

## Minority Culture

*Erika Rácz***The development  
of church matters in the settlements  
along River Mura till 1945**

A group of Croatians are living in County Zala along the River Mura in Hungary. There are only seven villages left: Fityeház, Molnári, Murakeresztúr (earlier Keresztúr and Kollátszeg), Petrivente, Semjénháza, Tótszentmárton, Tótszerdahely; some of the Croatian speakers live in Nagykanizsa and Letenye, altogether about 8,000 persons speaking the so-called kaj-Croatian dialect.

The Croats along the River Mura have preserved their mother tongue but assimilation – the common fate of minorities reached them too.

There are two important factors hastening or slowing down assimilation: the church and schools – these play a role separately or together in the preservation or giving up the mother tongue; in most of the villages of the region there were Roman Catholic elementary schools; the local parish priest was responsible for the overseeing the instruction as well as the management of the schools.

Almost 100% of the population of these villages follow the Roman Catholic faith. Till the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. the region belonged to the Zagreb diocese. The bishops of Zagreb regarded it their important duty to send priests with Croatian mother tongue to the area; thus there usually were Croatian priests who had studied in Zagreb. It was only Tótszentmárton which had a church; Molnári, Tótszerdahely, Petrivente and Semjénháza were the filials of Tótszentmárton; Fityeház that of Szepetnek (at the time its population overwhelmingly Croatian); Kollátszeg and Keresztúr belonged to Légrád across the River Mura.

In 1777 the Szombathely diocese was founded. This became a turning point in the assimilation of the Croats living along the River Mura. The villages of the region were allotted to Hungarian dioceses; to make things worse it meant this divided the Croats in two groups. The subversion of the Croatian language in church services also began. The attempts at Magyarizing were carried out by different methods. In 1883 the bishop of Veszprém wrote a letter to the parish priest of Keresztúr in which he reproached him for the neglect of education in the village, 'because the

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pupils are not Magyarized, they do not know anything of any subject.'<sup>1</sup> Three letters of the bishop of Szombathely, dated at different times dealt with the use of the Croatian language. All three were addressed to the parish priest of Tótszentmárton. The first, dated in 1909: 'Regarding that the congregation of Tótszentmárton asked for a chaplain speaking Hungarian in the case they are unable to employ an assistant minister speaking Croatian because the majority of the congregation speaks and understands Hungarian, the language of preaching and service is going to be Hungarian.'<sup>2</sup> The second letter was written in 1932: 'My son in Christ, I have learned that that the schoolmaster of Tótszentmárton has translated the Croatian church songs into Hungarian and this is the way he has them sung in church. If this is true, I disagree with it; it would cause untoward excitement among the people. Church singing is the last where any changes can be made. If they want to sing in Hungarian it can be introduced at the mass for young people and then only step by step...'<sup>3</sup> The third letter was written on the same topic also in 1939: 'I appeal to your human wisdom as pastor in finding the best solution for the use of language during services. There are two lines: not hurting their feelings about their language and not letting obstruct Magyarization.'<sup>4</sup>

The use of the Croatian language was gradually ousted from church services and other church functions. How did this happen at the various parishes?

In 1830, in the protocol of the Canonica Visitation of Tótszentmárton contains a list of books where one was entitled 'Capucini Croatici'<sup>5</sup>. The original protocol written in Latin was translated into Hungarian in *Historia Domus*. In the translation the book was referred to as 'István Capucinus: Croatian homilies'. In 1866 and 1867 there was a gospel in Croatian<sup>6</sup> in the inventory of the Keresztúr 'Mother church and Abbey' (the church in the village was built around 1810), in 1893 the book was not any more in the inventory; there were only Latin, German and Hungarian books in the possession of the parish. The 29<sup>th</sup> August 1896 meeting of the Tótszentmárton school board dealt with the advertisement for the position of the

<sup>1</sup> Murakeresztúr, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>2</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office 2955/1909.

<sup>3</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office, letter No. 2119/1932

<sup>4</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office, letter No. 2150/1932

<sup>5</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>6</sup> Murakeresztúr, Archive of the Parish office

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schoolmaster: 'a competition should be advertised for the position in Tótszentmárton ... the tasks of the cantor are to be carried out in Croatian.'<sup>7</sup> Béla Terbók schoolmaster won it; in the agreement about his fees it was noted that the knowledge of the Croatian language was necessary in his work as a cantor.<sup>8</sup> On the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1899 the duties of the bell-ringer was described in the kaj-Croatian dialect.<sup>9</sup> It was extended in 1904 with the Croatian description left unchanged.<sup>10</sup>

Between 1906 and 1941 the church authorities asked the local parish priests to fill in questionnaires about the situation in the Catholic parishes. Some of the questions were about the nationality language:

