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Family and Emotions

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Family and Emotions

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Special Editor of the Thematic Issue

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Loving Husbands, Caring Fathers, Glorious Ancestors: Male Family Roles in Early Modern Transylvania*

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The study examines how a Transylvanian nobleman, Gáspár Kornis of Göncruszka (1641–1683), created a narrative concerning four generations of his family. Though in his memoir, a patrilineal lineage scheme dominates, a close reading of scattered family documents also provides insights into the practices of horizontal bonding among relatives. The letters and last wills reflect the life cycle changes and represent emotional relationships among family members. By considering the act of writing as an emotional practice, the essay tests the claims of the memoir with the help of other archival and extratextual sources. What were the narrated roles of heroized protagonists, and what were the everyday duties of noble heads of family in the early modern period? The study depicts the transformations of the family network during crisis situations in the Transylvanian Principality.

Keywords: male family roles, kinship networks, egodocument, generational memory, orphanhood, widowhood, seventeenth-century Transylvania

This study presents a case study of family roles for men in the early modern era, drawing on the example of one of the most prestigious families in the Principality of Transylvania, the Kornis family of Göncruszka. At the time when the Kornis family was prominent, strong, dominant heads of families controlled the family networks across Europe. However, the uniqueness of the history of the Kornis family lies not in the internal system of relations of the micro-community, but in the intricate web of the relationship between the family and historical background of the region. The family was pro-Habsburg and Catholic, so it maneuvered as part of a political and religious minority in a principality with a protestant majority which itself was balanced between the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires. The Kornis house had to endure a series of political attacks, exile, and imprisonment. In the first decade of the early seventeenth century, all

* In my pursuit of the research on which this article is based, I enjoyed the support of the Bolyai Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Momentum “Integrating Families” Research Group.

the male members of the family were persecuted for political reasons; three of them—the father and two of his sons—fell victim to intrigues.

I interpret the family as a network of relatives and emotionally connected individuals who are able to function effectively for the benefit of family members through coordinated political and economic strategies. With the help of scarce sources scattered in the Kornis family's preserved fond in Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca, Romania) and other family archives, I seek not only the answer to how men behaved as husbands and fathers and what tasks they performed as heads of families, but the case of the Kornis house also shows what happened to this individual family in the event of the murder of the head of the family and the loss of the property that would have ensured the physical survival of the family. How was the family network transformed with the loss or absence of the head of the family? Who would play the role of head of the family in such cases, and how? What kinds of bargaining processes, both in the language of power and emotions, accompanied this? What strategies, both usual and exceptional, did the head of the family use when the continuity of the lineage was compromised? These are among the questions to which I seek answers.

The Memoir of Gáspár Kornis: The “Ancestral Gallery” of the Patrilinear Line

In his short memoir, Gáspár Kornis of Göncruszka (1641–1683) presents the history of the Kornis house, beginning with his great-grandfather, also named Gáspár, and tracing the family through the patrilinear line.¹ The term “house” in the language at the time referred to the clan, the consanguineous community of brothers from one male ancestor; in this ego document, the Transylvanian branch of the Kornis brothers, whose common ancestor was the great-grandfather.² Gáspár Kornis emphasizes the public significance of the family in the portraits he offers of the heads of the families, while the microenvironments of the protagonists, the everyday family environment, the household (women and children, horizontal relationships), remain obscure. The memoir is a good

1 ANR-DJC Family fond of Kornis de Göncruszka, inv. no. 131. Memoir of Gáspár Kornis. Editions: Szilágyi, “Kornis Gáspár”; Makkai, *Haldokló Erdély*, 199–215; Bitskey, *Magyar emlékirók*, 322–42. I used the original source in my study.

2 Fügedy, *Az Elefánthyak*, 21–25.

example of the patriarchal family scheme, in which the head of the family is the dominant and representative member.³

Early modern patriarchal male identity was closely linked to the role of the family head.⁴ Gáspár Kornis put his thoughts on paper as the head of his family, keeping in mind its destiny as he envisioned it and the prosperity of his descendants. The creation of the work written between 1678 and 1683 was given concrete relevance by the positive and negative changes that took place in his private life. It was a joyous event for him that, having been widowed after his previous long, childless marriage, he now had children from his second marriage.⁵ The author's social place corresponded to the dominant model of male identity at the time: mature adult, husband, father, and member of the social elite. Gáspár Kornis offered a narrative which dwelt on the alleged powers and responsibilities of his predecessors as heads of the family while at the same time legitimizing his own role and place. His intention to create a family of descent can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture. In the glorious “ancestral gallery” of its predecessors, he depicts heroes who had worked to the last drop for their nation and family. Miklós Esterházy also used visual depictions of his living and deceased family members in accordance with his intention to found a dynasty when laying the foundations for a family portrait gallery.⁶

Over the course of four generations, generational memory as an oral tradition fades as it passes away.⁷ By offering a narrative of the grandfather's family past dating back to the time of his great-grandfather, Kornis's work brought to life a collective memory tradition, a community of memory, which became an essential element of family identity after his death.⁸ The first figure summoned

3 Werbőczy, *Hármaskönyve*, 1. rész 112. cím. 1. On the patriarchal family scheme, see Kaser, “Family”; Hendrix, “Masculinity”; Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*. On the elder Gáspár and his sons, Boldizsár and Zsigmond, see Orgona, *Unikornisok*. On the memoir writer Gáspár, see Gábor, “Emlékezés”; Gábor, “Köszöntés a Krímből”; T. Orgona, “Csalárd mesterség.”

4 Shepard, “From Anxious Patriarchs.”

5 He married the daughter of Count István Csáky, the 15-year-old Mária Klára Csáky. ANR-DJC Kornis, inv. no. 131. Memoir of Gáspár Kornis, 21r–21v; Bártfai Szabó, *Oklevéltár*, 615, 751–58.

6 Erdélyi, “Inheritance and Emotions.”

7 Following Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Jan Assmann coined the concept of communicative memory for the recent past, a typical variety of which is the generational memory of recent events, the memories of three to four generations. The memory of one generation adheres to the carrier group. It is created over time, and over time (more precisely, as those who bear it pass away), it fades, giving place to new carriers. Assmann, *A kulturális emlékezet*, 49–60, 133–46; Halbwachs et al., *La mémoire collective*, 143–92; Nora, *Emlékezet és történelem között*.

