

Studies on the History of the Reformation in Hungary and Transylvania

Edited by Gabriella Erdélyi



Academic Studies

45



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Volume 45

Katalin Péter

**Studies on the History
of the Reformation in Hungary
and Transylvania**

edited by Gabriella Erdélyi

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

This book was produced under the auspices of the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and with the support of the National Bank of Hungary.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek:
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the
Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data available
online: <http://dnb.de>.

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Typesetting: 3w+p, Rimpär
Printed and bound: Hubert & Co. BuchPartner, Göttingen
Printed in the EU
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage | www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com

ISSN 2197-0165
ISBN 978-3-647-55271-2

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List of Abbreviations

- EOE – *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek. Monumenta Comititalia Regni Transylvaniae 1540–1699* [Transylvanian Diet Records], 21 vol. Budapest, 1875–1898.
- RMNY 1 – Gedeon Borsa, Ferenc Hervay, Béla Holl, István Käfer and Ákos Kelecsényi, ed. *Régi Magyarországi Nyomtatványok/Res Literaria Hungariae vetus operum impressorum* [Early Hungarian Printings], vol. 1. 1473–1600. Budapest, 1971.
- RMNY 2 – Gedeon Borsa, Ferenc Hervay and Béla Holl, ed. *Régi Magyarországi Nyomtatványok/Res Literaria Hungariae vetus operum impressorum* [Early Hungarian Printings], vol. 2. 1601–1635. Budapest, 1983.
- WA – Martin Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1–73, Weimar, 1883–2009.

Preface

This book contains Katalin Péter's most important works on the Protestant Reformation in Hungary and Transylvania that have previously been available only in Hungarian. Like all selections, this one is also subjective and arbitrary. The editor's role has been very limited but crucial. Even though the author has encouraged many of her students, including me, to publish their major works in English as well as in Hungarian in order to reach an international audience, she has not considered this to be one of her own tasks. Instead of revising and translating her own works, a process that she found boring, Péter has always preferred to venture into new, undiscovered terrains of research. She once wrote in the introduction to a book on early modern marriages:

After a long period of deliberation I decided to apply the method of everyday cognition in this book. I will walk about in history and I will form an opinion of people who lived in the remote past as I do in everyday life¹

– a statement which also reflects her concept of history as a livable, knowable, discoverable space. In the present book she follows the same path. Péter starts the story of the Reformation by sharing a personal experience—the museum visit and visual sight of the beautiful and rich Gothic altars, which made her realize that the Church and the faithful had a vivid relationship when the Reformation appeared.

The first part of the book is composed of a work published in Hungarian in 2004 that targets both scholars and the general public. The second part includes five studies published in academic journals that have not previously been published in either German or English. Therefore, we had to omit from this book, among others, an important essay in which Péter issued a pioneering challenge to the influential idea that the new Churches placed the Bible into the hands of the ordinary people.²

1 Katalin Péter, *Házasság a régi Magyarországon* [Marriage in Old Hungary] (Budapest, 2008), 9.

2 Katalin Péter, "Bibellesen. Ein Programm für jedenmann in Ungarn des 16. Jahrhunderts," in

In general terms, we aimed to make a selection of works that highlight the Reformation both as a specifically Hungarian and as a generally European phenomenon. The Reformation has traditionally been explained in terms of theology, the corruption of the Church and the roles of princes. Katalin Péter shifts the context of the study of the Reformation to a bottom-up perspective and produces a lively narrative of the experiences and reactions of contemporary actors—including rural town and village communities, local priests and landlords—to evangelical ideas. The evolving historical narrative of the social and cultural dynamic of the Protestant Reformation in all the three parts of divided Hungary, according to the intention of the author, is not only a walk through the past but an intriguing dialogue. The author engages in a dialogue with other historians, which renders her history a part of a discourse rather than a piece of knowledge or the past depicted in detail. And all readers are invited to participate in the process of writing history, during which in certain instances the author refrains from providing a definite answer to the dilemma posed, thus allowing them to come up with their own answers.

The Editor

Iter Germanicum. Deutschland und die Reformierte Kirche in Ungarn im 16.–17. Jahrhundert, ed. András Szabó (Budapest, 1999), 7–38.

Foreword

The recent anniversary of 1517 has brought about a great deal of new results and valuable research on Reformation history, all the more so as the growing activity of historians coincides with substantial changes in the practice of our trade. We no longer believe in a history flying or struggling—the difference depended on the mood of the author—toward a uniform state of affairs all over the world. And we no longer believe in the power of universal laws directing the actions of the agents of the past. With regard to the Reformation, this means that—like all historical phenomena—it became debatable. And the focus of inquiry turned from the great personalities involved in the matter to the people who experienced the Reformation and shaped its impact on history. One may state without too much exaggeration that there are as many Reformations in existence at the moment as there are historians dealing with them.

