

THE HUNGARIANIZATION OF NAMES AND INSCRIPTIONS ON THE CROSSES IN THE CEMETERY OF PLĂIEȘII DE JOS – A FORM OF MANIFESTATION OF ETHNIC ASSIMILATION

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ABSTRACT

The cemetery of the Romanian community in Plăieșii de Jos testifies by the inscriptions on the funerary monuments to the process of ethnic assimilation that has been going on here for a long time. An extended analysis of these inscriptions may bring new elements for a better understanding of this process of ethnic assimilation of a Romanian community.

Keywords: ethnic assimilation, Transylvania, Plăieșii de Jos, Harghita.

SHORT INTRODUCTION

A previous research¹⁶⁹ noted that the funerary monuments in the Orthodox cemetery in Plăieșii de Jos, Harghita county, are mostly inscribed in Hungarian, even though the Orthodox (or the former Greek-Catholic) believers in the region are historically mostly of Romanian ethnicity. This research highlights the process of ethnic assimilation of the Romanian community, in which the replacement of the Romanian language by Hungarian language in the inscriptions on tombstones is one form of manifestation of this process of ethnic assimilation.

Starting from this, we tried to make an inventory of the funerary inscriptions in the Orthodox cemetery of Plăieșii de Jos, Harghita county, through a field research carried out in June 2023, in order to see to what extent these inscriptions can shed light on the process of ethnic assimilation carried out in this locality.

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¹⁶⁹ Radu Baltasiu, Ovidiana Bulumac and Gabriel Săpunaru, *Slăbirea comunității românești din Harghita-Covasna [The weakening of the Romanian community in Harghita-Covasna]*, Bucharest, Ethnological Publishing House, 2013, p. 120.

ORTHODOX CEMETERY IN PLĂIEȘII DE JOS

The church and implicitly the cemetery of Plăieșii de Jos are attested in written sources continuously since 1729¹⁷⁰, most probably it was a church that already existed long before and that in 1750 had collapsed since in the Greek-Catholic confessional census of 1750 there is no mention of the existence of a church in this village¹⁷¹, although 433 Greek-Catholic believers were recorded here, but they had no priest. In the same year, 1750, they asked Bishop Petru Aron for support in building a new church¹⁷². In 1760, the new wooden church was registered, with two priests serving a community of 86 families of Greek Catholic believers¹⁷³. The stone church of Plăieșii de Jos, which still exists today, was built between 1880 and 1884 at the expense of the community¹⁷⁴. In 1948 the Greek Catholic church of Plăieșii de Jos changed to the Orthodox confession, which it has kept until today.

At a distance of about 100 meters from the present church is marked with a cross the site of the old wooden church built in 1750, practically in the middle of today's cemetery that surrounds the church on all sides. The oldest cross identified in the course of our research dates from 1874, with very few crosses older than 1900, 7 to be precise, all made of stone. Crosses preserved before 1950 are mostly made of wood, which was probably the rule in the previous century, which explains the preservation of a small number of pre – 1900 funerary monuments, together with the current practice of re-using old graves.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN PLĂIEȘII DE JOS

The commune of Plăieșii de Jos consists of the villages of Cașinu Nou, Iacobeni, Imper, Plăieșii de Jos and Plăieșii de Sus. The presence of Romanians in these villages is attested by written sources from the beginning of the 18th century (although as we have shown above the first wooden church of the Romanians most probably dates from before 1700); the historical names in Romanian of these villages, as recorded in parish registers from the 18th century are: Satu Nou (Cașinu Nou), Iacfalău (Iacobeni), Imper (Imper), Satu de Jos (Plăieșii de Jos) and Satu de Sus (Plăieșii de Sus)¹⁷⁵. The village

¹⁷⁰ Nicoleta Ploșnea, *Biserici, școli, comunități rurale românești din Covasna și Harghita (1850–1918) [Churches, schools, Romanian rural communities in Covasna and Harghita (1850–1918)]*, Romanian Language Publishing House, 2012, p. 438.

