

“This Is Our Bank”: Agricultural Associations and Their Role in Two Swabian Villages in Satu Mare From the Regime Change to the Present

LEVENTE SZILÁGYI*

Institute of Ethnology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Eötvös Loránd Research Network, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the impact of the agricultural associations of two Swabian settlements – Mezőfény (Foieni) and Mezőpetri (Petrești) – on the local economy and society. Agricultural associations played an important role at the beginning of the process of agrarian transformation after the regime change in Romania. The successor organisations of the socialist agricultural associations, now established on a voluntary basis, were able to counteract the impoverishment caused by the reparcelling or forced reparcelling of land during the long transitional period, while at the same time exploiting their monopoly position to prevent the emergence of individual and family farmers. The risk-averse, self-reliant economic model of the associations is reminiscent of the peasant, self-sufficient farm organisation. The associations can thus be seen as a very specific form of post-socialist post-peasant production systems.

KEYWORDS

regime change and the agrarian question, agricultural associations, Satu Mare Swabians

In my study, I examine the impact of two Satu Mare Swabian settlements – Mezőfény (Foieni) and Mezőpetri (Petrești) – on the local economy and society of the agricultural associations¹ that

* Corresponding author. E-mail: szilagyi.levente@abtk.hu

¹Locals refer to this form of cooperative, which has evolved from socialist collective farms (collectives), as associations [társulás] or partnerships [társulat]. In the following I will use the term *association* [társulás].

are still in operation today.² Agricultural associations played an important role at the beginning of the process of agricultural transformation after the regime change in Romania. The successor organisations of the socialist collective farms, now established on a voluntary basis³, were able to compensate for the impoverishment caused by the repeasantisation or forced peasantisation, on the one hand, and, on the other, exploited their monopoly position to prevent the emergence of individual and family farmers. My analysis answers the following questions: how did the agricultural associations emerge in Mezőfény and Mezőpetri? Under what circumstances were the collective farms dissolved? What were the factors that determined success or failure? What were the local factors that determined the creation of the new partnerships? What are the economic, political, and social contexts in which the associations operate? During my research, I conducted interviews with key actors who were active participants in the decollectivisation process and the creation of the association at the local level: former leaders of the local association, mayors, association leaders, board members, association members. In addition to the internal actors, I conducted interviews with agricultural entrepreneurs and individual farmers capable of judging and evaluating the results of the partnerships from the outside.⁴

When we read about the socialist, radical transformation of the economy, the trauma of the eradication of the peasantry, and the agricultural production relegated to collective farms, we think of a long period of time that sealed the fate of entire generations, a period of completion, and carrying with it the finality of immobility. The time that has passed since the regime change – which exceeds the time that the people of Mezőfény and Mezőpetri have lived with the collective farms – is usually described as a time of constant searching for a new path and the ever-changing need to adapt. In the villages surveyed, the cooperative form of agriculture has been in existence for sixty years. But this does not mean that they are without change, nor that they have followed the same or even similar paths. Several forms of cooperative farming have also developed in Romania since the regime change.⁵ It is well known that the countries of the Eastern Bloc implemented collectivisation and ran their agrarian economies in very different structures. As a result, the post-socialist transformation of agriculture has also taken place in specific and different ways in each country (HANN 2003). But there is also a consensus that the reorganisation of the agrarian sector has followed a number of different models within countries. Even a detailed description of the Romanian models would go beyond the scope of this study, so I will only summarise the more general findings on cooperative forms.

Before 1989, Romania's agriculture was dominated by three large agricultural organisations: state agricultural enterprises, collective farms, and, to a lesser extent, private farms. Of these three, the agricultural reform that followed the regime change affected the collective farms most

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³Voluntariness will be nuanced later in the text.

⁴The present study is also based on interviews conducted during fieldwork in the framework of the Hungarian Eötvös State Scholarship MAEÖ176.

⁵There is no precise data available on the percentage of land in Romania that is farmed in the form of cooperatives. Statistics estimate a figure between 12 and 22%. The main reason for this uncertainty is the wide variety of organisational backgrounds of the forms of collective farming, from agricultural companies operating as legal entities under tenancy agreements to informal associations of individual farmers.



radically. So much so that the most decisive process in the first decade of Romanian agriculture after the change of the political regime was decollectivisation and the economic and social problems it created. An important process of decollectivisation for the present study is the creation of the successor organisations of collective farms, the co-operatives. A result of the decollectivisation that is important for the present study is the creation of the successor organizations of collective farms, the agricultural associations. One distinguishes between real and fake associations/cooperatives based on the quality of cooperation. The latter, in fact, indicates enterprises which are cooperatives only in terms of the mechanism of transfer of land use and in name (SANDU 1999; STĂNCULESCU 1999). Katherine Verdery describes partnerships as a coercive structure in which the blurring of property rights has been exacerbated (VERDERY 2003). Sebastian Lăzăroiu sees certain types of cooperatives as an institutionalisation of rationalised mutual assistance between members (LĂZĂROIU 1999).

Examining the transformation of the Romanian collective farms into associations, Nigel Swain concludes that liquidation or transfer to the period after the regime change was essentially determined by the efficiency and profitability of the collective farm's operations (SWAIN 1997:78). Collective farms operating in an unfavourable ecological environment or with a low degree of mechanisation were immediately liquidated in the first half of 1990. It is no coincidence that associations have been established mainly in lowland settlements with good soil (SWAIN 1997:80). However, a favourable ecological environment alone was not a guarantee of success, as it required the active participation of social factors. In his view, only those associations could be successful whose members have accepted the compromises of becoming a member in the restitution process of the land holdings.

