oras baroc*, edit. Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2012, p. 28.

Holy Trinity Armenian-Catholic Cathedral, dedicated to Saint Gregory the Illuminator⁷. In Dumbraveni, Armenian community built four churches: Sf. Treime Church (1723), St. Petru and Pavel Church (1796), St. Ioan Botezatorul Church and St. Elisabeta Cathedral (1850)⁸. Due to its beauty, Armenian Church from Gheorgheni expresses the good taste and wealth of local Armenian community. The building is a baroque style one built in 1733, surrounded by a fortified wall, it is not only a cultural testimony, but also an economic one. The church from Frumoasa was built in 1781 from the donations of parishioners and is surrounded by a fortified wall in the same way as the one in Gheorgheni. The church undergone to an intense restoration process between 1925 and 1926. The parish house and parish clerk house were purchased in 1995 by Csibesz foundation, and after restoration, in 1997, an orphanage was opened⁹.

Another important characteristic of Armenian ethnic group that we should take into account when we talk about Armenian cultural heritage is their professional affiliations. Due to the fact that they were mainly merchants, artisans and crafts we found them in Transylvanian urban areas¹⁰. Due to these they managed to open several textiles, leather and jewelry manufacture in Transylvania. All these affiliations brought a substantial profit to the community, thus enabled them to have a significant cultural development in spite their demographic weakness. Proof of Armenian economic prosperity is towns and industry, which were an important part of Transylvanian economic circuit. Besides ecclesiastical buildings (that we already mentioned) we should take into account heritage buildings like craftsmen houses which, although had no impressive sizes, reflected the good taste, the financial power of the owner and their organized structure. Other important buildings from cultural heritage`s point of view are the edifices that hosted educational or benevolent institutions, that were present in every city where Armenian community lived and underlined their relation to education, culture and charity.

The first real attempt of the Armenian community to promote their cultural heritage and to preserve their identity was undergone at the end of 19th century when Kristof Szongott, an Armenian professor from Gherla devoted to the preservation and promotion of cultural and spiritual heritage, established an association of „Armenian Museum” with the

⁷*Ibidem*, p.88.

⁸<http://leveltar.romkat.ro/ro/arhive/arhiva-de-colecie-armeano-catolic-din-gherla/lista-fondurilor/331-612-a-gyergyoszentmiklosi-oermeny-katolikus-plebania-iratai.html>, accesat la 01.05.2015.

⁹<http://leveltar.romkat.ro/ro/arhive/arhiva-de-colecie-armeano-catolic-din-gherla/lista-fondurilor/330-584-a-szepvizi-oermeny-katolikus-plebania-iratai.html>, accesat la 05.05.2015.

¹⁰ Pal Judit, *Armeni în Transilvania contribuții la procesul de urbanizare și dezvoltare economică a provinciei*, Centrul pentru Studii Transilvane, Cluj Napoca, 2005, p. 28.

purpose of preserving the community's culture and patrimony. Szongott's museum was the first and only project of this type in Eastern Europe at that moment¹¹. Unfortunately after the death of Szongott his project was discontinued and the inventory of the museum became inaccessible for the public, in this way, the main purpose failed to be achieved on long term.

The first monography of Gherla written by Szongott still represents a key testimony of Armenian history in Transylvania. *Monografia oraşului liber regal Gherla* [The Monograph of Royal City Gherla] (published between 1893 and 1901 in 3 volumes), *Genealogia familiilor armenesti din Ungaria* [The genealogy of Armenians family from Hungary] (1898) and *Etnografia armenilor din Ungaria* [The ethnography of Armenians from Hungary] (1903) represents his valuable legacy and the only one of this magnitude. In 1907 Banyai Elemer published a book that it intended to be a repository of the monuments from Royal City Gherla, in which the author managed to create a frame for historical and cultural analysis for the material heritage of Gherla's Armenians¹².

Instruments usable for cultural preservation and promotion

Although with an important influence in the economical, financial and cultural life of places where they settled, Armenian community is still a small one in the contemporary social life and in the context of cultural globalization. In order to keep their ethnic specificity alive, to continue to have a benefic influence upon the cities where they live and to promote their ethnic group attributes, the community needs to create an exploitation form for their material and immaterial heritage. All these because the contemporary society is strongly influenced by multiple processes of globalization extended almost in every aspect of our existence (economic, cultural, political etc).

Preservation of heritage and frameworks

Cultural heritage can be divided in movable, immovable and immaterial heritage. To ensure the continuity of Armenian community from Transylvania cultural identity, all these types of cultural heritage must be protected, preserved and promoted through specific methodes.