¹⁷¹ Augustin Bunea, *Statistica românilor din Transilvania în anul 1750 [Statistics of the Romanians in Transylvania in 1750]*, in *Transilvania*, No. 9/1901, p. 248, Available at: https://www.bcuculuj.ro/synfilebibdigit/periodice/transilvania/1901/BCUCLUJ_FP_279996_1901_032_009.pdf, Accessed on: January 21, 2024.

¹⁷² Ion Ranca, *Românii din scaunele secuiești [Romanians from the Székler Seats]*, Vol. 2, Pax Historica Publishing House, Târgu Mureș, 1997, p. 196.

¹⁷³ Virgil Ciobanu, *Statistica românilor ardeleni din 1760 – 1762 [Statistics of Transylvanian Romanians from 1760–1762]*, The Institute of National History Yearbook, 3, 1924–1925, p. 681.

¹⁷⁴ Nicoleta Ploșnea, *quoted work*, p. 87.

¹⁷⁵ Harghita County Directorate of National Archives, Parish Registers Fund, Register 302.

of Doboii (where the church and cemetery are located) is now considered a street¹⁷⁶, although it is marked with the name “Doboly” on the military map made by the Austrian Empire in 1769, on which the Romanian church, most probably the wooden church built in 1750, is also represented¹⁷⁷. The Orthodox church in Plăieșii de Jos served the needs of all the Romanians of the villages listed above, a fact also noted on the crosses in the cemetery preserved to this day.

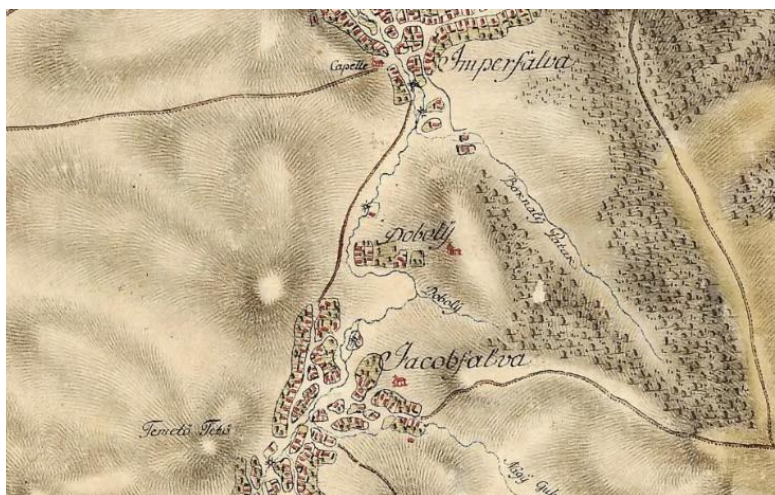


Figure 1. Austrian military map from 1769 showing the village of Doboii (Doboly) and the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church.

Without going into too much detail on the historical demography of the Romanian community of Plăieșii de Jos, which will be the subject of a later study, we will try to sketch an indicative demographic evolution. The pressure of ethnic assimilation of the Romanians in the area has been permanent in the last centuries, but we will record here a few sets of data for the period in which funerary monuments are still preserved in the cemetery studied. In 1900, 1015 believers of the church of Plăieșii de Jos were recorded¹⁷⁸. In 1930 in the village of Imper out of 222 people who declared themselves Romanians only 22 knew Romanian, in the village of Plăieșii de Sus out of 175 only 37, in the village of Plăieșii de Jos out of 73 spoke Romanian 8¹⁷⁹. In 1952 there were still 247 families attending the Orthodox church

¹⁷⁶ Radu Baltasiu, Ovidiana Bulumac and Gabriel Săpunaru, *quoted work*, p. 82.

¹⁷⁷ Josephinische Landesaufnahme, Map available at: <https://maps.arcanum.com/de/browse/country/firstsurvey/>, Accessed on: March 10, 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Alexandru Lupeanu, *Șematismul venerabilului cler al Arhidiecei Metropolitane Greco-Catolice Române de la Alba Iulia și Făgăraș pre anul domnului 1900 [The Sematism of the Venerable Clergy of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Metropolitan Archdiocese of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș for the year 1900]*, Blaj, 1900, p. 573.