Looking at the reasons for the negative developments in agriculture after the political regime change, I would highlight only the factors that have pushed the rural populations who have access to land ownership towards some form of association: 1.) the small size of the estates – mechanisation is not cost effective 2.) the lack of mechanisation – there was insufficient capital either to buy machinery or to pay for the labour; 3.) the advanced age of the “new” landowners; 4.) the fact that a large proportion of the heirs were not local residents; 5.) the poor quality of the land. In addition to these local factors, the Romanian state played a decisive role in the turn towards the establishment of agricultural associations, the direction in which agricultural Law No. 18/1991 clearly wanted to steer rural communities (VERDERY 1999), including by supporting the creation of the associations through several years of income tax exemptions (VINCZE – SWAIN 1998:193). The literature on the eruption of social tensions following the activities of the land distribution commissions and the further consequences of the conflicts is extensive (KIDECKEL 1993; PETI 2006). Adrian Hatos is quite bold in this respect: in many cases, he believes, communities have chosen the associative form precisely to avoid conflicts between landowners. The associations, he maintains, acted as a kind of conciliatory body, helping farmers with the administrative burden of land restitution and acting as a mediator between the parties in disputes (HATOS 2006:24). In 1996, the Christian Democratic National Peasant' Party government sought to create a legal environment against cooperative forms of farming and to promote the strengthening of Western-style market-based family farms by drastically reducing agricultural subsidies. As the members of agricultural associations had to pay for the various work processes, once state subsidies – which alleviated these costs – were abolished, a more attractive alternative for many was to enter into a land lease contract with the then proliferating agricultural enterprises. In most cases, this meant noticeably less income for landowners, but no additional costs in return, which proved to be a



decisive factor in a period of severe capital shortages. Most agricultural associations were liquidated between 1997 and 2000 (HATOS 2006:208).

In the analyses of Transylvanian Hungarian researchers, the period of decollectivisation is most often associated with negative terms such as refeudalisation, repeasantisation, forced repeasantisation – as a summary of a process in which people reverted to pre-collectivisation techniques and practices (SZABÓ 2002:27; CSATA 2006:5; KISS 2005:50). Hungarian ethnographic research in Transylvania – for reasons that are understandable from the point of view of the history of science – has mainly focused on the study of small-scale and family farms (PETI – SZABÓ eds. 2006). Cooperative forms were mostly included in the analyses as opportunities to be exploited, yet unexploited (TÓTH 1995), or failed experiments (KINDA – PETI 2006). There have been few detailed analyses of their operation and role (HATOS 2006). Adrian Hatos distinguishes between four plus one⁶ major periods in his analysis of post-regime change agricultural associations in Romania:

1. The period up to 1990, dominated by socialist collective farms;
2. The transitional period between 1990 and 1991, no longer socialist but preserving its legacy, mainly a period of defining new directions at the local level and dismantling the collective farms;
3. The short but all the more chaotic period between 1991 and 1992, the beginning of a radical transformation of Romanian agriculture, of which the fast and the slow versions are highlighted here. The fast transformation was the dominant form, during which the collective farms were liquidated, while in the slow version this cooperative form was maintained for a shorter or longer period of time, from one municipality to another, now in the form of a legal entity;
4. The period from 1992 to 2007 – the date of EU accession – a period of slow transformation, with a brief period of capitalisation in 1996–97 when the pace of change accelerated and the cooperative system was replaced by a land-lease enterprise system;
5. The period following accession to the European Union, characterized by land-based support and related economic strategies.

We can now see that the author's prediction of the EU accession deadline has been confirmed. The proportion of cultivated land has clearly increased and land assets have appreciated. The average price of arable land in Romania has doubled and, in some areas, tripled in the last five years. Despite this, Romania is still the cheapest country in the European Union.⁷ Thanks to low prices and a permissive legal framework, around half of Romania's arable land is in foreign ownership.⁸ People in the surveyed settlements consider it unthinkable that foreigners could buy land there. With a price of €4,000–7,000 per hectare, Satu Mare County is in the middle range compared to the national average. In the municipalities surveyed, the quality of the

⁶The reason for the plus one is that he wrote his analysis before the EU accession, but in the categorisation, he draws attention to the rapid and spectacular changes that are expected after the accession to the EU, especially from the time the new agricultural funding system went into force.

⁷There are also significant regional price differences within Romania, with the average price of land in Transylvania (€5–6,000 per hectare) being lower than the national average (€3–9,000).

⁸From 2014, any citizen or economic entities of the European Union or European Economic Area member state can buy land in Romania under the same conditions as Romanian citizens and economic entities.



land and the lack of fallow land mean that the price is significantly higher than average, €10–12,000 per hectare. Land for sale is rare. Of course, land tenure is not static here either, but the dynamics are more determined by inheritance procedures and intra-family sales.

THE VILLAGES

Mezőpetri lies 11 km southwest of Nagykároly (Carei), on the main road connecting Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare) to Nagyvárad (Oradea). The municipality has a total of about 2,300 ha of arable land and another 400 ha of hay fields, pastures, and orchards. Its population at the last census was 1,588, of which 46.9% (745) were Hungarians, 27.3% (434) Germans, 12.5% (122) Romanians, and 10.5% (167) Gypsies.⁹ In 1977 it had 2,081 inhabitants, in 1992 1,618.

Mezőfény lies 7 km northwest of Nagykároly, next to the Romanian-Hungarian border. The distance between the Church in the middle of the village and the state border is about 5 km. Its countryside includes 1,540 ha of arable land, 96 ha of meadows, 92 ha of vineyards, 97 ha of orchards, and 538 ha of pasture. The current population is 1,840 (2,344 in 1977, 2,053 in 1992), of which 55.3% (1,043) are Hungarian, 40.9% (772) German, and the remaining 4% Gypsy.

MICA GERMANIE, OR “LITTLE GERMANY”

In 2016, *Mezőpetri* was the focus of national (Romanian) media attention in three different kinds of news stories. First of all, statistics published in economic newspapers have made the national news: the Agricultural Intervention and Payment Agency (APIA) paid the highest amount of aid for milking cows (€206,000) at the national level.¹⁰ These news gave rise to the other two kinds: shortly afterwards, the leading Romanian TV stations, newspapers, and internet portals reported on the economic success of the *Mezőpetri* Agricultural Association, the successor of the socialist collective farm, in articles and reports with catchy titles. In sentences structured according to the logic of the missed chance, “this is what could have been if. . .,” the “if” was most often followed by the thought “had they destroyed the farming collectives.”¹¹ In the third category of news, the creatives didn’t skimp on adjectives and called *Mezőpetri* “little Germany” (*mica Germanie*).¹² The name is both a reference to the Swabian-German origin and, from a (mostly) Romanian perspective, to the western, civilized rural environment. The settlement is presented as a positive example of the use of EU funds, where money from tenders is not going into the pockets of the elite but into investments for the benefit of the community. The Bucharest journalists compare it to a pleasant country town rather than a village, with an

⁹The ethnicity tables of the census data of the Swabian villages in Satu Mare should be treated with due criticism regarding the Swabian identity(ies). Hungarian and German are not ethnic categories, at least not in the sense like, say, Romanian. For a more detailed explanation, see: SZILÁGYI 2015:84–93; BAUMGARTNER 2012:95.

