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FACULTY OF LETTERS
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HUNGAROLOGY STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF HUNGARIAN ETHNOGRAPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

DOCTORAL THESIS

TRANSYLVANIAN CANTORS BETWEEN 1948–1990
Biography of Roman Catholic, Reformed and Unitarian cantors

SUMMARY

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CLUJ-NAPOCA
2021

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SUMMARY

In the field of religious ethnography we have knowledge about whole dynasties of cantors, about studies that focused mainly on a single religion, a region, or a person from different eras. Works about the cantors from Transylvania appeared mainly in connection with the funeral customs (farewell texts), other popular customs and traditions, but the researches that have as object of study the whole community of cantors or the career of cantor, it proved to be lack in the field. The interest in the researched era comes from personal involvement, because after 1989 with a bachelor's degree, with two curricular areas (primary and preschool pedagogy as well as religious music), with several colleagues of mine, I had the vocation to become teachers in confessional schools. In the meantime, it was highlighted that the initiative to rehabilitate the cantor-teacher status, which functioned before the confessional schools were nationalized in 1948, was described as an exile in the realm of nostalgia. In the ecstasy of the freedom to act and the strong desire to change things, many initiatives took root immediately after the revolution, but in reality they became barren efforts of a process of transformation. The reopening of denominational schools nationalized under communism, with the exception of a few isolated examples, remained on hold due to other priorities in church policy, and the readjustment of the status of cantor-teacher also proved premature. In the absence of research, which would have aimed to explore changes in society during the communist period, it is difficult to draw conclusions from past events and to formulate acceptable scientific explanations to ourselves. In my doctoral dissertation I examine the period between 1948 and 1990, when the profession of cantor-teacher, following nationalization, was forced into two separate professions, that of church singer (cantor) and that of teacher. According to my hypothesis, the abolition of the status of cantor-teacher, the nationalization of famous church institutions, the modernization processes along the way led to a significant change in the role of cantor, as a result of various models of professional identification and different identities of cantors. This period of the church, as an institution is characterized by a permanent search for ways and quick solutions, by adaptation and conformity, and in the case of cantors to strengthen their halved status, neither

power nor initiative was shown by the church. The profession has lost its position not only in the Church, but also in society as a whole. In the work in three large blocks I considered realizable to present in the three major historical Hungarian Churches from Transylvania the status, the cantor role and analysis of relations both in church institutions and in society, the process of change and changes in the cantor profession.

In the first approach, after presenting the scientific context of research, concepts, methods, sources and area of research, I set out to summarize the role of cantors in terms of rules and doctrinal religiosity in the three religions (Roman Catholic, Reformed and Unitarian). Without a basis for comparison it would be incomplete to discuss only the identity, behavior and conflicts of cantors, who have a deep-rooted status in religious traditions, so we considered it important to go through the history of the profession and the role of cantor from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Based on the documents drawn up during the communist period from the church archives, the second approach reflects various aspects of Transylvanian cantors. This chapter based on "archival memory" was intended to explore the possibilities offered by the institutional framework, in particular the conditions that influenced the development and changes of the role of cantor as well as to reveal the invisible networks of some communities of cantors.

In the third approach out of a total of 7 completed interviews regarding the reconstruction of the singers' life history, only 4 were analyzed in the dissertation (two Catholics, one Reformed and one Unitarian), the other 3 can be found in the appendices. In addition to the confessional distinction of people, the main aspects of "selection" depended on the motivations for choosing the profession, the efforts made during training, the characteristic events of the cantor's lifestyle, and the role of the individual in society. With the help of the biographical discourse, I set out to create the career model of cantors, which proved to be an unexplored area in the field of social-human sciences.

In a brief approach, in the fourth, I draw attention to the trends of change in the role of cantor after the 1989 revolution.

The interviews in the appendices, the photos of the cantors, the photos of the documents from the archives are not just simple illustrations and supplements, but are important parts of the basic research.

The historical presentation of the status, the archival research and the analysis of the cantors' careers gave birth to the monograph of the Transylvanian cantors from the communist period.