8 The philosophical-social-psychological concepts of memory and oblivion, historical knowledge, experience, and the ability to narrate traumas are also used in literary and historical studies. Kónya et al.,

in his work is the founder of the Transylvanian branch of the noble family of the same name from Abaúj County, who raised the family to the top ranks of the Transylvanian elite. In the narrative from the elder Gáspár to the younger Gáspár, from great-grandfather to great-grandson, the intention seems to have been to draw a parallel: much as his ancestor had done through good marriages and skillful policies, by crafting a narrative of the family history, the narrator is at the service of the Kornis house and will become a paragon to his successors.

The Glorious Ancestor

The history of the Kornis family in Transylvania began with a good marriage. The nobleman of Abaúj County, the elder Gáspár Kornis (c. 1546–1601), married Ilona, the only daughter of and heiress to Imre Dolhay, the greatest landowner of Máramaros County (Maramureș, Romania). The advantageous marriage, combined with Gáspár's talent, resulted in a brilliant career. As a prestigious landowner in Partium (a region in the Hungarian Kingdom to the immediate west of Transylvania), Gáspár became the lord lieutenant of Máramaros County, the captain of Huszt (today Khust, Ukraine) Castle, and a member of the princely council. Four girls and one boy were born to the first marriage who survived to adulthood. Two sons were born to his marriage to Erzsébet Tholdi of Bihar, who was a daughter of an old landowner family in Partium. Gáspár then became one of the largest landowners of Transylvania with his third marriage to Anna Horváth of Zaránd, the widow of Ferenc Geszthy, general of Transylvania.

Gáspár the Elder is the first hero of the memoir of the great-grandson of the same given name. According to the memoir, he “did a lot of memorable things for his homeland.” The text highlights only two things from his career: one was that he was Captain of the castle of Huszt, and the other was that, because of his diplomatic efforts, King Rudolph sent General Giorgio Basta to help against Michael the Brave, who ruled Transylvania.⁹ The latter is not correct. Michael, the voivode of Wallachia, who occupied Transylvania, sent Gáspár to the king in August 1600,¹⁰ but although the legation immediately preceded the battle at Miriszló (Mirăslău, Romania) on September 18, it had no causal connection with

Kollektív, társas, társadalmi; Balázs and Gábor, *Emlékezet és devóció*; Gyáni, *Az elveszthető múlt*; Keszei and Bögre, *Hebly, identitás, emlékezet*; Gyáni, *A történelem mint emlék(mű)*.

9 ANR-DJC Kornis, inv. no. 131. Memoir of Gáspár Kornis, 13v.

10 Szádeczky, *Erdély és Mihály vajda*, 171–75.

it.¹¹ By the erroneous logic of the “post hoc ergo propter hoc,” Gáspár (the author of the memoir) presents his great-grandfather to his descendants as an ideal patriot who fought for his nation.

The other written sources on the role of Gáspár as head of the family help explain why his great-grandson called him “of blessed memory.” He chose a new homeland, thus opening a new Transylvanian branch in the line of the Kornis family. He thus gained a foothold in the principality and, as a consequence of the gratitude shown by the Báthory princes for the services he performed, he elevated his descendants from the nobility of Abaúj county to the Transylvanian elite. He based his family’s wellbeing on a considerable stock of possessions which he acquired partly through his services and partly through his marriages. He carefully laid down the order of inheritance for his sons and daughters by taking care to preclude any subsequent family strife or litigation. Following the political attitude of their father, Gáspár’s sons also inherited his court network. The great-grandfather gave his children a Catholic education and denominational guidance. His descendants became the pillars of the Catholic Church in the principality.¹² As a family head, he also proactively organized his sons’ marriage strategy. As a result of the three marriages, the family’s network of relatives and the size of the estates concentrated in the hands of the family members increased, both in Transylvania and in the Kingdom of Hungary.

Gáspár became a supporter of the Viennese court who cherished the dream of the restoration of a unified Kingdom of Hungary, though he later fell victim to this allegiance. The mercenaries of the Romanian voivode Michael killed the pro-Habsburg Gáspár. Gáspár had thought the survival of the Transylvanian branch to be assured.¹³ He had no idea that two of his sons’ marriages would be childless, nor could he have known that the offspring of the third son would grow up without their father.

The Martyr Grandfather

After the great-grandfather, Boldizsár (c. 1577–1610), the senior son from the second marriage of the elder Gáspár, plays an important role in the memoir. Boldizsár married Katalin Keresztúry in the summer of 1600. Katalin was the only daughter of Kristóf Keresztúry, princely councilor and Captain of Kővár.

11 Basta, united with the Transylvanians and won a victory against voivode Michael at Miriszló.

12 Bailey, “Transferring Family Values,” 174–98.

13 T. Orgona, *Unikornisok*, 104–15.

According to contemporary reports, her dowry came to an impressive total of one hundred thousand forints. She inherited the Szentbenedek (Mănăstirea, Romania) Castle in Belső-Szolnok County, a famous specimen of Transylvanian Renaissance architecture.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the correspondence between the spouses did not survive. Thus, the two letters that Boldizsár wrote to his mother-in-law, Ilona Kőrösy, widow of Kristóf Keresztúry, are especially valuable.

Ilona Kőrösy took control of the estates after the death of her husband in 1599. She was also responsible for finding a husband for her only daughter. Boldizsár's first letter, dated January 22, 1600, provides information on the latter subject.¹⁵ The letter concerns the organization of the proposal, possibly the engagement, which may have been linked to two events.¹⁶ The marriage has already been agreed on between the two parties, as the prospective husband uses the term "my well-wisher lady, my beloved mother." The terms "my lady mother, my lord father" were the terms usually used by a man at the time when he wanted to address his spouse's parents.¹⁷ With this intimate form of address, Boldizsár referred to his future mother-in-law and to the planned family relationship, and using the formulae of the day, he wished her a happy, long life "with all those whom she wishes." The latter, enigmatic reference may even refer to the betrothed girl, about whom, apart from this, there is not a single word in the letter. In keeping with contemporary social norms, the text is limited to the practical details of the proposal. As usual, the groom would have set off accompanied by noble gentlemen, but they were unable to arrive at the agreed time, Tuesday, due to the prevailing conditions because of the war, so he asked the widow to wait until Sunday evening, together with the relatives who had gathered.