¹⁰<https://www.stiriagricole.ro/cine-a-incasat-cele-mai-mari-subventii-pentru-vaca-de-lapte-40910.html> (accessed September 9, 2021).

¹¹<https://www.digi24.ro/regional/digi24-oradea/model-de-afacere-prospera-cap-in-comunism-societate-agricola-profitabila-in-capitalism-894490> (accessed September 9, 2021).

¹²<https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/petresti-sau-mica-germanie-comuna-care-svabii-au-schimbata-aerul-locului-1454435> (accessed September 9, 2021).



infrastructure that is the envy of larger cities, with full public utilities, a modern school fully equipped with digital facilities and lifts, a nursing home, a sports hall, a leisure centre, an outdoor stage, a bowling alley, and an industrial park. The picture that emerges from the reports is deceptive, however: the achievements and successes are real and brilliant, but their glory is significantly dimmed by a few circumstances. The agricultural association is on the verge of bankruptcy, the school is only open to lower grades due to a shortage of children, the building is mostly empty, the industrial park is underused, and only one investor has settled there, the great infrastructure and environment are useless if the municipality, and even the wider region, cannot provide the necessary workforce. Moreover, there is such a high rate of emigration and ageing in Mezőpetri that the settlement, which otherwise has excellent potential, is on the verge of social viability. Although no exact figures are available, the consensus is that about a third of the houses are empty. Those passing through the village will not see any signs of this, as all the houses are being looked after. The owners who have moved to Germany do not sell them, they pay for, or use family connections, for the maintenance and upkeep of the buildings and their surroundings (garden and street frontage).

In both settlements, most of the population is of retirement age, and the current economic and social structures are difficult to maintain due to ageing. Due to a shortage of children, the school in Mezőpetri has not started senior classes this year. This is particularly painful for the people of Mezőpetri, as in the past children from neighbouring villages were brought there to study in the German language class, a dormitory was run, and a few years ago the school building was completely renovated with EU funding. Mezőfény is in a much better position in this respect. Although the number of children decreased after the regime change, in recent years it has not fallen below the level needed for the stable operation of the school and has even increased somewhat. This growth is due to the fact that Mezőfény has become an attractive destination for young residents of Nagykároly, thanks to the infrastructural improvements resulting from the presence of a German-owned factory investing in the village. Both settlements are rich, and their infrastructure is also outstanding even at the national level: the coverage of public utilities is almost 100%, and all streets are asphalted¹³. Both municipalities have industrial parks, sports halls, leisure parks, retirement homes. Mezőpetri has won the award for the “Cleanest and Best Managed Municipality” of the Sathmar County Council for several years in a row, and Mezőfény has always been a finalist in this competition.¹⁴ The cleanliness and tidiness is not surprising, of course, as we are talking about villages where the Saturday community sweeping of roads, streets, and squares in front of houses has been preserved until recently.¹⁵ The materialisation of economic success is very similar in the two municipalities, yet they have been achieved in very different ways. While in Mezőpetri the investments were made through national and European Union tenders, in Mezőfény the developments were mainly made

¹³The asphaltting of the main field roads in Mezőpetri was taking place during the fieldwork.

¹⁴The prize does not only hold a symbolic value, it also comes with a valuable reward: commercial vehicles and cars have been „won” this way. Thanks to this prize, both Mezőpetri and Mezőfény have gained national recognition. They made the national Romanian news as „Little Germany.”

¹⁵In Mezőfény, this custom has been maintained until today, in Mezőpetri it was abandoned due to the high rate of emigration and the extremely high transit traffic.



possible by the increased tax revenues from the large industrial investment¹⁶ that settled there. From 2003 to September 2019, the Mayor's Office of Mezőpetri has won grants worth around 6.5 million EUR and 6.2 million RON for twelve projects. This was where the first industrial park in the county was established, and although its utilisation is minimal, the success of this tender has contributed greatly to the success of subsequent urban development projects. However, it would be unfair not to mention the projects that preceded the tender period, many of which date back to before or immediately after the regime change. It is also important to mention them because they bring us closer to understanding how the partnership came into being and how it survived.

THE COLLECTIVE FARMS

Before the regime change, the collectives were the main employers. Thanks to the excellent quality of the chernozem soil, both collective farms were highly successful and profitable. Of the two, it was the Mezőpetri collective farm that had the better reputation, with the cattle farm having a national reputation, partly due to Nicolae Ceaușescu's working visit to Mezőpetri in 1981.¹⁷ The tomatoes bred and grown here have also been shown at Western exhibitions.

"The director of the ILF was Uncle Karcsi Szabó. And he said to me, – Hey, Mózer, I saw your tomatoes. I said: where? – In Munich. They, the directors of the ILF,¹⁸ were posted every year wherever Romanian goods arrived, not only in Satu Mare County, but all over the country, and they delivered the goods there. – And I say, how did you know? The taste? – Who else has the names Mózer and Fézer and all those Swabian names written on their crates? – Because everyone put their goods in a separate box and had to write their name on it. – So that's when I saw it in Munich" (F. M., Mezőpetri).

Success did not mean that they became showcase institutions. Collectives were run by local elites who looked after the interests of both the members and the community.

"We had a good president, he was the president the whole the time, Uncle Feri Orosz, and he distributed to the people more than the quota, because he knew – he started this collective – that people's sweat was in this land, so he would fetch more from the warehouse and distribute more than the quota. He was also an MP, so he could do it because he had the power. He was from Mezőfény. The water tower is to his credit, the water supply has been secured during his time, the school was built during his time, it was not built by the state, it was built by the collective farm of Mezőfény. Maybe the state contributed as well. The kindergarten was built during his time, as was the doctor's office, and that's when the streets of Nagykároly were asphalted. So, he had the attitude to not just let the state take everything away, he tried to invest a little locally. So that was our legacy. We've never denied that, that we went into the '90s with a legacy like that. We didn't have to build a school and a kindergarten then" (T. T., Mezőfény).

