

Mohay, Tamás: A csíksomlyói kegyhely és búcsújárás. Diktatúra, rendszerváltás, modernizáció [The Csíksomlyó Pilgrimage. Dictatorship, Regime Change, and Modernization].

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BOOK REVIEW

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Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc, Romania), formerly a separate commune in the Hungarian-speaking region of the Székely Land in present-day Romania, has been part of the city of Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc) since 1959. Its Franciscan monastery, the pilgrimage church that belongs to it, and the associated Pentecost pilgrimage that dates back to the eighteenth century, are Hungarians' most famous pilgrimage destinations and religious events. In the last few decades, the site has become the center of a ritual in which religious and national traditions are inextricably intertwined. Today, it is a sacred place for the demonstration and reinforcement of Hungarian national identity at least as much as for the veneration of Mary and the commemoration of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The centuries-old "Csíksomlyó phenomenon" readily lends itself to ethnographic and anthropological analysis. Many such attempts have already been made, from many different angles.

Tamás Mohay, professor of ethnography at Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest, has been carrying out field studies as well as archival and press research on the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage and shrine since 1985. In the 1990s, when he began studying the revival of the pilgrimage following the Communist era, he naturally turned his attention to the history of the pilgrimage site so as to provide a historical context for the interpretation of the present.

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He explored the origins of the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage, the traditionalization of its miracle stories, the Franciscans' mendicant pilgrimages to Moldova, the expansion of the pilgrimage's appeal in the twentieth century, pilgrimages from Bucharest, and many other phenomena. This historical research forms the basis of the author's first volume, *A csíksomlyói búcsújárás. Történet, eredet, hagyomány* [The Csíksomlyó Pilgrimage. History, Origins, Tradition] (Nyitott könyv – l'Harmattan, Budapest, 2009), in which Tamás Mohay reviews the history of the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage until 1949. This publication was followed by the investigation of a specific source: the author examined the first Hungarian-language manuscript concerning the statue of Mary venerated in Csíksomlyó and the miracles recounted by contemporary witnesses („Istennek kincses tárháza...” P. Losteiner Leonárd ferences kézirat a Szűz Mária csíksomlyói kegyzobráról. [“God's treasure trove...” A manuscript by Franciscan Leonárd P. Losteiner on the devotional statue of the Virgin Mary in Csíksomlyó] (Csíksomlyói Ferences Kolostor – Szent István Társulat, Csíksomlyó – Budapest, 2015). The third monograph, which forms the subject of the present review, completes the series: in it, Mohay traces the development of the pilgrimage site and the Pentecost pilgrimage from the dissolution of the Franciscan order in 1949 until 2020 — that is, during the forty years that followed the Communist revolution and the thirty years that followed the change of political regime. Demarcated by two such momentous historical events, this was a decisive period in East-Central Europe and there is still a great deal to say about it both within and outside Hungary. However, even those with little knowledge of the historical context should not feel discouraged. Going into appropriate depth, the author sensitively guides the reader from the past towards the present, pointing out the critical role of historical antecedents in the progress of living traditions. This style of presentation, focusing on the “big picture,” is hugely helpful to the reader in interpreting the story of the Pentecost pilgrimage and the religious and profane aspects of the associated experiences.

The book is divided into six main chapters and twenty subchapters. Among the obligatory sections in the introduction (goals, methods, sources, antecedents, and concepts), I would draw particular attention to Tamás Mohay's research methodology and its painstaking and systematic realization. While writing the book, the author drew on the experience of over three decades of continuous and intensive participant observation (without concealing the fact that he was occasionally present in a role other than researcher). This long-term observation is complemented by interviews. Mohay selected an impressive number of interviewees, covering a broad social and geographical range. He enhances the complexity of the observation and interview methodology by examining and analyzing data from the press, another valuable source (and one that has been given little emphasis in earlier research), and by studying the new media. Finally, it should not be forgotten that this publication has a scholarly character. Tamás Mohay thus naturally — yet notably — provides a comprehensive overview and critical assessment of the specialist literature on the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage and shrine.