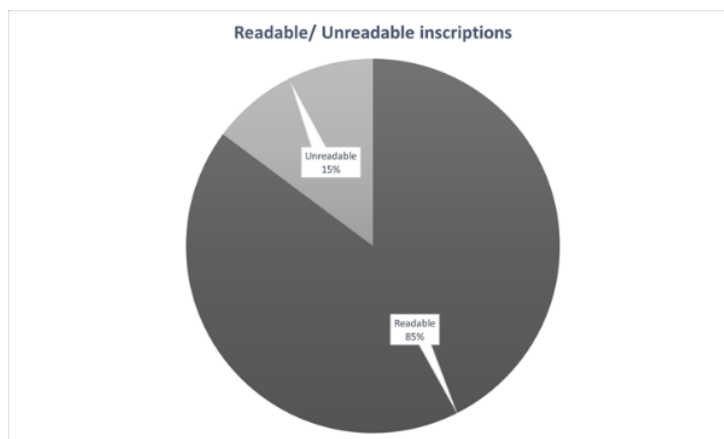
¹⁷⁹ Costel Cristian Lazăr, *Românii din județul Ciuc în perioada interbelică [Romanians in Ciuc County in the interwar period]*, Bucharest, 2007, pp. 39–40.

in Plăieșii de Jos, of these only 25 considered themselves Romanian¹⁸⁰. In 2002, 276 people declared themselves Romanians, of which only 126 were Romanian speakers¹⁸¹, in 2021 there were 117 people of Romanian ethnicity, of which only 38 declared themselves Romanian speakers¹⁸².

INVENTORY OF FUNERARY MONUMENTS

The research in June 2023 was aimed at inventorying the funerary monuments in the cemetery of Plăieșii de Jos and transcribing the inscriptions on them, as far as they are still legible. At first glance, the inscriptions on the tombstones here were mostly in Hungarian, but there were also inscriptions in Romanian. By making an inventory of these inscriptions we mainly wanted to verify the evolution of the use of the Hungarian language in a Romanian community over time, especially since the use of a language other than the mother tongue in an intimate matter such as the inscription on a funerary monument is a very strong signal for the process of ethnic assimilation.

A total of 432 crosses were inventoried and the inscriptions on them were transcribed into a database, as far as they are legible. The database was organised according to several variables, including: the cross's call sign, the legibility of the text, the language of the text on the crosses, the year the cross was erected, the name, surname, year of birth and death of those mentioned on the crosses, and their sex. A total of 368 inscriptions are completely or partially readable, 64 of which are unreadable.

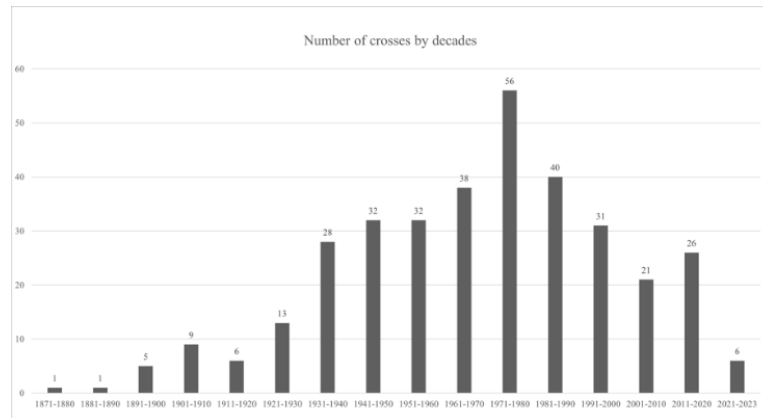


¹⁸⁰ Ion I. Russu, *Românii și secuii [Romanians and the Szeklers]*, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing House, 1990, pp. 132–133.