During this period, the institutional frameworks of the historical Hungarian Transylvanian churches were in special situations, so special conditions were created. Under the given circumstances, stratified categories were distinguished among cantors from different social backgrounds, who responded with various strategies and diversified ways of adapting to local possibilities, as well as to everyday challenges. The results of the research were summarized as follows:

1. *The Transylvanian Cantors Community.* We can talk about the community of cantors, as a mechanical formation at the level of church and institutional employee, which on its turn depended on external factors, which factors influenced the role of the cantors in each confession. Church institutions formed along common religious ideas (apart from dogmatic differences) made decisions under the same political pressure and oppression based on ministerial regulations, and when organizing the status framework of cantors they also had to take into account local considerations. However, within each separate church, common traditions, rites, and ceremonies, the common ground of the repertoire of religious music, and the common occupation transformed the cantors of the Churches into a religious community.

2. *Networks within the community.* In the micro-regions, the existence of interdependence, reciprocity and mutual aid was found at the level of informal relations between cantors, and among those who had institutional training, an even more extensive network was shown not only local, but extended abroad. Choral meetings and church events that moved larger crowds, they were not allowed during communism, but there are examples for a few exceptions in the biographies of Roman Catholic cantors (in Ciumani, Gheorgheni and Plăieșii de Jos), which were attended by 4- 5 choirs from the surroundings. This can be explained by the homogeneity of Roman Catholic cantors (due to the existence of the School of Cantors in Alba-Iulia), as well as the richness of the religious traditions of the region (especially related to the traditions regarding the saints in the Church).

In the biographies of the Reformed and Unitarian cantors were not mentioned any choir organizations before the revolution of 1989. In addition to their informal meetings, these events served as an opportunity to their mutual promotion and their self education .

3. *The cantor`s identity and personality traits.* Regarding the way of life of the cantors, their altruistic attitude, self-sacrifice and commitment to the community was to be expected considering that they chose this profession and remained faithful to it, on the other hand it requires a kind of career awareness, which in turn is nothing else but the propagation of religious traditions, practices and beliefs. Their identity as cantors distinguished them from the other members of the community, which identity they wore with conviction and loyalty. Based on archival data and biographical stories, Roman Catholic cantors were characterized by an accentuated religious identity awareness. Until they could practice their role as cantors, the would be singers went through a series of thorough selection in the church, till childhood, thus it was almost impossible for the inadequate person to ever become a cantor. There were countless examples of rejection of candidates. Cantors with practical skills, also filled in the role of mediators between the priest and the parish in local communities, because priests were mostly engaged in theoretical problems. The personality of the cantor played an important role in establishing the connection between the priest and the parish, as well as for a stable and fruitful relationship. The identity of the Catholic cantor has been strengthened and confirmed both by the community and by the Church.

Due to my research I was able to distinguish a number of different reformed cantor categories: retired teachers, peasant singers, wives of priests, and others, who in their role of cantors went through different paths to achieve professional identity, had different reputations in society and uneven material appreciation. Priestesses occupied a special place among the Reformed and Unitarian cantors, whose identity and role proved to be the most difficult to delimit and outline. Though being a cantor, their primer stereotypical identification given by the community was that of the wife of the priest. In their case we can only talk about their cantor role as being an addition or an extension of that of the role of the wife of the priest.

4. *The religiosity of the cantors. Doctrinal / official or popular religion?* In addition to the official religion lived in their daily work, we can say that the personal religiosity of the singers has been demonstrated in a larger dimension, which has manifested itself more in a disciplined work rhythm, in maintaining and managing the constant state of alert, in fact their entire life style. The cantors' survival strategy requires a certain distancing from the overwhelming experiences and feelings of ever-changing life, materialized in the rites of passage they encountered daily at

religious services, so they rather ignored "instant" religious experiences with strong emotional impact. Objects of worship were not missing from the homes of Catholic cantors, the presence of icons was almost mandatory, but the organ or harmony, prayer books and songs books were present at each cantor interviewed. In connection with popular religion, in interviews we find several examples of para-liturgical elements, for example the farewell texts written by Catholic cantors.