The main chapters that provide the framework of the book introduce Csíksomlyó as a pilgrimage site in three historic time periods: the historical past (from the beginning up until 1949), the more recent past (from 1949 to 1989), and the period of revival and modernization (1989 to the present).

In the chapter on the historical past, which is understandably short given the two earlier publications, the author's starting point is the idea that this is the period that shaped the entire pilgrimage site, the spiritual environment, and its natural and built spatial structure. The objects



of ritual worship (the devotional statue, the special beehive-shaped processional banner, or *labarum*, and the emblem indicating the church's rank as *basilica minor*) emerged during this period, as did the essential form and order of the solemnities. All of them still very much define the religious events that take place in Csíksomlyó today, and they obviously provide a frame of reference, thus a brief description of them is helpful for those who have never visited the pilgrimage site. This chapter provides information about the origins of the pilgrimage site, which still raise many questions to this day, and about the military incident — the Battle of Harghita in 1567 — that broke out when Prince John Sigismund of Transylvania attempted to forcibly convert the local Székely population to the Unitarian faith. According to legend, victory was celebrated before the statue of Mary in Csíksomlyó, and the pilgrimage is a commemoration of this event. The author summarizes the interpretation of this narrative, which has taken root since the end of the eighteenth century, as follows: "Origin, in this case, should be understood as a powerful explanation, at the valid heart of which is adherence to the Catholic faith that could not be overcome by any aggressive attempts at conversion. This might be the grounds for pride and rejoicing, sufficient reason for a joint celebration, and, as such, an important symbol of togetherness." Moving on to the subsequent periods in the history of the pilgrimage site, this interpretation, and the inherent powerful symbolic meaning, are highlighted repeatedly.

This is certainly true of the chapter on what is aptly called the recent past (since there are still many who have personal memories of this period). In this chapter, likewise drawing on original research and source exploration, Tamás Mohay describes in detail (in over 50 pages) the history of the religious practices and clandestine pilgrimage practices associated with Csíksomlyó during the Communist dictatorship between 1949 and 1989. Although, in terms of its content, this chapter can also be considered no more than an introduction to the substantial section on the changes since 1989, it nevertheless represents an essential and valuable contribution. After World War II, the Communist-led totalitarian state in Romania launched the vigorous persecution of religion and churches, following the Soviet model, which affected all denominations, albeit not equally. "Besides recollections, grievances suffered, initiatives not implemented, vanished archives, pillaged libraries, churches in disrepair, and countless plundered schools, it is the incalculable devastation endured, body and soul, that indicates what took place during the forty years of Communist dictatorship," writes the author. Drawing on contemporary and subsequent recollections, secretly kept notes, and archival documents, he then describes these four decades and the Franciscan brothers who were instrumental in shaping them. This section also includes a few pages of fascinating insights into the "American Csíksomlyó." A parish of this name was operated by Franciscan missionaries in Youngstown, Ohio, in the United States, during the dictatorship (1963–1992). The missionaries also held an annual celebration in their church at Pentecost, before a replica of the devotional statue.

After discussing the historical and recent past, the author embarks on a complex analysis of the changes that began with the introduction of the new political regime in 1989, which forms the backbone of the volume (325 pages). Following a description of the changes that took place in society and the Church in the wake of the revival, the author reviews the past three decades, including the pilgrimage and the various old and new programs associated with it: the dawn vigil, which has become a tourist attraction, sleeping in the church, the cancellation of the procession due to the sheer number of pilgrims, the ritual of touching the statue, and the passion play performed after the religious program. We learn about the role in the religious events of the multilevel spaces, which are many compared to other shrines (the church in the



hills, the monastery, the three chapels), the leaders of the events, the “old” pilgrimage groups, and the changes in the target audience. Mohay ends this chapter by adding seven personal recollections to his analyses of the changes. These recollections are intended to enhance the reader’s understanding of the religious experiences of individuals and their connection with the transcendent. These experiences are seldom discussed and are not easy to grasp, yet at the same time they are essential to an understanding of the religious experience that people undergo here, and of the “Csíksomlyó phenomenon” in general.