Although in the early modern era, the genres of fiction provided the most ample room for the expression of emotions, in this strictly practical text we observe figures of rhetoric which suggest a whole range of heightened emotions on the part of the young man. Primarily, he expresses his concern that he does not fulfill the bride's family's expectations, so the widow, he fears, will prejudice the bride against him or possibly prompt her to change her mind: "Maybe Your Grace could judge me, or could say me a shaky man." In his request, addressed

14 Radibrad Alvisi to Ungnad. In Alba Iulia, 31 July, 1600. Szádeczky, *Erdély és Mihály vajda*, 550; Horn et al., *Politika és házasság*, 192; Biró and Boros, *Erdélyi katolikus nagyok*, 28–31; Lázár, *Erdély*, 34.

15 Boldizsár Kornis to Ilona Kőrösy. In Radnót, January 22, 1600. ANR-DJC Colecția generală

16 Weichart, *Keresztelő, házasság és temetés*, 14–30; Szabó, "Betrothal and Wedding."

17 Jankovics and Kőszeghy, "Szeretők és házastársak."

nominally to the bride's mother but actually to the entire family, he expresses the desire to get to know of his future relatives: "I desire above everything the acquaintance of their graces." He uses exaggeration to emphasize his wish: "it's imperative to wait for us, your grace," "above all I beg your grace." He assures his future mother-in-law of his commitment to her: "Whatever I could do, believe your grace that I would be your grace's willing servant." Last but not least, he expresses his feelings for the bride with the following metaphor: "God knows I would fly, if I could, which I know your grace also would believe."¹⁸

After the assassination of Boldizsár's father, Boldizsár took over as the head of the family. Although he was not the oldest brother, he still managed to expand his power horizontally. In the patriarchal family, the principle of seniority prevailed, but just as the firstborn was not distinguished in the inheritance of property, the principle of equal inheritance was followed according to the law, so in the transfer of authority, it was not only age that mattered, but also suitability for the position of leadership.¹⁹ In the present case, the sources do not permit us to draw a nuanced picture of the power and emotional relations between the brothers, but the relationships among them were marked by both the ability to unite and rivalry and jealousy.²⁰

In Transylvania, the period marked by the rule of general Basta (from the summer of 1602 to the autumn of 1604) were calm, prosperous years for Boldizsár Kornis and his family. The head of the family became one of the most prominent politicians of the principality. He became the general of the Transylvanian armies and the lord lieutenant of Belső-Szolnok county. The short storm of this sunny period came in the spring of 1603, when Mózes Székely launched an attack. Boldizsár had his family flee to the castle in Görgény, and he himself, as the general of the country, confronted the claimant to the throne at Basta's side. The other letter to his mother-in-law, which was written at the time, survived in the archives of the Kornis family. In the letter, Boldizsár, who was away and involved in the campaign, informed his mother-in-law, whom

18 Boldizsár Kornis to Ilona Kőrösy. In Radnót, 22 January, 1600. ANR-DJC, Colecția generală.

19 Erdélyi: "Inheritance and Emotions."

20 The rivalry between György and Boldizsár is indicated by the missile in which the latter, as a member of the General Governing Council of Basta, who ruled Transylvania, asked Emperor Rudolf to exclude his half-brother from his paternal inheritance because he had sided with Bocskai, thereby sinning infidelity. (Request of Boldizsár Kornis to Emperor Rudolf, 17 August 1604. MTA KK Kornis II. 736–739.) However, the division between the half-brothers could only be temporary. As the property affairs between the three of them prove, they formed a strong community of interests and later acted together to achieve their common religious and political goals. See also Bastress-Dukehart: "Family, Property, and Feeling."

he addresses as “my lady my mother in love,” of his health and the military movements. The main motive for writing the letter seems to have been his concern for the fate of the goods and belongings evacuated from Transylvania. He shared his fears with Ilona Kőrösy, the head of the women’s household that remained at home, that if their belongings were taken out of the Szatmár (Satu Mare, Romania) castle, which was full of German guards, they would fall prey to robbing armies. As a good owner, Boldizsár even writes about the importance of ventilation in the spring and cleaning the clothes stored in the chest: “The clothes are now all blown by the wind, we clean them and don them on Monday, no damage has been put them up yet.”²¹

During the Bocskai uprising (1604–1605), Boldizsár lived in exile in Prague, away from his family, as a political refugee. During his absence, he took care of his loved ones by assigning a reliable male supporter to his mother’s household in the person of Zsigmond Sarmasághy, a Catholic nobleman who was involved in family communication.²² The relationship between the widow and the friend reflects the dynamics of male-female cooperation. The good friend managed property matters, and he reassured the worried woman that the passing army had done little damage to the vineyard and that the crops had already been harvested. During his stay in Kolozsvár, he collected information about István Bocskai’s plans and the movement of the troops, and he reported on all this in detail.

From a decade of marriage between Boldizsár and Katalin, only the letters described above, addressed to Ilona Kőrösy (the mother-in-law), have survived. Unfortunately, we do not have direct data on the age of the wife, but we assume that, like aristocratic coevals, Katalin married at the age of 14 or 15, so she was young and inexperienced.²³ Because of the burden of expecting and having children, it was not she but her mother who was at the top of the hierarchy in

21 Boldizsár Kornis to Ilona Kőrösy. In Rozsály, 23 May, 1603. ANR-DJC Kornis, inv. no. 250. no. 6.

22 Zsigmond Sarmasághy of Kövesd was a humanist Catholic clerk. Through his marriage to Borbála Füzy, the widow of István Jósika, who was related to the Báthory family, he acquired the right to manage the most important estate of the county of Torda and the title of Lord Lieutenant of Torda County. In 1604, he was arrested by general Basta on charges of promoting the principality of Gábor Bethlen. During his five-month captivity, Boldizsár Kornis was his main patron and the person who provided the most support for Sarmasághy’s wife in managing property issues. Sarmasághy was released from captivity with the help of Boldizsár Kornis. Sarmasághy sided with István Bocskai in October 1604, thus the Kornis family also found a helper on the enemy side. T. Orgona, *Unikornisok*, 129–30; Lázár, *Erdély főispánjai*, 109–12; Dáné, “A Torda vármegyei elit.”

23 Péter, *Házasság*, 56–58.

the home. Because of her age and her authority, Ilona Kőrösi was, presumably, the one who set the direction for the days, helping her son-in-law manage the home and the estate.