The collective also provided a number of services to help members who had lost their footing due to the economic and social challenges of the socialist transformation. The transformation of

¹⁶The German-owned Polipol furniture factory started operations in 2005 on the outskirts of Mezőfény. It currently has around 800 employees, most of whom come from Mezőfény and the surrounding Swabian villages.

¹⁷The Mezőpetri cooperative also received the "Hero of Socialist Labour" Medal (MERLI 1999:207).

¹⁸Fruit and Vegetable Processing Company.



rural society, the family and work organisation, and the difficulties that this entailed, were counterbalanced by the creation of new institutions. In the early 1960s, a bakery was opened, a nursery and a kindergarten were run, construction teams helped builders, etc.

The scope of the present study does not allow for a detailed description of the Swabian community in Satu Mare and the reasons for its introversion.¹⁹ In the community, which turned inwards due to the traumas of the 20th century – mainly but not exclusively by their deportation to the Soviet Union after the Second World War – an extremely strong solidarity based on a shared destiny developed, which could not fully resist the destructive effects of the communist regime but did not completely disintegrate either. One measure of this may be the institutionalisation of theft. The institutionalisation of theft from the collective has been highlighted by many scholars (GAGYI 2018; KOTICS 2001:17). In my research, I expected that the Swabian communities I studied would refute this. My assumption was that the people here still preferred to think of the collective farm's property as their own property. With few exceptions, the local narratives about theft confirmed my hypothesis, so the stories about thefts were mostly told in a specific context.

“Now, theft. Every human being has a little bit of the will to steal. But we found out. . . Even the Gypsies didn't steal here. Understand? Here, even the Gypsies didn't steal. I mean actual stealing. Maybe some took home like ten corncocks or something. They had no one to take an example from, for stealing. Not from the former president, not from me. I didn't steal a single leu's [leu=Romanian currency] worth, and neither did he. His daughter has a flat on the fourth floor in Nagykároly [laughs], a two- or three-room apartment. His wife lives opposite me. Understand? There was no theft here” (F. M., Mezőpetri);

“What, stealing? It wasn't typical. Now, it has happened that someone brought home five tomatoes in his food pouch. Well, yes. I, for one, wouldn't steal five tomatoes from your garden, but I'd bring them home from the collective farm. Because I used to work, too, at the collective farm in the summer when I was a student on vacation. It was only natural that I would bring home something like five tomatoes” (A. K., Mezőpetri).

However: “My mother-in-law came home from potato picking, with a bag of potatoes, and then we had that for dinner, and maybe the next day's dinner, too. But she had to, because all she got was one shift, which was not enough for even a minimum subsistence. So, it wasn't theft, it was a crime of subsistence, as they say about Gypsies nowadays. Some people took stuff by the wagonload, some by the truckload. Then sold it and got rich. It happened! Here in Mezőfény, too” (T. T., Mezőfény).

In both Mezőfény and Mezőpetri, the collective farms' assets are not seen as the legacy of an external power but as the fruit of the community's hard work. On the other hand, the Swabian work ethic, which survived collectivisation, has increased this wealth with extraordinary efficiency.

“They were damn fine workers, these people. Hard-working as hell. – But why? Because that's the way they are. It was the harvest, I wasn't yet the president back then, but the president was sick for three or four months, and I was running the farm. We harvested out there, toward Piskolt [Pişcolt]. We used small combine harvesters at that time, and at half past eleven it was almost the end of the night, and the wagon drivers came and said: Sir, go home. You're so tired, you've been running around all day. We'll pack everything up. Till half past one, people were carrying everything in on their own. In the morning when they left. . . – Is that all right? That's

¹⁹For more on this subject, see BAUMGARTNER 2012; SZILÁGYI 2014.



cool. That's it. This met with the Swabians' – by their own admission excessive – hoarding lifestyle. Anything worth more than a hatful of shit, we Swabians don't throw away, we keep it [laughs]" (L. B., Mezőfény).

The vast majority of the elderly population worked locally, primarily within the various economic units of the collective farm. As the collective farms were well-capitalised and profitable, industrial migration to the cities, although significant, especially among the younger generation, was less than in neighbouring Hungarian and Romanian villages. This does not mean, of course, that there has not been a significant migrant worker-peasant stratum²⁰ in these villages, since it is from among them that the agro-entrepreneurs who have become stable local economic actors since the 2000s have emerged.

However, there was another form of migration, which led to a gradual and accelerating decline in the population of settlements from the 1970s onwards. The emigration of the Satu Mare Swabians to Germany, which peaked in 1991-92, resulted in a specific social and economic environment. On the one hand, the share of the active population had already been declining steadily even before the regime change. To compensate economically for the labour shortage, the collective farms responded with increasing mechanisation, and their financial resources made this easily possible. Another consequence of emigration to Germany was that the population that stayed in the country was able to build, including through contacts in Germany, a financial base at the time of the regime change that allowed them to avoid the forced paths that were so common elsewhere during the transition. Grotesquely, a major contribution to the more stable financial situation of the Swabian population was made by the most traumatic event of the Swabian community, the deportation to Russia in 1944 (for more details, see: [BAUMGARTNER 2012](#); [BOROS 2005](#); [SZILÁGYI 2017](#)). The German state paid an annuity to the deportees as compensation:

"Under the old regime, the German state paid deportees 2-300 marks. That was a lot of money back then. There was a man from Mezőfény, he was a German soldier, and he took it upon himself to write the applications, he sorted it out for many people. Those who could prove that they had been deported were paid compensation by the German state. Mostly in the '70s and '80s. But only to those who were actually deported, on a personal basis, until their death" (T. T., Mezőfény).

"Some people, even back then, had this pension in Germany, or I don't know what they called it. Those who had been deported – and there were few here in Petri – and had some kind of permanent impairment, so that they were lame or incapacitated, so we didn't envy them, but they got some Deutsche Mark" (A. K., Mezőpetri).

Of course, the compensation could not be used freely, and the Romanian authorities strictly controlled how the money was spent. The money could only be spent in "dollar stores"²¹ in county towns and tourist centres.