¹⁸¹ Radu Baltasiu, Ovidiana Bulumac and Gabriel Săpunaru, *quoted work*, p. 73.

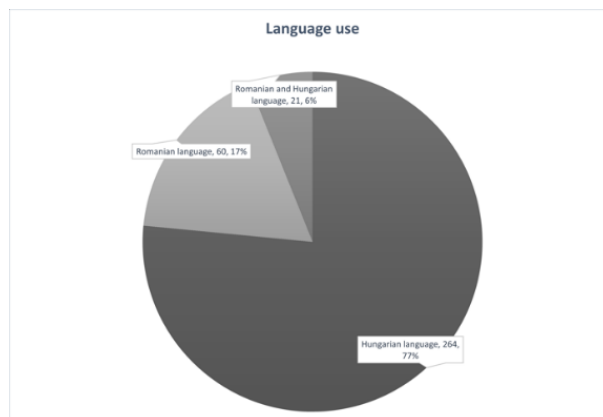
¹⁸² National Institute of Statistics, „Recensământul Populației și Locuințelor 2021. Caracteristici demografice” [“Population and Housing Census 2021. Demographic characteristics”], Available at: <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-%20rp1%202021/rezultate%20definitive-%20caracteristici-%20demografice/>, Accessed on: March 10, 2024.

When the year of its installation is not noted on the cross, we approximate it by the year of the death of the first person mentioned on the cross. The data show that the cemetery was renewed over time, most of the crosses having been erected after the establishment of the communist regime. At the same time, the evolution over time of the installation of funerary monuments in the cemetery of Plăieșii de Jos reflects the demographic evolution of the Romanian community in this locality.

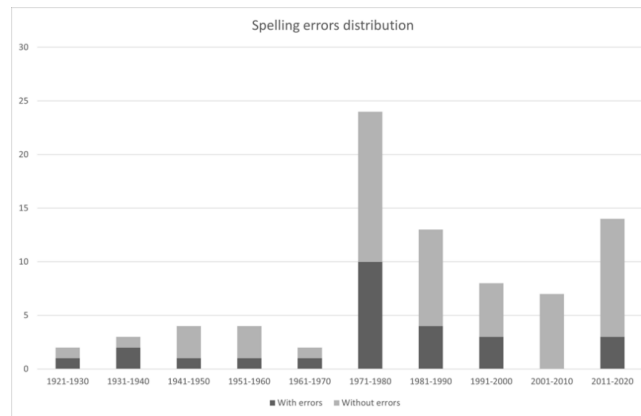


LANGUAGE OF INSCRIPTIONS AND SPELLING MISTAKES

The language used for the inscriptions on the crosses in the cemetery at Plăieșii de Jos is mainly Hungarian. Among the 345 crosses for which the language used can be identified are 21 crosses on which both Romanian and Hungarian are used.



It draws attention to the fact that many of the inscriptions in Romanian have spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, a signal of the low level of education and knowledge of the Romanian language.

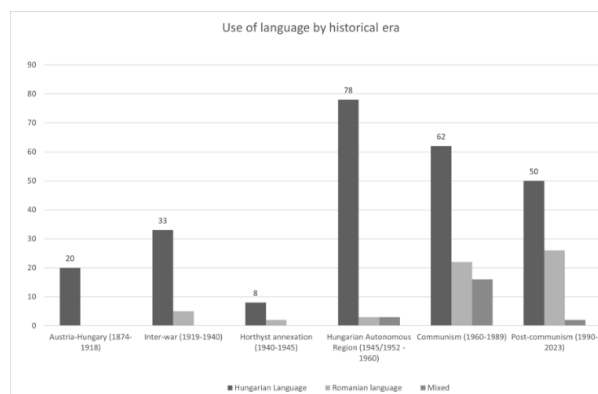


LANGUAGE USE IN DIFFERENT HISTORICAL PERIODS

Perhaps the most interesting graphic representation of the data obtained from the inventory of the burial monuments in the cemetery of Plăieșii de Jos is the one showing the use of a certain language according to the historical period.