Although it was completely common for the aristocrat husbands in the early modern era to be at home relatively infrequently, as a head of the family, Boldizsár may have felt excluded when his wife had a child in the autumn of 1604 and he didn't remain at home and couldn't see the child.²⁴ The existence of several children who survived to adulthood is indicated by the charter received from King Rudolph in 1606 in recognition of his services to the Holy Crown, his captivity, and his exile.²⁵

After several months of absence, Boldizsár returned home to his family in the summer of 1606 with an amnesty granted in accordance with the treaty of Vienna. Giovanni Argenti, the Jesuit rector of Kolozsvár, who himself had been expelled from Transylvania, captured the scene of family reunification that took place in Nagybánya (today Baia Mare, Romania): the husband, wife and mother-in-law celebrated the reunion with holy communion.²⁶ Once the fate of the family seemed to be consolidated, we have gaps in knowledge about the birth of three children. We know from a later source, the statement made by Katalin Keresztúry (Boldizsár's widow) in 1612 in front of the Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia) chapter, that Ferenc was born around 1607 and István was born in 1609.²⁷ Boldizsár's third child, Borbála, was born at the end of 1610, but by this time, Boldizsár had already been killed. In 1610, together with his half-brother György, he became involved in a conspiracy against Prince Gábor Báthory. During a raid in Szék (today Sic, Romania) on the night of March 24, the prince's men killed György and wounded and captured Boldizsár, who was beheaded in Kolozsvár six months later, in early July, after having confessed under torture.²⁸ The event came to be known as "the assassination in Szék." As

24 The letter of the imperial commissioner György Hoffmann to Ilona Kőrösi informed her of the birth of the child. Kolozsvár, November 1, 1604. Torma, "Okiratok," 258–59.

25 King Rudolph I to Boldizsár Kornis. Prague, August 26, 1606. ANR-DJC Kornis 644. no. 4; MNL OL A 57 Libri regii, vol. V. 769–770. Published Szilágyi, *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, vol. 5, 425–27.

26 Giovanni Argenti: De Societate Jesu 1606. Balázs et al., *Jezsuita okmánytár*, 597.

27 Veress, *A Göncz-Ruszkai Kornis család*, 4.

28 Miklós Nyári to his mother, Katalin Várday. Rozgony (today Rozhanovce, Slovakia), July 10, 1610. MNL OL P 707 Zichy XXXII. no. 10709; Liber annalium raptim scriptus per Michaellem Veyss. Gross, *Chroniken und Tagebücher*, 218; "Mikó Ferenc emlékirata," in Makkai, *Bethlen Gábor*, 42; "Segesvári Bálint krónikája," in Szabó, *Erdélyi Történelmi Adatok*, 175; "Borsos Tamás emlékirata," in Kemény and Nagyajtai, *Erdélyország Történelmi Tára*, 38.

noted above, Boldizsár's daughter Borbála was born after he had been executed. In a petition to King Matthias II in 1614, Katalin referred to her as a "filia posthuma."²⁹

Although the cause of the conflict between the prince and his Catholic councilors was primarily of a sectarian and political nature, it has been narrated in historical memory as the "conspiracy of cuckold husbands."³⁰ According to this story of jealousy, which spread later through the chronicles, on his way to the diet in Beszterce (today Bistrița, Romania), the prince visited Boldizsár's castle in Radnót (today Iernut, Romania), where Boldizsár's beautiful wife caught his eye. In the absence of direct evidence, unfortunately, it is not known how much truth there is in the story. Sources left by family members immediately after the events explain the conflict for political and confessional reasons.³¹

The story of the cuckolded husband appeared decades later in generational memory. The prominent figure in the memoir by the younger Gáspár Kornis is the grandfather, Boldizsár, around whom the author constructs a martyr's story: the hero fights for his family and for his country, fails, and is killed. In telling the story of Boldizsár, the memoir remains quiet on the confessional and political causes of the conflict, explaining what happened to the husband as the consequence of his righteous commitment to protecting his family and himself. According to this interpretation, the person of the grandfather does not appear as a fallen, executed politician, but as a hero, a martyr who defended his family and country. Later, it is also clear from the text that the property which was confiscated from Boldizsár would be recovered by the Kornis family, which would continue to flourish through the Boldizsár's descendants and preserve the glorious memory of its ancestor. On the other hand, Boldizsár's opponents (the prince and his evil advisers) die as a consequence of divine justice. Their riches are scattered, and nothing is left of them apart from the memory of their treachery. The crime committed against the grandparents' house and the family honor is characterized in the memoir as a grave sin against both divine and human law, and this characterization thus explains why the grandfather

29 Katalin Keresztúry to Mathias II, April 10, 1614. MNL OL E 249 1614. no. 18. fol. 45. X 9229, microfilm no. 31491.

30 Horn, "Őnagysága merénylői"; Horn, "Báthory Gábor"; T. Orgona, *Unikornisok*, 150–56.

31 Zsigmond Kornis to Bálint Lépes. Parnó (today Parchovany, Slovakia), October 11, 1610. MTA KK Kornis vol. II. fol. 866–869. Katalin Keresztúry's request. ÖStA Finanz- und Hofkammerarchiv. Hoffinanz Ungarn r. Nr. 101. Konv. January 1612. fol. 41. Katalin Keresztúry's will. Nagyszombat (today Trnava, Slovakia), January 31, 1618. MNL OL F1 Libri Regii vol. XII. 52–53b; MNL OL E 147 fasc. 1. fol. 60–61.

(Boldizsár) would have been justified in being part of a conspiracy against the prince and thus also preserve the reputation of the family.

With the death of Boldizsár, Katalin was left a pregnant widow with two little boys. Earlier, her mother, Ilona Kőrösy, had provided support during her son-in-law's absence, but the situation had changed. Katalin had to take care of her old, sick mother, and she became the head of the family. The burden on Katalin was exacerbated by other circumstances: her husband's execution involved the confiscation of properties, and Katalin's own estates were also confiscated. This meant a complete economic collapse. The family had to flee Transylvania. Katalin's brother-in-law, Zsigmond, who fortunately had not been present when the raid had been held in Szék, also fled to Hungary with his wife, Ilona Pálffy, on hearing the bad news.