²⁰ Of the many interpretations of the social category of the worker-peasant, I consider the approach of the authors Ștefan Dorondel and Stelu Șerban to be the most valid for local conditions. It goes beyond the picture drawn by Szelényi and Kostello, according to which the peasant workers are both part-time agricultural workers and under-educated industrial workers, forced by the communist power into urban industrial units ([SZELENYI – KOSTELLO 1996](#)). They add to this the lack of market orientation ([SZABÓ 2013](#); [LOVAS 2006](#)), the reason for which is identified as the dependence of family farming on cooperatives ([DORONDEL – ȘERBAN 2014:20](#)).

²¹ The local name for the Comturist shops that were mainly open to tourists visiting Romania and, to a lesser extent, to Romanian citizens legally holding foreign currency. Since possession of foreign currency of unknown origin was a criminal offence in communist Romania, very few Romanian citizens, mainly posted workers from Arab and African countries, were allowed to shop there.



“But they weren’t just handed it; they had to go down to the shop to spend it. And they couldn’t just buy anything there, and they might have needed something else, but they bought a tape recorder because their grandkid might listen to it, a gas cooker, a parchment rug, a fridge or a freezer, and things like that” (A. K., Mezőpetri).

“That was official, it was in Sathmar. If you had relatives in the West and you came home and paid in Deutsche Mark, you got whatever you wanted. You could buy a car, a Dacia or a Trabant in Romania. My wife got a Trabant. Her uncle bought her a Trabant from Germany. During the old regime. Well, if you had relatives in the West and they wanted to help people here, they could help a lot. – I heard stories that they could buy a fridge. – Sure, and furs, fur coats. ‘Dollar store,’ they called it. You could buy things you couldn’t get for lei. And quality products, like luxury goods” (T. T., Mezőfény).

The “luxuries” thus acquired could be easily monetised, further improving the financial situation of families. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the households in the Swabian villages were equipped was better than the Romanian average. Bathrooms with running water and large domestic appliances were common at the turn of the 1980s. An important consequence of advanced embourgeoisement has been the high proportion of participants in higher education. A causal relationship between the high number of highly educated people and the continuation of cooperative farming after the regime change was pointed out by Hatos (Hatos 2006:291).

THE AGRICULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS²²

“It’s not the fault of those bricks that they were laid by the communists who built that wall. (. . .) Well, you have to preserve it, you have to give it its purpose. We didn’t do anything like that here. What our fathers and mothers once built, it’s a mortal sin to scatter and let it become nothing.” (T. T., Mezőfény)

In the foregoing, I wanted to describe the factors that may have played a role in the continuation of co-operative farming through the agricultural associations in both Mezőfény

²²I was nine years old in 1989. I cannot claim to have had an interpretative view of the post-regime change phenomena related to agriculture, even in my narrower life world in Nagykároly, despite the fact that my family, and to some extent myself, were active participants in the great agricultural transformation. Both my parents are agricultural engineers, both worked in this sector of the economy – my father as a middle manager (senior engineer). In addition to their permanent jobs, they/we were gardening in greenhouses on rented land, in the informal framework that was less common at the time, growing mainly tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, cucumbers. All the members of our family took an active part in this activity, and together with my two older siblings, I also had important responsibilities. We had to do certain jobs from a very young age, without parental supervision. This family garden is still running today, although we “children” are no longer the workforce.

After the regime change, my parents invested family capital and tried to privately run the gardens, which used to be their workplace, but after several years of losses and the forced liquidation of movable (machinery, equipment) and immovable (warehouses, small and large plots of land) assets, they ended this business. In this period of struggle, which lasted until the early 2000s and required year-round presence, many questions were already formulated in my mind, but real reflections only took place much later, during a research project focusing on Transylvanian rurality. In the agonizing livelihood of agriculture, it seemed inconceivable to me that this could be associated with financial well-being. Later, as a university student, during my travels on the Nagykároly-Sathmar-Kolozsvár route, I could not help but notice the large proportion of fallow fields, previously unknown to me. While everything seemed to be collapsing, there seemed to be an institution (system) that was ignoring the macroeconomic environment that could be functional and even successful.



and Mezőpetri. In the following, I will describe the process of transformation, a brief history of the associations, and their role in the local community.

Several analyses have been carried out on the possible scenarios for the liquidation of the Romanian collective farms, the restoration of land tenure (land distribution), and the typology of the main actors (SWAIN 1997; HATOS 2006:252–253). Their common conclusion was that the legal framework gave too much room for “flexibility of interpretation,” which resulted in the local liquidation of reserves, carried out differently from one municipality to another, and the fate of the collective farms’ property was thus a function of local socio-political power relations (CARTWRIGHT 2000). And it was not only a question of whether to go down individual paths or to continue with the cooperative/associative farming system, but also of deciding on the guidelines and structure of the latter. Although in both Mezőfény and Mezőpetri the co-operative form was chosen, the co-operatives were organised and functioned in completely different ways, and the land was allocated according to different principles, so I will describe them separately below.

MEZŐFÉNY

In the transitional period between the dissolution of the collective farm and the creation of the agricultural association, individual/family farming could start on plots of at least 50 ares²³ per person after the regime change. For an average family of 2–4 former collective employees,²⁴ this could mean up to two hectares. The farming was either done by hired labour or by mobilising family resources. In the ’90s this was quite commonplace, when there were still groups of hoers organised during the collective. Every informant remembers this period as a particularly financially successful one.

“So, the collective farm was still there, but there was no agricultural association. It was a transitional period. The farming was done by hired labour, or we ourselves did it, because we were not ashamed to hoe, the whole family went out and got to it. But then the price of corn was so high that a colleague bought a tractor with two trailers of corn. At that time, there were still many animals in the mountains, and a trader came and bought ten tons of corn at once and took it by truck. Now there are no animals. But back then it was worth working the land, it was a start, and everyone got going, and then slowly it got lower and lower” (L. B.).

“At the time of the regime change, the price of crops was very high. It was a rather big leap. All kinds of agricultural products were very well paid for. At that time, 50 ares were given to us in the transition period, and we sowed corn in it; they gave one hectare to my grandfather, who was a member of the collective, my mother-in-law and my father-in-law, so, we cultivated 50 ares with the corn, we almost bought a Dacia just from that. We sold the corn in grains, back then it was selling like hot cakes” (T. T.).

