

**“Babeş-Bolyai” University Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of History and Philosophy**

**“Collective memory and identity attitudes.
Transylvanian Armenians”**

Summary of the doctoral dissertation

Scientific advisor:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Doru Radosav

PhD candidate,

Lavric Laurențiu Nicolae

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Key words: Transylvanian Armenians, identity, Armenopolis, Elisabethopolis, Armenian image, collective memory, Armenian rite, Armenian genocide, Hungarian Armenian identity

Transylvanian Armenians managed to gain through their actions, facts and especially through their urban contribution an important place in the history of Transylvania. Most of them merchants, the Transylvanian Armenians formed a small but powerful community who achieved a lot of things in a short period of time.

The purpose of this thesis is to reconstruct the collective memory and the identity attitudes. I want to know if an Armenian community still exists and how their members define themselves. I want to know if the descendants of the Transylvanian Armenians that have Hungarian names and don't speak their language consider themselves Armenians or not, if there's still an Armenian consciousness.

In the first chapter I showed how the Armenians came in Moldavia, Valachia, Transylvania and their important role in the development of these states. They were important because of their jobs and because they settled especially in towns. In Transylvania the first big wave of migration had arrived in the seventeenth century, mainly from Moldavia. They were merchants and cattle breeders. An important historian, Nicolae Iorga, named the Armenians "the parents of Moldavia" due to their contribution to the development of this country.

In the second chapter I revealed the most relevant aspects of identity and the most important theories regarding identity. For example identity is a concept far more complicated than you can see at a first sight.

At the end of the XIX century the Armenian intellectuals from Transylvania created an ideology that they called "armenism"¹ in the effort to save the Armenians from a complete assimilation. Instead, this ideology created a false self image. It was quite difficult to praise the traditions, the past, the Armenians as a chosen people and in the same time to consider the assimilation as a positive fact.² For these reasons the ideology had a short life.

In any group the language is an essential part of identity and national consciousness. Unfortunately, today the Transylvanian Armenians no longer speak

¹ Rita Bernad, Balint Kovacs, *The Armenian-catholic collective Archive in Armenopolis*, Leipzig University, Leipzig, 2012, p. 134.

² Pal Judit, *Armenians in Transylvania: their contribution to the urbanization and the economic development of the province*, Center for Transylvanian Studies, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, p. 78.

Armenian but are still aware in some way of their Armenian origin. The last generation who spoke Armenian was the grandparents of those who live in present. The Armenian language survives in church through religious songs and prayers.

In the third chapter I focused on Armenian towns. Armenopolis (Gherla) is a unique case in the modern history of Transylvania because this city was built according to a plan on a piece of land bought by the community. They managed to build from zero a baroque town and contributed to the economic and urban development of this province.

The second most important Armenian town Elisabethopolis (Dumbrăveni) was built in time on the structure of an old saxon village. In this case Armenians didn't build a new, they took a small village and raised a flourishing town. This settlement gained the title of town in 1696, when the future city of Armenopolis didn't even exist. Armenians contributed also to the development of other two settlements, Gheorgheni and Frumoasa.

A key chapter of this paper refers to the identity attitudes of Transylvanian Armenians. In their history, they constantly had a positive self-portrait. They were peaceful and always aware of their economical value and importance. Even today in collective memory we can find positive aspects in the Armenian self-portrait. Therefore, the Armenian is honest-minded, hard worker, religious, wealthy, intellectual, a loving parent, good negotiator, patient.

Although they left their homeland centuries ago in collective memory still persists those physical features which distinguish them from the rest of the world. Those features preserve and develop in the form of stereotypes and cliché.

The Armenians have dark skin, brown hair, big nose, big and black eyes. Although, this stereotype had a negative aspect in time the collective memory transformed them into positive aspects. They became positive features and the Armenians are proud of them.

But this phenomenon doesn't regard only the physical features. Due to the collective memory others' stereotypes gain a positive value. Also, others' flaws such as misery and treachery are trying to be justified. The Rubens painting which lays in Armenian Catholic church in Gherla is another special part in creating the Armenian self-portrait. Through this painting they gain positive features, they are smart, sharp, they don't buy something cheap.

But not always Armenians had a positive image. At the beginning the Armenians were received with little trust by the Hungarians, Saxons and Szeklers. They were regarded with suspicion because they were strangers, merchants seen as non-producing, who gain and create concurrency fights.³

In the last part of the nineteenth century there was a change in the way of who Armenians were seen. From a negative aspect the Armenian image became one that was positive. This change was due to the Hungarians intellectuals.

The commerce and the handicraft were an important part in the Armenian image. For quit a while the word Armenian meant merchant. Maybe the most important feature of Armenians is that of being merchants. They were so good in this field that at one time they were leading the business and the commerce from Transylvania.

From the interviews that I realized, I could see that the grandparents of those who live in present maintained their traditional jobs. Most of them had shops, business up to Italy and Vienna, while others were shoemaker, butcher, tailer.

In collective memory specific places, those “lieu de memoire”, have a crucial role. These can be a specific place, a building, a church, a monument, but also a village, a town or even a street.⁴ In this case we can identify old shops, or the Armenian houses as “lieux de memoire”. This places are full with stories, legends and memory.

In time the Armenians managed to negotiate their own identity depending of historical period, interests and context. In the eighteenth century the Armenians wish to integrate into the Transylvanian society, still a medieval one. They define themselves Armenians and tried to succeed in life as a strong and unite group.