The “Seedless” Uncle

The memoir of the younger Gárpár Kornis makes some mention of Zsigmond, Boldizsár's younger brother. Zsigmond fled to Hungary after the assassination in Szék. Then, after Gábor Bethlen ascended to the throne in Transylvania, Zsigmond returned, as he had been granted an amnesty. The memoir mentions the “many glorious duties” Zsigmond fulfilled for his “sweet homeland,” for which he received, exceptionally, esteem and rewards from the princes, Gábor Bethlen and György I Rákóczi. He recovered the Kornis estates and acquired other properties. The memoir highlights Zsigmond's important family role. As a “seedless man,” he left all his goods to his nephew, Ferenc, Boldizsár's son.³² Zsigmond is the first figure of whom the narrator had personal memories and who could preserve and pass on the family tradition.

The Transylvanian branch of the Kornis family survived through the descendants of Boldizsár. There were no children from the marriages of his brothers. Zsigmond's wife, Ilona Pálffy de Erdőd,³³ struggled with a chronic disease, epilepsy, which prevented her from living the usual life of an aristocrat woman.³⁴ She presumably spent most of her time in the castle in Papmező (today Câmpani de Pomezou, Romania). The sources contain very little data concerning her life. Some letters to Zsigmond mention her: “I offer my services

32 ANR-DJC Kornis, inv. no. 131. Memoir of Gáspár Kornis, 15r.

33 Ilona Pálffy de Erdőd (†1637) was István Pálffy's daughter and Miklós Pálffy's (1552–1600) niece.

34 Gábor Perneszy to Zsigmond Forgách, July 22–23, 1616. Szilágyi, *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, vol. 7, 370.

to my aunt.”³⁵ When her husband mentions her in his letters, he almost always writes of her illness: “I would be as I would be, but my poor wife is still in that condition.”³⁶ Although we do not have data indicating that she was ever expecting or gave birth to a child, she may have faced additional difficulties carrying a pregnancy due to her illness.

The head of the family was responsible for the posterity of the family name, so it is not surprising that Zsigmond struggled with the thought of his childless marriage.³⁷ According to the traditional view, disease was a punishment from God. Zsigmond also regarded their situation as a punishment, and he referred to his wife’s condition as a “cross” and “God’s grave whip.”³⁸ In his letters, he suggests that he viewed himself as the sinner on whom punishment was being visited, and he expresses a sense of guilt: “It is above all bitter that I have sinned and my beloved wife is whipped instead of me.”³⁹ A passage from another letter suggests that he identified emotionally with his wife, who was experiencing mental and physical pain, a suffering he described as “so bitter that it surpassed death in many ways.”⁴⁰

Pregnancy, especially in the first months, may increase the risk of epileptic seizures. Pregnancies, naturally associated with marriage, may have exacerbated the wife’s condition and increased the husband’s sense of guilt. Zsigmond nourished his hopes of having an heir for a long time. After caring for Ilona conscientiously and devotedly for four decades, he became a widower at the age of 57 and then considered his chances of remarriage. At the time, he no longer believed he had much chance of having offspring, but he was still tempted by an image of a caring wife who would tend to the tasks of his everyday life.⁴¹ Finally, he gave up the intention to remarry and devoted his attention to his brother’s orphaned children.

35 Pál Pálffy to Zsigmond Kornis, Pozsony, November 7, 1635. MTA KK Kornis vol. II. fol. 1245.

36 Zsigmond Kornis to Pál Bornemisza, Deszni (today Dezna, Romania), September 14, 1635. MNL OL R 210 item 5. no. 170.

37 Oren-Magidor, *Infertility*; Péter, “A gyermekek,” 19–20.

38 In her will, Katalin Széchy also uses the terms “whip of God” and “cross” as an explanation for her husband’s infertility. Horn, “Nemesasszonyok,” 325–46.

39 Zsigmond Kornis to Pál Bornemisza, Papmező, August 25, 1627. ANR-DJC *Colecția József Kemény*, no. 1019.

40 Zsigmond Kornis to György Apafi, Belényes (today Beiuș, Romania), August 11, 1633. ANR-DJC *Colecția József Kemény*, no. 1018.

41 István Bethlen to Zsigmond Kornis, Huszt, March 6, 1638. MNL OL, F 12, fasc. 9. no. 6.; Zsigmond Kornis to Pál Bornemisza, Deszni, October 17, 1638. ANR-DJC *Colecția József Kemény*, no. 1019.

The strengthening of the relationship between the uncle and the nephews and niece naturally followed from the Zsigmond's "seedlessness" and the fact that Boldizsár's children were left half-orphans. The role of surrogate father strengthened the uncle's place as head of the family, and his role as guardian promised additional financial benefits. In the summer of 1613, when he was still in exile in Hungary, he took responsibility for Boldizsár's family and seized the right to control them and their properties. In the spring of 1614, after Prince Gábor Bethlen, hoping for political gain by winning the sympathies of the pro-Habsburg Catholic lord, had recalled Zsigmond to Transylvania, Zsigmond wrote a letter to the Transylvanian parliament in which he asked for the settlement of the situation of "my poor little uneducated, orphaned cousins, children of my poor lord, Boldizsár Kornis."⁴²

After the parliament abolished the proscription against the exiles, Zsigmond settled with his wife, his sister-in-law, and the three half-orphaned children on what had been Boldizsár's estate in Radnót. The ambivalent relationship between the widow and her brother-in-law was reflected in the fact that the castle and estate in Radnót (the property of Boldizsár which had been confiscated) was acquired by Zsigmond not for Boldizsár's children but for himself. Zsigmond did not completely exclude the widow and children, but in the absence of any legal foundation for a claim, Katalin could live "only thanks to the good will of Zsigmond, without any foundations."⁴³ A conflict of interest developed between the two of them. Zsigmond sought to reclaim and unite all the confiscated Kornis estates in his hands, including the former possessions of his two dead brothers. He thus placed Boldizsár's relatives in a vulnerable, dependent position. Between 1613 and 1616, there was a conflict between two families living under one roof, the widow and her brother-in-law.⁴⁴ The widow, Katalin, submitted a claim to the Viennese court for funds for the maintenance of her children and the education of her two sons. She noted that she had "not a slip of land" in Transylvania. In her applications for assistance, she used the rhetoric one would expect of a widow. She emphasized her vulnerable position and the political

42 Zsigmond Kornis's request. Gyulafehérvár, March 13, 1614. ANR-DJC Kornis, inv. no. 250. no. 3.

43 Zsigmond Kornis to Kristóf Borbély. Radnót, May 25, 1614. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 37. no. 1.; Simon Péchy to Katalin Keresztúry. Kolozsvár, December 2, 1616. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 37. no. 28.; Simon Péchy to Katalin Keresztúry, Várad (today Oradea, Romania), December 28, 1616. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 37. no. 31.