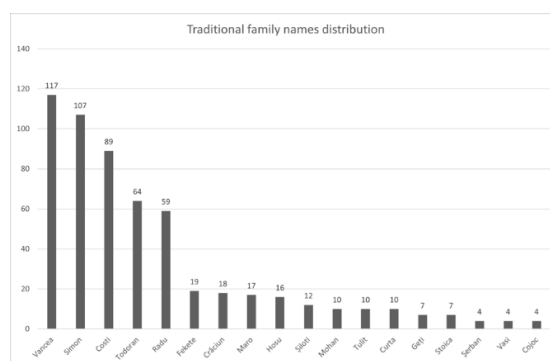
For the period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the exclusive use of the Hungarian language is evident, a phenomenon that continues after the union of Transylvania with Romania in 1918 – keeping in mind that the number of crosses from the period before 1940–1950 is not representative, given the practice of re-using graves and replacing crosses. However, the post-1950 period is the period of the current graves, which better reflects the custom of using a particular language for funerary inscriptions.

Considering the above, it is obvious that the use of the Hungarian language was overwhelming during the existence of the Hungarian Autonomous Region, while in the other historical periods the use of the Romanian language on the tombstones was close to the statistical figures concerning the knowledge of the Romanian language.



TRADITIONAL SURNAMES

It is worth noting that the family names present on the funerary monuments in the cemetery in Plăieșii de Jos are the same as those in the first written records of the presence of Romanians in the region. Vancea, Simon, Costi, Todoran, Radu, Fekete, Crăciun, Maro, Hosu, Șiloti, Mohan, Tulit, Curta, Geți, Stoica, Șerban, Vasi, Cojoc – these are the names that appear constantly in censuses, parish registers or other archival documents since 1720, which attests to a documented continuity of the same families in the villages of Plăieșii de Jos.



CONCLUSION

The use of a language other than one's mother tongue in a setting as intimate as the inscriptions on a funerary monument is hard to explain. The believers in Plăieșii de Jos who attend the Orthodox church did not offer a clear explanation. V.A. (90 years old) says that the inscriptions on the crosses are made according to the wishes of the family, the text and language are chosen by the family, as does V.M. (72 years old). Nowadays most of the crosses are made of stone and the inscription is made by a specialised company in Târgu Secuiesc, but even before 1989 it was the same situation where the crosses were usually inscribed outside the village, but according to the wishes of the family of the deceased.

According to information from historical sources, the Romanian community of Plăieșii de Jos has a documented continuity from the beginning of the 18th century, there being information that Romanians were present here in previous centuries, but for the subject of this article the relevant information comes from this period. Documents from the 18th century indicate them as Romanians and attest to the fact that they spoke Romanian, as well as for the 19th century. The use of the Romanian language on tombstones in the 20th century coincides with census data on the use of the Romanian language, providing further confirmation for the ongoing process of ethnic assimilation in the region.

An interesting case is the funerary monument of Udrescu Nicolae (?–1962) and his wife Udrescu Eva (1893–1934). According to V.A. (90 years old) Udrescu

Nicolae was not a native of Plăieșii de Jos, only his wife was from the village; in the interwar period Udrescu Nicolae had a general store in Imper, raised two daughters who later went to Bucharest. The data provided by V.A. (90 years old) are confirmed by the school registers of Plăieșii de Jos from the interwar period, which also record the Romanian ethnicity of the Udrescu family. The only difference is that the inscription on the tombstone is in Hungarian and the names of the two husbands are written using Hungarian spelling: Udreszku Nikula and Udreszku Eva. The cross preserved to date was erected in 1962, after the death of Udrescu Nicolae, so it is not clear who made the decision to have the inscription in Hungarian and the names of the deceased written in Hungarian spelling.

A hypothesis worth pursuing in the future should consider the fact that the tombstones are public monuments and to what extent there would be community pressure to conform to the majority language spoken in the region, namely Hungarian.

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