5. *Memory, historical memory, historical periods.* The singers' memories based on real experiences from life stories are in fact meta-codes endowed with meaning about reality. In the individual memory of the cantors each historical period has a certain code, an attribution or is nominated by metaphor, and are endowed with the judgment of value, for example: the Russian invasion, collectivization, the period of political processes in 1956 as "contemporary ghost" or "new times knock on the door", "in Ceau's time", and "in democracy". Like an imprint of the oppressive dictatorial regime, the "archival memory" kept the reports required of Church institutions, the threats against them, and measures and considerations, which made religious life almost impossible.

6. *The cantor career.* The obligatory elements of the career model are: the presentation of the values inherited from the predecessors and the family, the professional training, the job and the conditions for keeping it, and the retirement. In the cantors' stories, it was clearly highlighted by regarding their origin, in the family the main system of values was the religious one and the commitment to the Church. At the same time, it was characteristic for the parents to have functions or to be representatives of the local confessional communities: shrine, elder, curator or cantor. The similarities among the reasons for choosing a cantor career were usually the interest that appeared since childhood, the "call" was made on the basis of musical talent, voice and religious education. Access to a musical instrument was determined by external factors, depending on circumstances and possibilities. The musical repertoire of the religion has been acquired since childhood, and the possibilities of professional training have traveled different paths in the three religions. Practicing the occupation and working conditions have always been determined by the opportunities, needs and circumstances of the local community, but the evaluation of performance in communion has been shaped by the personality of the cantor. The salary of a cantor was not enough to earn a living, so either he completed his basic position as a singer with a secondary job, or the cantor was the secondary to another main job. The singer,

first of all, had to listen the demands of the priest. This was followed by the observance of the presbyter instructions or of the church council. The cantors chose different strategies according to their personality to resolve the internal tensions caused especially by the expectations of the council or the priest, and the compromises were tacit precisely to keep the good reputation of the church. However, the cantors were left with a lot of bitterness and frustration. In reality, the retirement was only formal, because many parishes had struggled with the lack of cantors, so the retired cantors continued to work in the same way as before. Those who had worked elsewhere full time devoted themselves more to singing after retirement. They practiced singing as long as their physical strength allowed, only then they left if a younger cantor appeared. Because of they worked at the weekend, without free time they could not afford a vast social network, they kept in touch only with the close family and possibly with close relatives. Those cantors who had the opportunity to study religious music in an organized, institutional form (Roman Catholics, Unitarians), had a wider social network, especially priest wives, and for peasant cantors this network was limited only to the local communion or from the surroundings.

7. *The cantor status and role circle of cantors.* The status of cantor and the role circle was influenced and shaped by the macro- and micro dimensional factors of history. According to the religious traditions of the religions, the characteristics of the rite and the function in the liturgy, we can conclude that the status of cantor was ensured in the same religious doctrinal framework as before the period of nationalization. On the other hand, due to the conditions created by the economic, political and social situation of the period, as well as the modernization processes, the role circle of cantors, as the dynamic side of the statute, managed to develop various functional models. Based on interviews, life stories of cantors, in my interpretation the status of Roman Catholic cantor's reflects a stability deeply rooted in religious traditions, and has been more resistant to the processes of historical change than the status of researched cantors in Reformed or Unitarian Churches. As a result of nationalization, Protestant cults after 1948 failed to lay the groundwork for institutional frameworks for the professional training of cantors, thus diversifying into many categories of singers, which were not recognized and established even after 1989. In general, without possibilities of instruction and education, without social appreciation Transylvanian Hungarian cantors from this period undertook this service despite of all and despite of knowledge that being Christian was a stigmatized state.

Keywords: cantor status, role and competences of cantors, cantors communion, cantor individuality and personality, cantor career, church singers, peasant singers, priest's wives singers, teachers, cantor-teachers, religiosity, biographical discourse, archival memory , memory and historical memory.