44 Gábor Bethlen to Katalin Keresztúry, Várad, December 28, 1616. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 250. no. 31.

loyalty her family had always shown: “*Humillima orphana et perpetua Servitrix, Catharina Kereszthury Magnifici quondam Balthazaris Kornyss relicta vidua.*”⁴⁵

During these years, Zsigmond’s position in the principality was also precarious. In 1616, as a result of a temporary loss of favor, he lost Radnót. Prince Gábor Bethlen donated the castle to Chancellor Simon Péchy.⁴⁶ The chancellor first offered money to the widow, who was a part-owner in Radnót, but Katalin, referring to her children, demanded not money but property in exchange for a share of Radnót.⁴⁷ The following spring, she was given Szentbenedek, which had been confiscated, as well as several other of her husband’s confiscated properties, and she left Radnót with her children. In the meantime, her sons had already grown up. They had to be sent to a higher-level school, which meant financial hardship for the family.⁴⁸

The tension between the widow and her brother-in-law was resolved by developing a new family strategy. As a result of the decision, which was presumably had been in the making for years, both parties were forced to make concessions in order to regain the economic and social influence and status of the Kornis house. Katalin Keresztúry did not remarry, leaving all the property she had inherited from her parents to her children. When her daughter turned eight years old, Katalin sent her to the Clarisses in Pozsony. Thus, Borbála did not have to be married, and her inheritance did not fall into the hands of a different family. Katalin also confirmed the children’s right to inherit by will, according to which all maternal property is divided into three parts, but if Borbála were to make an eternal vow of virginity at the age of fifteen, half of her inheritance would be given to the cloister and the other half to her brothers. Katalin Keresztúry also entered the convent, thus solving the problem of providing support for herself. To avoid further fragmentation of the estate, one of the boys was also assigned to pursue a career in the church after having completed his studies.⁴⁹

The cloister helped Katalin remedy more than her financial problems, nor can one ignore spiritual motivations. Relatives who choose the church vocation,

45 MNL OL E 249 Benigna mandata 1614. no. 18. fol. 45-46. X9229 mf. 31491.

46 Gábor Bethlen to Katalin Keresztúry, Kolozsvár, December 2, 1616. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 37. no. 28.

47 Gábor Bethlen to Katalin Keresztúry, Várad, December 28, 1616. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 250. no. 31.

48 Kristóf Goda to Katalin Keresztúry, Nagyszombat, July 26, 1618. MTA KK Kornis vol. II. fol. 996–997.

49 Katalin Keresztúry’s will. Nagyszombat, January 31, 1618. It was confirmed by Gábor Bethlen on April 24, 1618. MNL OL F1 Libri Regii vol. XII. fol. 52–53.b.

according to the Catholic conception, became “advocates” of family members before God, and they regularly prayed for the forgiveness of sins and for the spiritual salvation of their living or deceased relatives.⁵⁰ Last but not least, within the walls of the distant cloister, along with her daughter, Katalin found peace of mind, as she was able to flee the rumors concerning her alleged disgraceful acts and the alleged illegitimate origins of her daughter.

According to the family strategy, the other important decision had to be made by Zsigmond, who had less and less hope of having children as long as he was at his ill wife’s side, so Boldizsár’s children were the only hope for the continuation of the Transylvanian branch of the Kornis family. However, it took Zsigmond a long time to come to regard his brother’s children not as rivals but as his own heirs. The bargain between the widow and her brother-in-law took place sometime between 1618 and 1624. In 1618, Katalin still regarded her brother-in-law as the usurper of her children’s paternal inheritance, so in her will, she prohibited him from looting them any further.⁵¹ In 1624, before she went to the cloister, she wrote another will according to which she made Zsigmond the “curator” and “defender” of the estates, alongside Prince Gábor Bethlen and Governor István Bethlen.⁵²

In 1638, one year after the death of his wife, Zsigmond began writing his will, in which he named Boldizsár’s eldest son, Ferenc, as his main heir. Twenty years brought about a lot of changes in the relationship between the uncle and the half-orphans. Over the course of his long life, Zsigmond was able to follow the fates of his nephews and niece for a long time, so we can monitor changes in their relationships. Zsigmond supported Ferenc’s and István’s education at the Jesuit Academy of Nagyszombat (today Trnava, Slovakia), where they enrolled in 1618, and he also supported their studies at the Jesuit Academy of Vienna, where they enrolled in 1621.⁵³ He made sure that they would come to the attention of important figures in the princely court, and various rites and ceremonies offered occasions for him to ensure that his nephews would begin to develop contacts in a social space that would be the backdrop of their later lives as adults. The

50 The term comes from the Clarisse nun of Mária Franciska Csáky: “I remain an advocate of Your Graces before God.” Anna Franciska Csáky to Ferenc Kornis. Pozsony, November 11, 1653. MTA KK Kornis vol. III. fol. 1883.]

51 Katalin Keresztúry’s will. Nagyszombat, January 31, 1618. MNL OL F1 Libri Regii vol. XII. fol. 52–53.b.

52 Katalin Keresztúry’s will. July 8, 1624. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 234. no. 2.

53 *Prorogatoria super omnibus causis Francisci Kornis de Ruszka, Viennae studiis operam dantis emanatae.* Alba Iulia, July 22, 1628. ANR-DJC Kornis inv. no. 646. no. 5.

two boys played an important role in the funeral of Princess Zsuzsanna Károlyi. Ferenc and István delivered an oration and elegy Latin in St. Michael's Church in Gyulafehérvár (today Alba Iulia, Romania), next to the *castrum doloris*. Their participation as adolescents constituted a significant public appearance and also carried an important message: as a manner of Baroque theatricality, it reminded the participants of the princess's deceased children, who would have been about the same age as the performers had they survived.⁵⁴