Because of the general euphoria after the fall of the communist regime and the economic successes of the transition period, many farmers demanded full privatisation and restitution. Some have even withdrawn their land from common ownership, but the vast majority have opted for the cooperative form. There is not enough data available to explain why so few people chose individual farming, so instead of explaining the motive, I will only highlight a few reasons

²³ 1 are = 100 m².

²⁴ The traditional Swabian household economy was characterised by three generations living together.



given by locals. The first is more a saying than an argument, stating that “the Swabian thinks first and acts second,” which is no more than an ethnically tinged proclamation of the correctness of a decision made thirty years ago. A more specific reason is that there were no farmers with extensive landholdings in Mezőfény, and Law No. 18/1991, which has been cited several times, allowed the restitution of only 10 ha. To start an agricultural business, farmers would have had to rent land, but the cooperatives were an insurmountable competition in the cultivation of this land, given their available machinery and manpower.

There are two agricultural associations in Mezőfény, the Agrofieni Agricultural Association and Agromec Ltd. The former is the legal successor of the collective farm, the latter of the machine station, and there are no individual large entrepreneurs. In this paper I will only examine the role of Agrofieni. Apart from one important difference, the two agricultural associations function in the same way. The difference lies in the fate of the assets distributed among the members in liquidation. The members of the agricultural association decided to keep most of their movable and immovable property (stables, warehouses, silos, carts, ploughs, machinery, animals, etc.) as collective property when the cooperative was liquidated. These assets were entered into a meticulously drawn up register based on a point system. The point system included the size of the farm before collectivisation, the number of agricultural machines and animals contributed to the collective, and the time worked in the collective. The points were converted into units called “shares,” which accurately determined the members’ shares of the assets of the established association.²⁵ Accurate calculations were made possible by the careful preservation of the records of the deliveries in the collective’s archives. The settlement of the property relations was carried out in a way that is rare in Transylvania and with strong bonds of trust (for further details on the links between trust and decollectivisation, see [TORSELLO 2003](#)). A key figure in the restitution process, the reigning mayor at the time of the restitution recalls these as difficult but good times. When the land was restituted, the landowners accepted the proposal of the former leaders of the collective farm and the newly formed association’s board members to join, considering the future of the association. There was not enough arable land available to allocate the mandatory 50 ares required by Law No. 18/1991. To the satisfaction of the majority, the Land Allocation Committee resolved this by allocating a uniform 7% less ploughland, with the difference being allocated as orchards or in sandy areas.

“So, we tried to comply with the law, but I would say that each municipality applied it differently. And the other big advantage we have is that we associated with each other. In the 1930s, when there was no collective farm, only private farming, the farmers from Mezőfény associated with each other because the countryside in Mezőfény was so fragmented. They hired an engineer, and then he made the map, and whoever got his land closer to the village got a bit less, whoever got beyond the railway line got more. Even back then, there were times when people went to protest with pitchforks, saying they were given their land in the wrong place, so it didn’t go so smoothly either, from what I heard from the old-timers. And now, it didn’t go smoothly either, but it was worth it because the 800 ha of the association are almost a single plot. Not in one piece, but in big chunks. And the former machine station works in big chunks, too, I mean with what they’re entrusted with. It’s a huge advantage, and that’s our advantage in agriculture, that we have a cooperative, and that’s how it works” (T. T.).

²⁵ When Agromec was launched, it redeemed the movable assets, paying the members’ shares in cash.



The association, despite the trust placed in its leaders, could not have been created if the land had not been of a uniformly near-identical quality. In addition to members' land, the associations also lease land to those who opted for individual farming at the time of the regime change but who subsequently abandoned farming for various reasons. The land consolidation process has brought a lot of benefits. Primarily for the associations themselves, of course, but also for members and even non-members. The registration of land could take place under much more relaxed conditions. Whereas those who did not want to join the association received their land at the beginning of the land distribution,²⁶ and this was recorded in the land register, those who joined the association did not have to act so urgently to obtain the title deeds; they worked on it for ten years and in return received benefits which allowed them to plan for the long term. When the land was registered, inheritance was also considered, and the parcels were allocated by considering the size of the inheritance expected from parents and grandparents.

"As we set up the association by parcel number, we also considered where everyone would inherit, so the parcel would be next to it. If I had an inheritance from my father and my grandfather and my other grandfather, they were all side-by-side. That's the way it's been worked out. We even considered the future, let alone the current situation, for this association. For example, I have my father's and my grandfather's inheritance in one location" (T. T., Mezőfény).

The association's 800 ha were initially given a single parcel number, but later, in order to ensure the continuity of agricultural activity, the land titles were allocated. The parcelling and land registration was carried out by a well-respected, 'naturalised' professional. The same person kept the land register of the collective, so the socialist collective farm both began and ended with him. He was assisted in his work by the land register, which was kept with great care even during the collective's existence, and in which inheritance matters were also accurately recorded. The land distribution committee compiled this data, and while elsewhere the landowners themselves tried to gather the documents proving ownership, here the land distribution committee brought the data clarifying ownership to people's homes, and based on this they jointly drafted the official application. In this way, the land distribution was carried out extremely efficiently, and there were no subsequent complaints.²⁷

The association was highly profitable, especially in the first decade of its operation. The high price of cereals generated significant income. The horticultural units inherited from the socialist predecessor, which required a lot of manual labour and could not be run profitably, were dismantled. A significant part of the revenue was used for development, which resulted in the company quickly becoming a stable agricultural player in the region. The shortage of staff due to the large number of workers reaching retirement age was compensated by continuous

²⁶ A consensus decision was sought on land distribution. The land of those who did not wish to join the association was preferably returned to the original location, but efforts were also made to ensure that the land included in the association formed coherent, large parcels. Therefore, where there was a conflict of interest, applicants were offered land in more favourable areas of the countryside.