The studies in this volume treat the Reformation as it happened in Hungary, in my interpretation. I am an old historian who has worked on different subjects, with one of my favorite topics having been the Reformation.

To start the explanation of my opinion with the personal part, I have drawn a somewhat lopsided picture. A colleague who is an excellent expert on the period called my attention to this. He said that he liked my writings on the Reformation but he could not agree with them. “Your conception is as pointed as the other,” was his comment. By “the other” he meant the traditional understanding of the Reformation. According to this understanding, the landlords, male and female, were instrumental in the reception of the new tenets. The landowners used, or most often misused, their right to determine the denominational belonging of the church buildings on their estates in establishing the new Church and then the new Churches. The logical explication of this development would be that something similar to the “Princes’ Reformation” took place. My reasoning, on the contrary, leaves out the landowners because, on the one hand, my experience is that they did not concern themselves with the spiritual needs of the subjects and, on the other hand, the power and the rights of the lords or ladies over the peasants was unrelated to ecclesiastical matters. The person who had the *ius*

patronatus over the churches of a territory was the church patron of the Latin and the Greek Churches as well. That had been the practice in Hungary since the earliest times, and this practice continued during the Reformation. Catholic lords and ladies could be the patrons of Protestant institutions or congregations and Protestants had Catholics under their patronage as well.

The landowners had no interest in changing the faith of the subjects. In addition, there were far fewer people on whom they could count as evangelical ministers than was the need of their immense estates. If, for instance, the three Zrínyi brothers who adopted the evangelical faith in the middle of the sixteenth century had wanted to turn the peasants on their domains Protestant, they would have needed to provide at least a thousand congregations with evangelically minded pastors. This would have obviously been an impossible task.

I put uneducated simple people, called *község* in Hungarian, in the place of the landowners in the Reformation. They were the first to hear of the new tenets and they spread the good news of the omnipotence of faith. As a contemporary theologian wrote in the dedication of a popular book: “you received and heard before others and you glorified and spoke to others the knowledge of God’s mercy.” That was probably an overstatement at that time and it is likely an overstatement today. To be partial, however, when it comes to writing on peasants, is, so to speak, natural. I have the feeling that history writing on the peasant that involves the historian emotionally, as Theodor Shanin put it in his 1971 *Short Historical Outline*, has not lost its emotive character. And the uneducated people of my studies published in this volume are practically the peasants. I confessed in one of the pieces to my partiality without mentioning Shanin. He came to my mind only after having read the parts together as a book.

In chronological terms, the book covers issues from the middle of the fifteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century, while geographically it treats events that occurred in the Kingdom of Hungary. Transylvania has been mentioned in the title because it was a fairly separate entity of the Hungarian kingdom in the Middle Ages and became a separate country for a time precisely at the beginning of the Reformation era. The latter development, however, was not connected to changes in religion: it was the result of wars and the Ottoman occupation of a large part of Hungary. I am not sure if one needs to emphasize the separateness of Transylvania, though this is usually done. In the text I use the Hungarian place names of the period, with the names of today and the country in which the localities are located in parentheses. It is impossible to confine the history of the Reformation to the current territory of Hungary because the lives and consciousness of its sixteenth-century inhabitants were based in the domain of shared history that had emerged in the medieval Kingdom of Hungary. It is important to take this fact into consideration, particularly in order to understand that people of various ethnicities and religions inhabited this common space.

The early chronological start of the book is the consequence of the conviction that it is inadvisable to treat intricate occurrences of history in themselves. Through a broad approach it first of all becomes clear that the relationship between the Roman church and its members was harmonious. The main proof of the good connections between the Church and its members was the series of churches with rich and splendid inner decoration, built roughly at the time when the Reformation reached Hungary. Then there was the Dózsa peasant uprising in 1514. According to the interpretation I suggest, the crusade proclaimed by the legate of Pope Leo X, Cardinal Tamás Bakócz, turned into a war against the “infidel” nobility because the simple man and the simple woman—the papal bull on the crusade addressed male and female members of all social standings—were sincerely concerned about their afterlife and were familiar with the language of the church. I would say that the same explanation is valid for the commerce in indulgence slips. It was exactly in 1517 that a local synod in Hungary had to take measures against possible abuses in this regard. A high demand for forgiveness mediated by the church was palpable at the time when evangelical tenets reached Hungary, in the 1520s.