- what language was used for the sermons?
- in what language was the congregation singing?
- what language was used in other church functions:

The 1908 questionnaire filled in at Murakeresztúr stated that 'The language of the sermon is Hungarian, only the gospel is read in the local dialect on Sundays and holydays. During the service the congregation sings in Hungarian. Other church functions are in Hungarian'.<sup>11</sup> According to the data for 1917 only Hungarian was used.<sup>12</sup> In Tótszentmárton 'the sermon is in Croatian, the congregation sings in Croatian during the service, during other church functions the use of the Croatian language is general' between 1906 and 1913.<sup>13</sup> This was still the situation in 1917 and 1932 too.<sup>14</sup> In 1940 the language of the sermon was Hungarian, the singing both in Hungarian and Croatian, during other church functions, e.g. funerals both Hungarian and Croatian was in use.<sup>15</sup> At Tótszerdahely the sermon was in Hungarian, the congregation sang in Hungarian and Croatian in 1941.<sup>16</sup> In 1943 the bishop of the Szombathely diocese pro-

<sup>7</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>8</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>9</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>10</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>11</sup> Murakeresztúr, Archive of the Parish office, Questionnaire for the Catholic priests for the year 1908.

<sup>12</sup> Murakeresztúr, Archive of the Parish office, Questionnaire for the Catholic priests for the year 1917.

<sup>13</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office, Questionnaire for the Catholic priests

<sup>14</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office, Questionnaire for the Catholic priests for the year 1917.

<sup>15</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>16</sup> Tótszerdahely, Archive of the Parish office 6/1942.

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vided data for the Minister of Religion and Education in aid of the 'elaboration of the ethnic past' based on the reports of the parish priests of the region. According to the data from Tótszentmárton, Tótszerdahely and Szepetnek (Bajcsa – still a settlement with Croatian majority, belonged to Szepetnek) in 1943: In Tótszentmárton the singing was Croatian during low mass and in Hungarian during high mass, the priest preached in Hungarian. In the village 'there is no nationality problem at present, the local population speaks both Hungarian and Croatian.' Tótszerdahely had its parish since 1930. According to the report the language of the services was Hungarian at the time of the inquiry, before the curacy it was sometimes Hungarian, sometimes Croatian. In 1943 Magyarization became characteristic of the village. In Szepetnek the language of the service was Croatian till the 1880s (earlier the inhabitants of the village were Croat speakers). The inhabitants of Bajcsa, belonging to the parish can speak Hungarian well. 'The older people speak Croatian at home but the younger generation knows Hungarian better than Croatian and speaks almost exclusively Hungarian. The quick Magyarization is due to the work of the school with Hungarian as its language of instruction.'<sup>17</sup>

The language of religious instruction was Hungarian in every village. May be it was Croatian in Tótszentmárton and Tótszerdahely for a while because a report about the school year of 1862/62 states that the language of teaching in the schools of the two villages was Hungarian as well Croatian.<sup>18</sup> Since 1908 the language of religious instruction was Hungarian in both places.<sup>19</sup> In 1935 the parish priest of Tótszerdahely asked the bishop of Szombathely to allow Mária Bondor teacher to instruct first graders in religion 'because their not knowing Hungarian religion cannot be explained to them, only memorization can be expected.'<sup>20</sup> The bishop assigned the task to Mária Bondor and warned the priest that 'religious instruction means the explanation of the material and not making the children memorize it. Explanation should be in the mother tongue of the children.'<sup>21</sup> The county meeting of Zala planned the building of a church in Tótszerdahely in 1938. The meeting addressed a decision for approval to the Minister of Interior. In it they explained the request 'Tót-

<sup>17</sup> Szombathely, Archive of the bishopric, Acta Cancellariae 1000/43.

<sup>18</sup> Archives of County Zala, school inspector reports 1863.

<sup>19</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office, statistical report of schools

<sup>20</sup> Tótszerdahely, Archive of the Parish office 7/1935

<sup>21</sup> Tótszerdahely, Archive of the Parish office 1266/1935.