The exchange of letters between Zsigmond and Borbála, Ferenc, and István was one of the most important means of communication. This is especially true for a nun living within the walls of a distant cloister in Pozsony. Borbála Konstancia (a name she acquired after becoming a nun) regularly corresponded with her brother, Ferenc, and her uncle, Zsigmond. After the death of her mother in 1629, the practice of sending letters remained her only link to her family.⁵⁵ The letters replaced the experience of visiting one another, as indicated in one of her letters: "My Gracious Patron Lord and my sweet father [...] I did not want to pass up the good opportunity to visit Your Greatness through this little humble writing of mine."⁵⁶ The letter writer's own condition and the recipient's health were constant elements of the letters. As was typical of letters written by members of the Church, Sister Konstancia's letters began with an invocation ("Jesus Mary St. Clare"), and they also contained an indispensable intercessory prayer for family members. In an emotional letter written to her uncle just before his death, Borbála wrote the following: "I offer my poor humble divine prayer to Your Greatness as my Gracious Patron Lord, my Sweet Father. I wish from my pure heart to Your Greatness that God give you all blessed goods, good health, long life." Her words reflect concern for the health of the elderly family member: "I have heard these days of the sickness of Your Greatness, which was not a small sorrow for me, therefore I prayed to my God to console your Greatness." On the other hand, when talking about her own condition of health, illness, and near-death, she remarks almost indifferently, "I do not think I shall live long." She refers to her uncle as her "patron" and her "father," and she does professes affection for him: "I have no greater joy in the world than when

54 Mikó, "Mivel én is," 17–18., 56; Szilágyi, *Erdélyi országgyűlési emlékek*, vol. 7, 10–14.

55 Katalin Kondé to Ferenc Kornis, Pozsony, September 15, 1629. MTA KK Kornis vol. II. 1078–1079.

56 Borbála Konstancia Kornis to Zsigmond Kornis. Pozsony, September 17, 1648. ANR-DJC Colecția Sándor Mike no. 859; Borbála Konstancia Kornis to Ferenc Kornis. Pozsony, September 17, 1648. ANR-DJC Colecția Sándor Mike no. 860; About the practice of letter writing: Erdélyi, "Akarnálak levelém által"; Erdélyi, "Stepfamily relationships"; Del Lungo Camiciotti, "Letters and letter writing."

I hear of Your Greatness being healthy and I take your kind letters from Your Greatness.” Unfortunately, Zsigmond’s letter to Borbála did not survive. In his will, he addressed her as “my poor nun sister, Madam Borbála Kornis.” He left her a hundred gold coins and three hundred forints and let the nuns pray for him in the cloister.⁵⁷

We have only indirect data on the relationship between Zsigmond and his nephew, István, who was a Jesuit priest. Zsigmond was the chief patron of the Transylvanian Catholic Church, but if the stakes were to ensure succession and preserve the social status of the family, he quite certainly did not hesitate to subordinate the interests of the Church to the interests of the family. After the death of his wife Ilona, he tried to get his nephew out of the order, albeit unsuccessfully.⁵⁸ In his will, he recalled his nephew: “I want to commemorate in this testament my beloved brother and both my carnal and spiritual kinsman, who, though the Lord God has chosen for himself and is anointed with priestly dignity, yet I want His Grace to benefit from the few goods that the Lord God has entrusted to me in this mundane existence.” He left an estate for his nephew to support the Jesuit college in Szatmár.⁵⁹ However, the young priest died sooner than his elderly patron. In 1642, Zsigmond hurried István’s sickbed. As he wrote in one of his letters, he hoped “before [my nephew] dies, [to] say a few words to the poor man, even if he is a priest, yet my kinsman.”⁶⁰ István died less than a month later, and Zsigmond, unable to fulfill his promise in his will, made a donation to the Jesuits of Szatmár the following year. He stipulated that they be given a hundred forints a year, a hundred cubes of wheat, and a hundred cubes of wine.⁶¹

Undoubtedly, Zsigmond had the most personal, direct contact with Ferenc, who was a layman. After the death of his wife, Zsigmond declared in his testament that he considered his nephew to be his successor, heir, and the future head of the Kornis family. The will asks for God’s blessing on Ferenc’s life so that he may be of service to God, the Holy Catholic Church, and his sweet homeland. Zsigmond also prayed for the descendants of Ferenc and the survival of the Kornis house.

57 Zsigmond Kornis’s will. Papmező, February 2, 1641. MTA KK Kornis vol. III. fol. 1512–1520.

58 István Bethlen to Zsigmond Kornis. Huszt, February 14, 1638. MNL OL F 12 Lymbus fasc. 9. no. 4.

59 Zsigmond Kornis’s will. Papmező, February 2, 1641. MTA KK Kornis vol. III. fol. 1512–1520.

60 Zsigmond Kornis to Pál Bornemissza, Papmező, January 18, 1642. ANR-DJC Colecția József Kemény, no. 1019.

61 Letter of donation from Zsigmond Kornis to the Jesuits of Szatmár (Satu Mare, Romania). Remetemező (today Pomi, Romania), June 25, 1643. MTA KK Kornis vol. III. fol. 1680.

Zsigmond repeatedly reflected on his role as patron and head of the family. In his will, as if holding a mirror in front of himself, he apologized to his nephew, which as a kind of trope was a typical feature of the genre, and he admitted that for various reasons and shortcomings, he had been unable to help him as he would have liked, even though Ferenc's love for him and his good behavior had deserved more reciprocity. For all this, however, he gave him ample compensation by making his nephew the heir of all his possessions.⁶² There are many examples of shows of care and love in the will. The function of testamentary writing was "the duty of love for those surviving" an emotional practice, and it addressed the need to ensure care for offspring. Zsigmond's use of expressions for members of the family, to whom he referred as "my sweet cognates, the beloved who survive me," also suggest that he had embraced the role of a kind of substitute father. He asks Prince György I Rákóczi and Princess Zsuzsanna Lorántffy to "defend and protect" his heir. The request has an extremely humble style: "very humbly begging for Your Majesty." Zsigmond seeks to win the prince's support by sharing his fears and worries about his nephew. He uses diminutive words about Ferenc: "my poor orphan and my very helpless brother," although his nephew was an adult, a married man, and the lord lieutenant of Kolozs County. Zsigmond writes about Ferenc as if he were his son. As the son replaces the father after his death, so will Ferenc replace Zsigmond in the service of the prince: "Do not leave Ferenc Kornis, Your Majesty, whom I relinquish to Your Majesty instead of me."

