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**THE ERDÉLYI DE SOMKERÉKI FAMILY. THE HISTORY OF A
TRANSSYLVANIAN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY FROM THE MIDDLE
AGES TO THE EARLY MODERN TIMES.**

– ABSTRACT OF THE PHD THESIS –

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KEY WORDS: Genealogy, Medieval history, Aristocracy, Transylvanian society, Early modern times, Archives, Families

The Erdélyi de Somkerék family was one of the most important aristocratic families of Medieval and early modern Transylvanian society. During the almost 300 years of existence (c. 1360-42), this family has managed to advance on the social ladder attaining a significant position in Transylvanian society. The goal of this research was to analyse the history of this family, a history which abounds in key events, significant not only in Transylvanian history, but from a European relations point of view as well. Having been part of the upper nobility, some members of the family have had remarkable political or military careers, have gained properties, proved to be able patrons, and through marriage have managed to establish important ties with the aristocracy of the region. When the last male member of the family died out, their contemporaries have rightfully considered them as one of the wealthiest Transylvanian families.

The archives from Budapest and Cluj-Napoca abound in documents that are useful in reconstructing the history of the Erdélyi de Somkerék family. In spite of this fact, historiography has not been productive regarding the history of this family. In older literature one can find only a single paper concerning these aristocrats, alongside with some articles that contain data on their political and military careers, on commissioning buildings, royal charters etc. Given this reality, associated with the lack of an ample family chronicle, the research within this doctoral thesis aims to complete, to fill this important gap of general Transylvanian historiography.

The main source of research is represented by the archives of the Erdélyi de Somkerék family. This collection of documents managed to survive thanks to Mihály Teleki's policy of acquiring estates, as after the last male descendant of the Erdélyi de Somkerék family has passed away, Teleki takes over not only their properties, but all concerning documents as well. In the beginning, for almost a century, the Teleki family has kept all deeds conferred in Sibiu, where for the first time, the archive itself was systematically organised. During the first years of the 19th century, the collection has been transferred to the Teleki Library from Tîrgu Mureş, then in 1916 it was taken to Budapest and it is kept there since, within the National Archives of Hungary. The

documents concerning the subject of this thesis are integrated into the so called *Collection of the Teleki family from Tîrgu Mureş*, registered under call number P 657-658.

In spite of the fact that literature on the Erdélyi de Somkerék family is scarce, the wider subject, i.e. the history of Hungarian aristocracy has been researched in detail, and the results, as well as the methodology can be used for this analysis as well. Erik Fügedi and Pál Engel's work on the aristocracy, as well as András W. Kovács' volume regarding the Wass de Cege family, both offer methodological frameworks necessary for research and for concluding the results. Although the title suggests an approach from a genealogical point of view, the interdisciplinary character of the subject itself implies a deeper scientific examination, through a wide range of analyses, such as palaeography, diplomatics, archontology, heraldry, as well as aspects of economic, religious and architectural development of the time.

The thesis is made up of 11 chapters. The first two chapters deal with topics concerning archival sources and literature. The history of Transylvanian aristocracy has been researched in detail by several scholars of the time, such as Engel Pál, Mályusz Elemér, Kubinyi András, Fügedi Erik, W. Kovacs András and others. In its turn, the early modern era was broadly analysed by Horn Ildikó, Péter Katalin, T. Orgona Angelika, Papp Klára etc. The works of these scholars offer necessary patterns for research and conclusion of the results.

Chapter three is concerned with the biographies, respectively the political and military careers of the family's members. We have managed to identify 189 persons, who in one way or another are linked to the studied family, individuals avoided by historiography, whose extremely important personal stories significantly complete the portrait of this important historic family. A total of 83 aristocrats (49 men and 34 women) have been born into this family, another 62 persons have married into the family, while 44 children have been the descendants of female members of the family.

Throughout history, many men of the Erdélyi de Somkerék lineage managed to advance into very important positions. Besides their ascension, there were also cases of decline due to acts of rebellion, beheading and seizure of properties. The most important position obtained by a family member was that of vice-palatine, in the person of Antal Somkeréki, during the first half

of the 15th century. Three have become vice-voivode, while others managed to advance to viscount.

The founder of the family, Antal Somkeréki, has attended several important events from all over Europe (Battle of Nicopolis, Council of Constance, the crowning from Aachen), while his military prowess and royal honours have made him one of the foremost Transylvanian noblemen of the time. His descendants have rebelled against Matthias Corvinus, but eventually they also became related by marriage. The family was actively involved in Transylvanian life, following the time's trend both in politics and religion. The last male descendant was one of the most talented politicians of the first half of the 17th century, an individual who has been commissioned to lead several missions, meanwhile he also kept a vast correspondence with the rulers of Transylvania.