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szerdahely lies directly by the border drawn by the treaty of Trianon, thus it is about the benefit of the Croats on their way to Magyarization, the church will not only help them but also it is in the interest of the Church and the nation. The Croatian speaking congregation can see how the Yugoslavs are building over the border and they themselves have not even their church.<sup>22</sup> In 1938 the deputy parish priest of Tótszentmárton wrote a letter to the presidency of religious funds of the Ministry of Religion and Education asking for help for building a chapel in Semjénháza. He was of the opinion that the inhabitants of Semjénháza deserved assistance because 'though most of them have Croatian as their mother tongue they decided that in their school the instruction should be completely in Hungarian.'<sup>23</sup> In 1939 the deputy parish priest of Tótszentmárton turned to the management of the publishing house Szent István Társaság for a donation of religious books in Hungarian for the local Roman Catholic elementary school, explaining that 'though all the members of the congregation have Croatian as their mother tongue, following their own request, the school instructions are completely in Hungarian thus they deserve the help from the Szt. István Társulat.'<sup>24</sup>

The church has a decisive role in the use of the minority language as is reflected by the statistics:

Date	Settlement	Number of Inhabitants	Declared to be Croatian speaker (%)
1881	Bajcsa	405	72.0
	Murakeresztúr	1,230	81.0
1941	Bajcsa	550	4.5
	Murakeresztúr	2,235	17.0 <sup>25</sup>

The village of Bajcsa was the filia of the Hungarian parish. In Murakeresztúr Géza Csóthy (earlier Kaufmann) was abbot for 42 years, he was

<sup>22</sup> Tótszerdahely, Archive of the Parish office 23082/1938

<sup>23</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office, 1938

<sup>24</sup> Tótszentmárton, Archive of the Parish office

<sup>25</sup> Sources: A magyar korona országaiban az 1881. év elején végrehajtott népszámlálás főbb eredményei megyék és községek szerint részletezve. II. köt. Budapest, 1882; Az 1941. évi népszámlálás. Demografiai adatok községek szerint. Budapest, 1947. [Census in Hungary in 1881. results by counties and villages]

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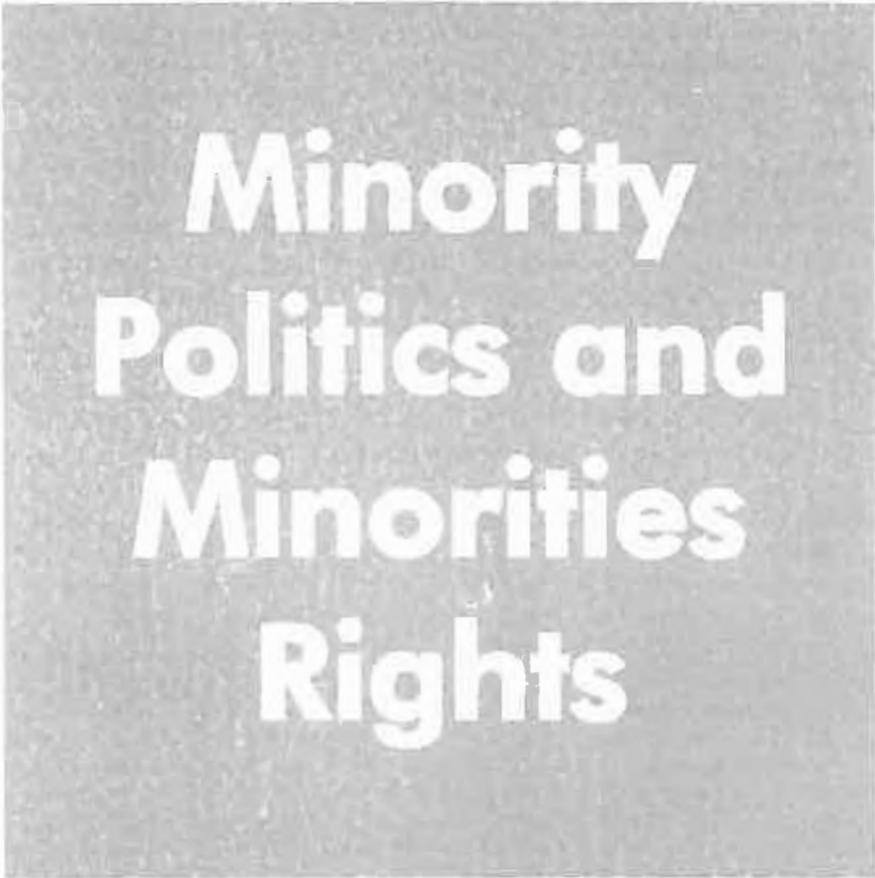
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'the uncompromised fighter for the common good and the Church.'<sup>26</sup> It must be added that the church was only one of the factors of assimilation.

Religious affinity played an important role in the preservation of national identity in spite of the gradual withdrawal of the mother tongue. The sermon in the mother tongue, the communal singing in church was the only mental nutriment of the people. The prayer books published in Zagreb bought individually or the ones copied by hand were used to pray from at home and were cherished for generations.

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<sup>26</sup> Pfeiffer János: *A veszprémi egyházmegye történeli névtára (1630–1950)*. München: Grösses Gesellschaft, 1987 (= *Dissertationes Hungaricae ex historia Ecclesiae*, 8). 353. [The historical register of the diocese of Veszprém 1630-1950].



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