The year 1848 marked a turning point for the Transylvanian Armenians. After 1848 the Armenian community lost their feudal privileges and the integration turned out into assimilation which by the end of nineteenth century was complete. The events of 1848 let them experience the feeling of being a part of a common nation and played a major role in the forming of Hungarian Armenian identity.⁵

³ Pal Judit, *Armenian Imagine-Armenian Identity-Assimilation of the Transylvanian Armenians in the 18-th and 19-th Centuries*, în Agnieszka Barszeweskca, Lehel Peti, *Integrating minorities: traditional communities and modernization*, Ed. Kriterion, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, p. 16-17.

⁴ Rita Bernad, Balint Kovacs, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁵ Pal Judit, *Armenian Image-Armenian Identity...*, p. 25.

This year and all the changes that came along provoked a change in the way that Armenians acted. From this moment they chose an individual way of self-realization and assimilated to the dominating political group. They started to define themselves as Hungarians.

In the years between the two world wars and in the communist era Armenians continued to define themselves as Hungarians. Especially in the communist era there was a wave of silence and quiet that involved all the society. This silence came especially from normal people.

The 1989 events meant a new regime, a democratic one which encouraged the freedom of expression, the expression of your own identity, the democratic values and protected the national minority. After the fall of the communist regime there was a rediscovery of the Armenian origin, routes and Armenian legacy.

We have to mention that the descendants of the Transylvanian Armenians are assimilated by the Hungarians, they don't speak the Armenian language but they are still aware of their Armenian origin and legacy. At Gherla and Dumbrăveni where the community was bigger and stronger, the assimilation began only in the second part of the nineteenth century. The descendants of Armenians from these two cities define themselves in present Hungarian Armenians. Instead, in Gheorgheni and Frumoasa where the number of Armenians was smaller, they assimilated and lost their language faster. Nowadays they define themselves as Hungarians with Armenian origin. In reality, they try to maintain a balance between Armenian origin and Hungarian identity.

In chapter five I analyzed the Armenian contribution to the urbanization process in Transylvania, the way that some places and their memory was manipulated, and the main features of the Armenian cities.

Armenopolis was built and developed in the same time with the entrance of the baroque in Transylvania. This explains why many houses from the city are baroque. Healthy merchants, the Armenians from Gherla employ constructors from Austria, Hungary, many of them with German origin, who promoted a Central-European baroque.

The most widespread plan is that with a big and central living and with all the attention focused on a monumental entrance. This project can't be used in Armenopolis because it costs too much and due to the small plot that exists. Therefore, there are some

changes. The project is twist with 90°. Because of this change the monumental entrance ends up in the court, while a lateral façade became the main façade. Due to this change the monumental entrance loses all the value and grandeur.⁶

In Dumbrăveni there is another project who stands up. This project contains two parallel buildings who are connected trough a wall gate. This two buildings share with the neighboring building, who belong to another owner, the same roof and façade. This project is present mainly in the city center. Armenians chose this solution to divide the shop from their home.

Armenians contributed also, to the development of other two settlements Gheorgheni and Frumoasa. But this two settlements didn't reach the level of urbanization from the main Armenians cities. The Armenian houses from Gheorgheni stand up because on the ground floor is the shop and up stairs live the owner.

Another interesting subject that I focused was the manipulated memory of a place, space. That's why I analyzed two cases, two central squares from Gherla and Sibiu. In Gherla the central square was included in the project and most likely has a Austrian origin. In stead the central square from Sibiu is much older dating from the medieval era.

The changes from Gherla had a political motivation and they were visible especially when a new regime came in power. For example after 1918 the Romanian administration transformed the central square into a park, after 1940 the Horthy administration raised an obelisk on the top of which the communists put a soviet star. After 1989 this monument is demolished and another one is built in the memory of nation's heroes.

In stead, in Sibiu the changes had a religious background and revealed a struggle between the majority Saxons and the Austrian catholic officials. Therefore, the city and the main square, "Piața Mare", became the battleground of this two groups. In both cases the central square remained the place where politics, economy and religion changed their symbols and fought for the power.

In chapter six I analyzed the special relation that the Armenians have with Armenian Church. For the Armenians the most important institution is the Church.

⁶ Virgil Pop, *Armenopolis-oraș baroc*, Ed. Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 104.

Wherever they are, the Armenians built for the first time their church. The Transylvanian Armenians are a special case inside the Armenian community from Romania because at the end of the seventeenth century they became Catholics. The Church remained for a long time the only institution who preserved the ethnic identity and even for the catholic Transylvanian Armenians the Church is tied in present with the community survival.

Nowadays the language used in the holy liturgies is Hungarian and the Latin rite. There are still some prayers and religious songs in Armenian and the Armenian rite and language are used only in the most important liturgies. For this reason the Armenian-Catholic Church from Transylvania contributes and maintains a new identity, the Hungarian-Armenian identity.

In the last chapter I analyzed the Armenians migrations, the Armenian genocide and the Armenians names and the stories behind them. The endless migrations, for example, and their memoirs are still present in the collective memory.

If we look more carefully at the names we can retrace the road of the Transylvanian Armenians. For example the names with Persian, Arabic, Turkish origin show us the relations and the ties between the Armenians and this people.

In present the names of Transylvanian Armenians are Hungarian, and are written according to the Hungarian spelling. But the stories behind those names are far more interesting and captivating, and show us, in a different way, how the names appeared and what does it meant.

Transylvanian Armenians are between history and memory, between a history of discontinuities and a memory of continuities. In their history these discontinuities are present in all the life's aspects: religious, economic, political and identity.

Transylvanian Armenians are trapped between history and memory. The Armenian component, the Armenian origin survives through memory. Therefore those interviews are very important because those who I spoke are the last generation who saw Armenian shops, met Armenian merchants, they know the old city, they are the last who heard they grandparents and parents speak Armenian.