Zsigmond's embrace of the role of the father and the willingness of the other members of the family to welcome him in this role can also be observed in the daily correspondence of the family members. Discussions of one another's health constituted an indispensable part of the letters. Ferenc worried about Zsigmond's health, and Zsigmond often worried about Ferenc's health. Although he did not call Ferenc his son, Zsigmond did refer to Ferenc's wife as his daughter-in-law, thus indicating that he either felt he was in or sought to suggest he was in an emotionally intimate relationship with his nephew's wife, Katalin Wesselényi.⁶³ Katalin, for her part, called her elderly relative "my father,"⁶⁴ and she regularly inquired about his health. During visits, he often enjoyed Kata's "housekeeping" and his hunting trips with Ferenc. The time they spent

62 Zsigmond Kornis's will. Papmező, February 2, 1641. MTA KK Kornis vol. III. fol. 1512–1520.

63 Zsigmond Kornis to Ferenc Kornis, Belényes, May 6, 1642. MTA KK Kornis vol. II. fol. 1631.

64 Katalin Wesselényi to Ferenc Kornis, Szentbenedek (today Mănăstirea, Romania), March 3, 1644. ANR-DJC Kornis, Katalin Wesselényi's letters to her husband. 1644–1649, no. 1–2.

together also provided an opportunity for Zsigmond to develop a “grandfather” relationship with Ferenc’s children. He called the younger children “The Lady Her Grace’s *cseléd*,” a somewhat literary term for servant. He thus suggested that, at that age, the children were still attached primarily to their mother. Zsigmond also used their nicknames to refer to them (Boris, Kata, and Gazsi), which would also have been understood as an expression of affection. He referred to his nephew’s only son as the “little Gáspár hussar,”⁶⁵ perhaps because he often let the little boy ride on his knees as if he were riding a horse.

Over time, he gradually went from being a caring head of the family to an increasingly old and sick person who needed the help and care of his nephew. The communication between the two of them also changed in light of this, with more and more talk about Zsigmond’s illness. For instance, in a letter written on May 6, 1642, he wrote of his own impending death:

I was so sick that I thought I was about to die, and I still wouldn’t mind if Your Grace were closer to me and your health were good, because I need Your Grace to take good care of me now, sweet brother, because it seems that I will soon embark on that very long journey, from whom the Lord God will protect Your Grace for a long time, Amen.⁶⁶

Zsigmond Kornis died on November 6, 1648 in Radnót after long illness at the age of 70. In accordance with his will, he was buried next to his wife in the chapel of the castle in Papmező. After long preparations, his successor, Ferenc, who was raised by him like his own child, arranged the last rites for his uncle with great splendor. In the invitation to Zsigmond’s funeral, he referred to the deceased as “*pater secundus*,” i.e. as his second father.⁶⁷

Summary

In this essay, I offered a case study of the male roles in a family network among the nobility in the early modern era, drawing on the example of the Kornis family. The head of the family, as the dominant and representative member of the family, had complex competences. As the head of the nuclear family, it was his duty to provide prestige, financial security, legal representation, confessional

65 Zsigmond Kornis to Ferenc Kornis, Belényes, May 6, 1642. MTA KK Kornis vol. II. fol. 1631.

66 Zsigmond Kornis to Ferenc Kornis. January 9, 1645. MTA KK Kornis vol. II. fol. 1743–1745.

67 Ferenc Kornis to Ádám Batthyány. Szentbenedek, May 8, 1649. MNL OL P 1314. Batthyány, X 27237, mf. 7435, no. 4852.

guidance, protection, and care for his wife and his children. Furthermore, it was his main, Christian duty to be a loving husband and a caring father.

As the head of the extended family, in addition providing legal-economic representation, he increased and maintained the prestige, wealth, and property of the family. All this could be achieved through skillful policies and advantageous marriages, so as a successful head of a family, he built and transmitted an extensive network of kinship relations which helped further the social integration of his offspring and gave them the opportunity to choose appropriate spouses. Family peace and agreement was served by determining the order of inheritance. The rivalry between the brothers and the struggle for control of the dynasty weakened the members of the family, individually and collectively, so the family members sought compromise and cooperation as soon as possible.

The strength of the family as a community can be measured mostly in its responses to crisis situations. In these cases, the responsibility of the head of the family to develop a crisis strategy and effectively represent and enforce group interests increases. Therefore, the loss of the head of the family itself creates a particularly serious situation. In this case, the trauma and mourning had to be left behind, as the vacant position had to be filled in order for the family to survive. With the loss of the head of the family, widows were able to perform the duties of the head of the family within the patriarchal framework to a limited extent, sometimes through an accompanying male helper. Widows were compelled to rely primarily on members of their own birth families against the male relatives of their deceased husbands, and in the absence of help, they easily found themselves in a vulnerable, submissive position against their brothers-in-law.

Among the numerous critical periods in the history of the Kornis family of Göncruszka, the two most serious periods followed the loss of the two heads of the family, first Gáspár and, a decade later, Boldizsár. Both events plunged the family into existential insecurity: voluntary or legal exile, loss of property, followed by family fragmentation. In these crisis situations, the cohesive power of the Kornis house was shown. After the murder of Gáspár, his middle son, Boldizsár, and, after Boldizsár's execution, Boldizsár's younger brother, Zsigmond, took the baton. Initially, a conflict of interest arose between Boldizsár's widow and Zsigmond over the right to supervise the orphans and their property. This conflict was later resolved by a compromise which benefited both parties. Zsigmond, who initially reclaimed the confiscated estates of his brothers, eventually made one of his nephews the heir to all his possessions. He

was thereby able to play the roles of father and grandfather, which legitimized his position as the head of the family and which he would not otherwise have had as roles, due to the infertility of his marriage.

The career, destiny, and ability of a given family member sometimes helped the family's strategy and sometimes worked against it.⁶⁸ In the Kornis family, we see examples of both. The talent and good marriages of the heads of families played an important role in the rise of the family and its survival among the Transylvanian elite. At the same time, Boldizsár's early death and György's and Zsigmond's childless marriages endangered the family's survival. The Transylvanian branch of the Kornis family of Göncruszka was characterized by demographic weakness for three generations. Boldizsár had only one son, Ferenc, who remained a layman, and Ferenc's only son to reach adulthood was the memoir-writer, Gáspár.

At the end of the seventeenth century, the younger Gáspár Kornis played the role of the head of the family with the act of writing memoirs. He characterized his ancestors as husbands and fathers who suffered as martyrs for the honor of their families and as patriots who worked for their nation to the last drop of their blood. The traumas suffered by the heads of the families because of their political views and their religion (traumas including attacks, assassinations, murders, exile, and execution) became the foundations of a collective identity. Faith, fidelity, suffering, and martyrdom became cultic threads of the family legend, enshrined as a tradition in the narrative of the memoir.

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