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People and attitudes towards death in Bistriţa-Năsăud County
Obituary - history and sources

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION SUMMARY

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Death, as a way of migration into a higher experience, but which is still able to keep in touch with the living world, develops itself in the funeral cult and the analysis of the practices and beliefs related to death, together with the messages transmitted by obituary, disclose the fact that, in the survivors' conception, the deceased is still having a dialogue, beyond the physical death, with the living ones, preserving his memory in the survivor's flashback and conscience. This apparent and consolatory conception is partially accepted by the church, death remaining the same "cruel" and "wild" force that separates the human being from life, the only one that he knows spontaneously, the survivors from the deceased ones, creating big anxiety towards this irreversibility of the phenomenon.

This interpretative study, even a pioneering one, focuses on the limited, spatial-chronological analysis of some aspects related to people and death from the Bistrița-Năsăud county, and also the influence, persistence of the obituary in the citizens' life between 1876-1914. I have approached this issue from the perspective because of my personal curiosity.

This study wants to present the image of the Bistrița-Năsăud county, of its citizens and to enforce a resource, neglected until the present in the Romanian historiography, the obituary. At a glance over this ordinary type of announcement, written by a deceased's family member, or a close friend of the bereaved family, it does not seem to say very much to the reader. It looks like a citation of unimportant data: who, where, when. What I wanted to change by this study is this wrong perception related to the obituary which, in our opinion is an indispensable, needful resource in reconstructing the image of a community. Choosing this subject was an older personal curiosity, respectively presenting the obituary in a different light. The new element is represented even by the chosen subject, "People and attitudes towards death in the Bistrița-Năsăud county". Up to the present, the Bistrița-Năsăud county has not had a very detailed description, the insignificant attempts of trying to offer some data related to its history refer to the administrative organisation and the presentation of some local clerks.

I consider that a set-back for many people in approaching this subject is the language in which the documents were edited, the majority of them being written in Hungarian. In order to retrace the history of the Bistrița-Năsăud county, I have used a multidisciplinary approach, from different domains, like history, demography, ethnography, archival, geography, sociology etc. and a variety of resources, consisting of documents, regulations, statutes, press articles, pieces of work to create a complete study.

I wanted to present the image of the county and its inhabitants, of the way in which the death was perceived and treated within the community. The documents related to the funeral rites, to the regulations and the burial statuses, the organisation and functioning of the cemeteries and the obituaries helped me during my work.

The working method consisted of tracking, selecting, ordering, transcribing and interpreting the documents and insertion of the footnotes. In the annexes, the documents have been integrally edited, according to the original version, being all the elements preserved from the body of the texts - dating, graphic signs, emphasises, affixes, iconic signs - pictures. Without any distortion of the phonic and morphologic characteristics of the documents, I have made some modifications according to the present writing Romanian rules, willing to facilitate the texts reading. The main resources have been the archive files, statuses, regulations and obituaries completed with monographs, information from the newspapers of the time, dictionaries etc. I have focused more on the obituaries or the death announcements.

The six chapters of this study sketch a complete image of the citizens, of their professions, way of response, involvement in the community events, in front of the death.

Practically, the first chapter underlines the administrative and historical-geographical image of the county. Even from the beginning, a spatial-temporal delimitation is made, underlining the organising style of the county. In a brief description, I have presented the inhabitants' preoccupations, their professions, the way in which they used to build their houses, the gastronomic preferences, the traditional folk clothing. Afterwards, I have made a geographical presentation, in which I mentioned the main range of mountains and streams of the county. Also, a complete presentation of the county must contain some information related to the education, followed through the perspective of two different areas - Bistrița and Năsăud. Năsăud was a pure Romanian area, with old traditions, while in Bistrița predominated and intersected Romanian, Hungarian and Transylvanian Saxon elements. This is the reason why I have followed the two areas separately, by presenting the schools which worked there during the county, the organising and functioning style and their legislation. At the end of the chapter I presented, for Năsăud, the activity and the organising and functioning style of the reunion of the Greek-Catholic teachers "Mariana".

The second chapter contains the main categories of intellectual people from the county period: the priests, the professors, the clerks. The doctors have been mentioned in the health

chapter. During the county, the end of the 19th century - the beginning of the 20th century, the priests and the professors were the most important categories, their role being recognised not only by the society, but also by the authorities. I have focused on the first two categories, because these were mostly occupied by Romanians. I have described their forming way and their evolution. Not the same thing could be said about the third category, the clerk. In general, these positions were occupied by Hungarians and Transylvanian Saxons, the Romanians enjoying only a small number of such positions, especially in communes. This situation changed in 1886, when the Romanians held more and more positions and important jobs within the administration. We cannot mention about aspects related to the intellectual world, without talking about the cultural activities developed by their representatives. Even at the end of the 19th century, there were founded societies, reunions, associations for the lifestyle standard improvement and for supporting the members of the communities during the important moments of their life. Within these societies, the three important ethnic groups managed to cohabit and to find solutions in order to make their life better.

The third chapter presents the sanitary situation of the county, starting from the prevention methods and treatment in case of an epidemic, discovery of the main treatment methods. The pieces of information have been collected from the archive documents. The several vicarial leaflets describe the main illnesses of the 19th century circumstantially, together with their prevention and treatment way. The authorities have made great efforts in order to stop the illnesses development and have developed several controls and prevention actions within the population. Hereinafter, I have described the organising and functioning style of the hospital, the only profile institution within the county, where the population received treatment. The sanitary system organisation has developed according to the Austrian-Hungarian legislation. Shortly, I have presented the main sanitary commissions, their organising style, attributions, and benefits of the medical staff. At the end of the chapter I have analysed the illnesses of the 19th century, most of them being described by technical terms: "chronic", "acute". I have noticed that a high importance was given to the illness description, more than to other elements, like the place or age of the deceased.

The fourth chapter presents the demographic and anthropological perspectives from the Bistrița-Năsăud county, in which are described the dynamics and the evolution of the county, the burial rites, the cemeteries organising and functioning style and the burial reunions.

The last two chapters have been allocated exclusively to the obituary, for a detailed analysis. The fifth chapter introduces us in the obituary world, starting from the word derivation, its origins and evolution.

The obituaries have become more and more "democratized", in the sense that women, minorities and ordinary people have had a lot higher chances to appear in the obituaries after they died, compared to the past situation. Anyway, the subjects of the so-called "obituaries news" are, most of them, men. Women and minorities are mentioned disproportionately in the changing Style and the obituaries content, during time, they have become more secularized, less interested in the death details and more focused on their life story. We could say it was a trend within the rich and educated people to appeal to an obituary. After our analysis, we have not found any obituary of an ordinary individual, farmer or worker. The investigation was made difficult by the low quality of the inventory of the studied information and the lack of a bibliography strictly related to the subject.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the death commemoration was based on a very detailed presentation of the individuals' life and their successes in an obituary or death announcement.

Key words: attitudes towards death, obituary, cemeteries, burial reunions, Bistrița-Năsăud county, death, symbols.