The last main section of the book, divided into four subchapters, analyzes the dimensions of modernization from the perspective of the last thirty years. One of these dimensions is the emergence of the “tourist gaze” in the huge crowds. For those visiting the site from this perspective, Csíksomlyó is simply one among many shrines where the religious celebration can be considered as just one of the programs on offer. It may even be the case that visitors see the trip as no more than a worthwhile tourist program. Using the example of groups from Hungary and Slovakia, Tamás Mohay discusses the many different motivations and behaviors of visitors to Csíksomlyó, according to which they can be categorized as either tourists or pilgrims.

The second important aspect of modernization is the fair. Here, the researcher himself points out that the Csíksomlyó fair organized to coincide with the pilgrimage is both a revival and a continuation of tradition, since the fair was a natural part of the event before 1949. At the same time, with the growth in the size of the crowds visiting the pilgrimage site, the number of vendors and the range of goods on offer now naturally exceed all previous levels, while the commercial aspect of the pilgrimage has become far more pronounced. Despite this, the author believes that the commercial dimension has remained on the margins of the Pentecost pilgrimage, in terms of both space and significance.

A separate chapter is devoted to representations of the shrine and the pilgrimage in the media, which is an inevitable dimension of the new phenomena, given the Csíksomlyó “boom” in recent decades. Local, regional, and national newspapers, television channels, and various electronic media all play a role in the representation of the events that take place at the shrine. “There is no doubt that the presence of the media is starting to shape the pilgrimage, although this is rather limited to the details. It is an ongoing process, and the extent to which media exposure will affect the nature of the pilgrimage, and how far it will lead to a kind of ‘festivalization,’ is as yet unclear.” Thus, according to Mohay, the question cannot yet be answered: future studies will be required, including, we might add, comparative analyses based on parallel data from shrines of similar significance.

The concluding chapter of the book seeks to understand one of the features of the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage that has become increasingly prominent in recent decades: the transformation of the site into a national shrine. Mohay sees in the background to this the longing for, and the pleasure of, the experience of togetherness among Hungarians, emphasizing the significance of the *experience community* that is realized year after year at the pilgrimage site, which merely enhances the pathos of its national character. To appreciate this, the reader must be aware that following the Trianon peace treaty that ended World War I, the Hungarian population of the Carpathian Basin was scattered (among the territories of several states), thus the Hungarians living in the territory of historical Transylvania became citizens of Romania. This is what has made Csíksomlyó a kind of inter-state shrine for Hungarians and a symbol of reunification. Tamás Mohay also highlights the longstanding idea latent in Hungarian society that Transylvania preserved a “more genuine” Hungarian past and a more authentic folk culture,



which it was not desirable to display during the forty years of Communism. After 1990, the suppressed desire for the expression of identity could be realized — for example by visiting Csíksomlyó en masse. This was when rock operas on the theme of the national past became part of the accompanying program, and when public figures began to make increasingly frequent appearances. The referendum on dual citizenship in Hungary, accession to the EU, organized pilgrimage tourism, and the emergence of heritage museums have all added fresh layers to the national character of the shrine.

Tamás Mohay's monograph can be said to fill a gap, being the first such comprehensive examination of sources and the first such scholarly presentation to date of the phenomena that have taken shape around Csíksomlyó, or indeed any other Hungarian shrine. The author not only reviews the phenomena of popular religiosity but also presents their ecclesiastical, social, religious/psychological, as well as touristic/anthropological contexts. This is complemented by references to the scholarly literature, as well as press, film, and manuscript references, a list of the interview subjects, a 19-entry source supplement, an index of personal and geographical names, and 267 photos taken by the author. With its accessible style, clear structure, and attractive layout, the book can be recommended not only to a specialist audience but also to any reader keen to obtain an insight into the exceptional "psychology" of a pilgrimage site.

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