The biographies are completed by the analysis of the family trees, noted throughout the ages – both by family members and by historians – and in the same time by a genealogical tree compiled based on the studied documents.

Besides the inherited properties, the family managed to widen its real estate fortune with villages or parts of villages. The latter have been acquired through donations offered by the ruler, or by purchasing or exchanging with the neighbouring landed proprietors. Throughout its generations, the family had two large domains, having their centres at Șintereag and Gornești, while the maximum geographical /territorial expansion of these domains was reached shortly before the extinction of the family. The testament of the last male family member enumerates 32 villages and several buildings, and due to this wealth his contemporaries have considered him one of the wealthiest aristocrats of Transylvania.

The Erdélyi de Somkerék family can also be linked to many architectural achievements. The thesis groups the studied buildings into four subchapters. In the first category we have places of worship, built or rebuilt by the members of the family. The next part analyses the former citadel of Gornești, and then destroyed buildings are also presented, buildings whose location cannot be identified. The chapter closes with a list of the auxiliary constructions.

The Erdélyi family funded the church from Gornești (15th c.) and have also rebuilt the church from Șintereag. Moreover, the church of Cepari can also be linked – partially or completely – to the above mentioned noblemen. The oldest construction funded by them is the manor of Șintereag, its first reference dates from the year 1392, and which, according to Géza Entz, is the oldest manor that has developed to a castle. Among the edifices they funded, a special place is held by citadel of Gornești, built by vice-voivode István Erdélyi de Somkerék between the years 1462-65. Besides this citadel, the family had other dwelling places, such as four manors, two in Șintereag and one each in Dumbrăvioara and Jucu. The sources, however, are very parsimonious in offering data on these residences.

Throughout the decades, besides the donated properties, the members of the Erdélyi de Somkerék family gained a whole series of charters both from the king and rulers, this fact made it much easier for them to advance on the social ladder. The highest number of such benefits was offered to Antal Erdélyi de Somkerék during Sigismund of Luxemburg's reign, but the descendants of the former also benefitted of such distinctions. Antal receives the right to build a fortification, and five years later the right to erect a stone citadel. The sovereign allows him to organise two national fairs per year at Șintereag and weekly fairs every Monday, the same rights have been given for the village of Dumbrăvioara as well. Moreover, he has been given the right of *jus gladii*, the Royal Chancery issues an armorial, and the Papal Chancery allows for the members of the family to be absolved of their sins by a confessor chosen by them, any time they felt the need for it. The generations to come were given several economic facilitations and properties and bondsmen as donations.

Being descendants of the Becse-Gergely genus, the members of the Erdélyi de Somkerék family were related to a significant number of important families (e.g.: Apafi and Bethlen de Bethlen), however they have gained new allies and established new kinships through the institution of marriage. One of the most important marriages proved to be that of János Erdélyi de Somkeréki with Jusztina Szilágyi, the cousin of King Matthias. On this level there were also contradictory cases, when they entered into marriages with chosen members of their former adversaries, thus the tracing the network of kinship gives us a clear image on the pragmatic and absurd dynamism of Transylvanian society.

In the archives of the family dowry lists were preserved, that contain interesting information about the material culture of the time, as well as about the economic power of the family. Wedding invitations have also been studied, which provide information on how these events were prepared and organized, but also on the relationships between the celebrated and their guests.

The general historical background and events from Transylvania influenced their decisions in seeking kinships and in their confessional options as well. One of the first representative members of the family, Antal, was a devout catholic, loyal to the Papacy, the Pope even granted him an indulgence that absolved him of all sins. His son, István, although funded a church, he also played an active role in looting and desecrating several places of worship. The spreading of the protestant reform led to adopting Calvinism, and later on Unitarianism. Despite these changes, when the family died out its last descendant was an avid supporter of the Jesuits. Another important type of family document is the testament or will. These offer a glimpse on the family members' attitude towards death, the amount of their possessions and the network relationships within the family.

Based on the analyzed documents, one can state that this family is one of the foremost aristocratic families from Medieval and Early Modern Transylvania; a family that made its name through the important biographies and careers of its members', as well as through acts of patronage. Posing as decisive actors of the Medieval and early Modern development of the region, they were related with almost every influential family of the Carpathian Basin, kinships that proved to be particularly relevant for establishing and reassessing certain historical data.