²⁷ It is not the fault of those involved in land distribution that this system subsequently proved not to be viable. The land surveys carried out in the 1990s were inaccurate. The National Cadastre Programme, launched in 2015 with the intention of bringing land registers in line with the reality on the ground and creating a systematic digital cadastre, was unsuccessful. The sale of land in the countryside was largely carried out through so-called pocket contracts. The main reason for this is the uncertain property ownership resulting from unresolved inheritance procedures due to high costs.



mechanisation, and today the company has around 40 employees. The association in Mezőfény has avoided the typical fate of Romanian cooperatives, i.e., liquidation and transformation into leased farming enterprises (HATOS 2006:147), and it is still functioning as a community institution, although its aim is to achieve the highest possible profit, since it pays members' dividends and operating and development costs. The dividends paid by the association consist of the harvested crops, per hectare, on demand, in the form of produce or cash (but only for large crops: wheat, maize, sunflower, etc.), as well as oil and sugar. Additional dividends are paid based on the share of the fixed capital. If someone asks for a cash dividend, the association sells the crop instead and pays cash. Because the purchase price of grain is lowest after harvesting and then rises steadily, and the cooperatives can store longer and wait until prices peak, members always earn a higher income than individual entrepreneurs who have to sell their crops immediately after harvesting. The cash value of dividends has been around 1,300–1,500 RON per hectare in recent years, including the income from shares. This is not an extraordinary amount, but if you add the entire year's cost of basic foodstuffs (bread, oil, flour, sugar²⁸), it can be considered a significant income. The association also provides other services to its members. It may seem that the people of Mezőfény have given up farming for the benefit of the association, but the opposite is true. They continue to farm and keep animals on their backyard plots, which are on average around 30 acres, but the way they do it has moved away from the traditional way of farming.

“Even those who have a couple of cows milk them by machines. And if someone has a 10 ha garden, he harvests the corn by machine, too. He pays for it, and there's a private corn harvester, or the agricultural association, so even the harvesting is done by machine. He doesn't even hoe it. Why bother? Every year he fills out a form, what service he needs from the association. 'I have a 30-ares garden here, and I need it weeded, harvested, and I'll pay at the end of the year.' The association does it, and you pay at the end of the year, and the association even stores your crops. There's the warehouse, they'll measure it out for me again, I'll just go with my cart and pick it up from there” (T. T., Mezőfény).

Farming is therefore not coercive, and definitely not a burden; backyard farming brings additional income with minimal labour investment. Nevertheless, this highly idealised picture is considerably nuanced by interviews with members who have hired labour from the association. In these, the association is often portrayed as an organisation abusing its position of power. The work requested is not carried out on time or at a higher price than the market rate.

The association's main profile is cereal production, but it also runs a cowshed, bakery, and slaughterhouse. The latter services are mainly available to members – the bakery sells bread on a ticket basis, the slaughterhouse replaces pig slaughter at home – and can therefore be seen as welfare services, the costs of which are covered by the income from the cereals. The almost 50%, due to the fall in the price of grain, has now become very burdensome for the association, and as a result there is a growing conflict of interest between the director²⁹ and the board. The director

²⁸ After the sugar factory in Nagykároly was closed in the mid-2000s, the production of sugar beet, previously cultivated over large areas, was reduced. The closure of the last regional factory in Nagyvárad (Oradea) in 2014 caused the final abandonment of the growth of sugar beet. Nevertheless, the members of the association continue to expect the association to supply them with their annual sugar needs.

²⁹ The director is a Romanian horticultural engineer who started his career in the collective of Mezőfény and was chosen for his skills as a manager.



is calling for a reduction in dividends and the abolition of welfare services, the board for the continuation of the current framework.

“We get the share because we left everything in the association, cattle, horses, buildings, movable and immovable property, and the return on that is the 20% today. The manager always tells us what the interest is now in the bank. Well, it’s not even 1%. So, it was written into the statute that the bank interest rate would be the benchmark. He is right in a way, but we are not the bank to cheat the client, this is our bank, this association” (T. T., Mezőfény).

There are very few people in Mezőfény for whom agriculture is their livelihood, with the exception of the association’s employees and a few innovative agro-entrepreneurs and their employees, but the agricultural association as an institution of *communitas* (SZABÓ 2004:26) provides a stable base for the life of the community while providing basic services to its members, without recourse to one of the most important economic instruments of our times, the EU’s tender-based support system.

“Associations are not taking advantage of the opportunities to apply for tenders. I think they bid once for machinery, they bought a tractor combine, but it’s not typical. People should use this opportunity, but they think that then they have to give as well, and they don’t have anything to give, so that’s how they think this works, that they’ll need to give bribes. Because a private farmer will collect the bribe, so I’m talking about corruption. Or you pay a consultant to write the application the way it should be written. But they don’t bother with this stuff” (Sz. U., Mezőfény).

MEZŐPETRI

While the Mezőfény association was created as a result of a consensus decision, the Mezőpetri scenario was completely different. The chairman of the collective, using his position of power, unilaterally transformed the collective farm into an agricultural association.

“I came out strongly, I told them [i.e. the people of Mezőpetri] that if . . ., you built this, your strength is in it, your money is in it, if you want to take the bricks and tiles and everything home and make a stable, I’ll help you, but if you don’t do that, then everything will stay here. (. . .) If anyone touches anything, I’ll get on the tractor and run you over. Understand? That’s how it worked. There was a stupid guy, he’s dead now, and he was saying that it all should be dismantled and distributed to the last brick. But nobody dared touch it. Well, the doorknobs were stolen and stuff, but nothing else was touched. So that’s how it stayed, with me, ’cause I stayed, too [laughs]” (F. M., Mezőpetri).

Land redistribution was also carried out according to his interests, he was in a position of power.

“No one here has demanded that their land be returned at the old location; that’s stupid. The way I divided it up for them was fine” (F. M., Mezőpetri).