In immovable cultural heritage category we could include historical buildings as churches, schools, traditional houses, civil constructions that housed benevolent institutions or other types of buildings that have specific architecture. All these edifices had an important

¹¹Kristof Szongott, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹²Virgil Pop, *op cit.*, p. 20.

role in asserting and maintaining the identity of Armenian community and, at the same time, hosted the movable and immaterial cultural patrimony. Movable cultural heritage represent the sum of the books, manuscripts, ceremonial objects, clothing pieces, heraldic and ceremonial standards, furniture and others objects which represent a testimony and an expression of Armenians` values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. Immaterial cultural heritage refers to social events, rituals and customs, verbal and non verbal traditions that goes from generation to generation and confer to the community the feeling of belonging identity¹³.

The importance of highlighting Armenian cultural heritage is given by the fact that through these actions community initiatives for the revival and preservation of these items are stimulated and in this way these elements could became a source of economic development (for example cultural tourism) and identity consolidation factors.

As we highlighted, the immovable cultural heritage of Transylvanian Armenians is a rich one and also an important one for the cultural and material wealth of this ethnic group. In order to preserve it, a medium-long strategy should be made. Due to the various historical contexts and to the vicissitudes of passing time, many Armenian historical and religious buildings are deteriorated. So, the first step should be restoration, than conservation and valorization. After the restoration step, in order to became a viable project on long term (to have enough material resources for the next steps) and to promote properly Armenian culture and history, the most representative buildings for the community`s specific should be transform in museums and to be included in touristic circuits. By promoting some adequate cultural information regarding immovable Armenian cultural heritage, these buildings could be promoted by touristic brochures, included in sites that promote cultural values or touristic sites, and included them in catalogues and in databases, so they could attract visitors. In this way, cultural tourism will manage to both promote the characteristics of Armenian communities from Transylvania and to familiarize people with their history, but also to give an economical boost to the area where the monuments are and to provide the means necessary to maintain the immovable cultural heritage in the best possible conditions.

Preservation of movable cultural heritage is also an important part of keeping alive the flame of cultural identity in the Armenian community. So, objects of cultural heritage value should be the main priority for restoration projects. In order to promote Armenian values, these movable cultural values should be integrated in museums, archives, libraries. Archives should be digitized and integrated into databases accessible for public. Cultural heritage

¹³ Adina Berciu Drăghicescu (coord), *Aromânii din Albania-Prezervarea Patrimoniului lor Imaterial*, Edit. Biblioteca Bucureștilor, București, 2010, pp. 7-8.

values should be cataloged. To some extent preservation of movable cultural heritage is related to the preservation of immovable one. By restoring historical buildings, we could create also places (museums, archives, libraries) where movable values could be highlighted, could be preserved and it could increase cultural value of both movable and immovable heritages.

Immaterial cultural heritage represents the third pillar of identity for the Armenian community in Transylvania. This part of their cultural heritage is one of great importance because, as we show, Armenians from Transylvania are somehow different from Armenian communities from Romania due to some specific development influenced by the historical contexts and by the other ethnic elements with whom they came in contact throughout generations. In order to conserve the immaterial cultural heritage, there should be done some complex studies which should identify and make an inventory of Armenian traditions, habits, rituals that should be integrated in catalogues, books, databases, because without identify and have relevant information about immaterial cultural heritage, they could neither be protected, nor preserved.

Of course, all these stages of preserving and promoting Armenian cultural heritage needs to be integrated in strategic plans related to cultural heritage, plans that could be useful by initiating academic and non-academic interethnic dialogues related to these problems, way that would reach facilitating the knowledge of Armenian culture, of Armenian problems and needs in preserving its cultural heritage and a way that could lead to the identification of several new specific mechanisms of conservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

Several steps were made toward preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Armenians from Transylvania, but they are not enough for such numerous and valuable cultural elements. In 2010 was opened „Museum of Armenians from Transylvania”, museum that is inside the Castle Apaffi from Dumbrăveni and where are exposed photographs and objects belonging to the Armenian community. Another example of preserving Armenian heritage is the reactivation of „Armenian Museum Association”, which aim is to reopen the „Armenian Museum”, museum that was founded in 1906 in order to preserve Armenian cultural heritage and strengthen Armenian national identity and promote Armenian millennial descent among both their community and beyond.

Conclusion

The cultural heritage left behind by Armenian community from Transylvania is a rich one and certifies of the role and the importance of this ethnic group in the multiethnic and

multi-confessional Transylvanian community throughout history being a testimony of historical events and of the evolution of mentioned region. Through preserving and valorizing this cultural heritage, civil society will realize the role and the contribution of minorities to a multiethnic and diverse society as Transylvanian one is. By promoting Armenian community's cultural values and not only Armenian's one, we encourage cultural tourism and strengthen Armenian community identity flame and not only, we also strengthen Transylvanian and Romanian identity flames, important elements in the context of contemporary society and in the context of increasing globalization process in which the identity factors tend to fade. By implementing strategic medium-long projects, Armenian community will be the main beneficiary, thus contributing to increasing the awareness of the need of preserving their cultural heritage, essential condition to maintain their cultural identity. In all the procedures necessary to preserve and promote Armenian cultural values, we should take into account the multidisciplinary aspects in which this issue should be approach.

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