Of the 2,300 ha of arable land in the village, a total of 200 ha have not been transferred to the agricultural association. He is still the president of the association. This makes the Mezőpetri association unique in the country, and many of its practices are still in place today, which are a remnant of the days of the collective farm. It is still the largest employer in the village, and some of its 120 employees are still organised into brigades. As in the days of the collective, the brigade of bricklayers not only works within the association but also carries out external work. The



association is made up of the following main units: the major crops, the machine station, the cattle farm (including the meat processing plant), the bricklaying brigade, and the bakery. It operates a dividend system similar to the one in Mezőfény, but because of the separate economic model, it pays less, and for years it has paid nothing on shares. The separate economic model has to do with maintaining the cattle farm,³⁰ which in the current economic climate can only be operated with very low efficiency, mostly at a loss. This also provides an accurate diagnosis of the instability of the economic environment in Romania, where a decade ago livestock farming was the main driving sector. While in Mezőfény the income from cereals is used for community services, in Mezőpetri it is used to compensate for the losses of the cattle farm. On paper, the Mezőpetri association also has a board of directors, but decisions are made by the president alone. Even if not everyone agreed with his decisions, critical voices about the economic results have remained quiet until recent years. And no one disputes that as president he has done a lot for the village and its residents.

“Well, anyway, he took it further. It’s a merit in itself that he didn’t let it go to waste but tried to carry it on as long as he could. Now, he’s not modernising, and many people are complaining that he’s not taking advantage of these opportunities to apply for grants, to renovate the machinery, and so on and so forth, and the livestock. I don’t know about that, he knows. I see it as a merit that he really kept it all as much as he could” (A. K.).

As the association in Mezőpetri is almost identical to its authoritarian president, I tried to find out as much as possible about his motivations, economic strategies, and plans during my fieldwork. From the interviews with him, a very different practice from that of Mezőfény emerged, but one that was equally in the interests of the people. While in Mezőfény the aim is to maximise profits by increasing the dividends of the members, the intention of the president of the Mezőpetri association was to keep the Mezőpetri people in their place by maintaining human resource-intensive livestock farming and anachronistic brigades and workers’ groups.

“Even now, if you’re from Mezőpetri and you want to work here, you have a job. So, I’m not leaving anyone behind, I’m hiring everyone. (...) I have so many people because I have the zootechny. So as to have work for the people. But that’s a separate issue. That’s the way I see it” (F. M., Mezőpetri).

But the number of dissatisfied people is growing, with more and more people withdrawing their land from the association. Not with the intention of farming independently – they are renting the land to a local agribusiness tycoon. Paying higher dividends – although in this case the term *lease* is more accurate – he already farms more than 800 ha. Thanks to his modern machinery, acquired through several successful EU tenders, and employing five people in total,³¹ he is able to cultivate the land he leases in a much more cost-effective way than the agricultural association. He’s a very successful entrepreneur, but his success has few benefits for the local community (those whose land he farms receive a slightly higher income) or none at all. He regards the association’s mode of operation as outdated, its running of the animal farm wasteful, and its failure to respond to tenders as incompetent. He is not alone in this criticism, as many members of the association are calling for the cow farm to be shut down. Their argument is also valid: the president should not run the association as a charitable organisation, at least not with their money. The rejection of tenders, like that in Mezőfény, stems from a rejection of corruption.

³⁰The cattle population of the Mezőpetri cattle farm was the largest in Satu Mare County at the time of the research.

³¹None of them is from Mezőpetri.



“I have submitted projects twice and not once have these bums approved it. Then, I would need just two milkmaids and two men, and amen. I’d have a stable and a truck driver to bring in the food. It could be done differently, but those dirty bums didn’t approve it. Well, they didn’t approve it because of those Westerners, because the West gives them money if you buy everything from the West. If you buy the calves, cows, all the milking machines, shit, everything. But here we had everything, I didn’t have to buy cows, in fact, I sell them all over the country to farms. And I told the people in Bucharest, there were some guys here, they said: no, no. Then a few days later one of them phoned me and said I was right, this why it wasn’t approved. There couldn’t have been any other reason” (F. M., Mezőpetri).

The president of the association is well over retirement age and plans to step down soon, which he believes will mean the end of the association. I think he is being realistic: the association in its current form will certainly not continue to operate, most likely the profitable agricultural division will be taken over by the business tycoon and the other units will be liquidated.

The history of the agricultural associations may seem like an absolute success story, and in fact it is one by national standards. However, the analysis has also revealed the downsides of their functioning. The post-socialist elite who presided over the associations (engineers working in the former cooperative or even the former chairman of the socialist collective farm), and especially the all-powerful leaders of the associations (in local parlance: the “chairmen”), were the main beneficiaries of the association in all municipalities. Over a period of more than thirty years, they have grown wealthy to an extent that, at the very least, calls into question the fairness of dividends. Without exception, the chairmen have run the associations according to their individual ambitions, in many cases channelling the partnership’s resources into parallel individual businesses and amassing vast movable and immovable assets. They used their power to influence the local political process throughout. The truth is, they also tried to meet some of the needs of the community.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I would describe the associations of Mezőfény and Mezőpetri as not only economically but also socially successful organisations, which, in addition to providing a stable financial base for the communities in the difficult times following the regime change, often took over state responsibilities and represented social cooperation and social localism based on trust. This success required the simultaneous presence of several factors:

- an ageing population,
- labour shortages already at the time of the regime change,
- Swabian mentality, work ethic,
- the availability of capital through contacts in Germany.

A finding of the analysis of co-operative forms of farming in Romania is that the wealthier a village, the more likely it is to choose individual farming over farming associations, as the necessary start-up capital may be available (HATOS 2006:238). The case of Mezőpetri and Mezőfény contradicts this, as they were particularly wealthy settlements already at the time of the regime change, and yet they opted for the co-operative form of farming. Furthermore, this has been done consistently in a way that has strictly excluded external elements, be it foreign labour or even European Union funds. As a result, none of the associations are taking advantage



of tendering opportunities. They do not participate in the tendering system because of the inevitability of corruption. Their representatives perceived the EU accession not as an opportunity but as an attack on their production practices that guaranteed their independence. In the common market, their competitiveness has declined, and their incomes have fallen as a result of the different agricultural support systems in different countries.

In this risk-averse, self-reliant economic model, it is perhaps easy to glimpse a memory of the typically peasant, self-sufficient farm organisation. Thus, we should look at the agricultural associations as a very specific form of post-socialist post-peasant production systems.

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Szilágyi Levente Gábor has been a research fellow at the ELKH RCH Institute of Ethnology, Budapest since 2011. He received his PhD from Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca in 2014. His research interests are borderlands, cross-border relations, rural transformation, and the post-socialist transformation of agriculture.

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