The field was ready for the reception of the message *sola fide*. The new ideas were attributed by both friend and enemy to Martin Luther. We have very few sources on the actual contents of early evangelically minded preaching. Judging by people’s deeds, it seems that two tenets were the most alluring for the audiences: the idea of universal priesthood and the serving of the Lord’s Supper under two kinds to all members of the congregation. The attraction of the first was reflected in the activity, and long activity at that, of lay people as preachers. And according to denunciations made in the 1520s, these lay preachers were not exclusively of the male gender. The allure of the other feature of the new faith, receiving the Lord’s Supper under both kinds, was reflected in the fact that the first indication of turning to evangelical faith was to demand the Eucharist that way. The meaning of the two most popular theological tenets could be summed up as the wish for equality before God.

It would be plausible to conclude that the wish for equality before God has been one of Christianity’s main characteristics. That conclusion, however, would be incorrect. The many Catholics we know to have been at the side of the Protestants prove it to be so. I mean not merely the coexistence of different denominations but even more the hard choices. Sources tell repeatedly about some people feeling comfortable in the Roman Catholic Church while others declared themselves ready to die if coerced into its faith. A church visitation record from around 1560 that I used in several studies says that even members of a socially and intellectually homogeneous group living in a village could be of sharply divergent religious inclinations. The Hungarian case warns strongly against regarding the Reformation as the only or imperative solution to social or ecclesiastical problems.

The main benefits of the Reformation in Hungary affected not only the evangelical minded but also people who decided to stay with the old faith. The Reformation presented in this book above all provided members of the community with the possibility to doubt. The new ideas called into question knowledge that had become part of the people's essential being. This applied to everybody—both to those who accepted the new faith and to those who rejected it. During the disputes regarding the new teachings, some people chose to retain the old knowledge, the language they already spoke well, while others chose to accept the new teachings and to learn the new church language. This change was perhaps less traumatic in religiously mixed Hungary than it was in countries where people had previously experienced the ministry of one church only.

We know very little about the shock of changing religion. No direct sources revealing information on this issue have been preserved from the sixteenth century. It was different in the seventeenth century, when from the 1620s on a fairly great return to the Roman Catholic Church took place in Hungary. At the moment of my present considerations, the content of songbooks can be taken as indirect sources. They reveal the fact that the representatives of the churches were not keen on demonstrating theological differences between denominations before the faithful. Their aim was perhaps to soften the blow of conversion. And the same interpretation can be given to the phenomena I treated in the piece *Confessionally Undivided Hungary* in Part II of this volume. The Reformation did not destroy the existing networks of social relationships. To choose the evangelical faith at the time of the Reformation was most probably less staggering than turning from Protestant to Roman Catholic in the age of Catholic Reformation.

The difference between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been treated in several studies. They might seem superfluous in a book on the Reformation, were it not for the fact that the disparity was in substantial measure the result of the actions of Protestant agents. It was the evangelically minded pastors, schoolmasters and typographers who created printed culture in Hungary. Before the sixteenth century we know only of some codices and very few books, whereas beginning in 1528 printed works appeared fairly regularly. The first book in the vernacular we know of for sure was a work in German regarding protective measures against the plague, and the second was the Hungarian translation of the letters of Paul the Apostle. The initiative of the Franciscan Pelbárt Temesvári to publish Latin model sermons for ordinary parish priests—who would then perform them to the laity in the vernacular—had no continuation after his death in 1504. The Catholic clergy and Catholic intellectuals in general were strikingly absent from the period of the profound swing which led from the beginnings of printed culture to the time I call the Golden Age at the end of the sixteenth century.

The Golden Age, in my interpretation, consisted of roughly three decades at the end of the sixteenth century. Its main characteristic was that all vernaculars spoken in the country were put into print. It took 150 years for that to happen again. Besides that, a rich body of material of secular interest appeared in popular form between 1571 and 1600. For the sociological analysis of these phenomena I used the handbook *Régi Magyarországi Nyomtatványok* (Early Hungarian Printings), which gives bibliopical and thematic descriptions of all printed matter. The obtained figures appear in tables at the end of the *Golden Age and Decay* piece.

Vernacular literature, especially in popular form, was the great gift of the Reformation to the simple people that was devoid of religious considerations. The creators of this literature—Protestant schoolmasters and village ministers—worked with themes that were denominationally unbiased. The community, whether it had chosen the Reformation or remained Catholic, could read it. The importance of this fact is equal to that which we attach to the impact of books and the printed word. The simple folk were offered the opportunity, because there was demand for it, to learn about the world from the printed book without religious partialities. In the next period, after the turn of the seventeenth century, simple men and women were only provided with devotional reading, if anything, in their language. And there was no return of the Golden Age any time later.

Finally, I feel an intriguing concatenation of events in connection with the Reformation would be worth mentioning. It was constructed in Transylvania, where rulers were Roman Catholics for all but a few years during the sixteenth century. These Catholics, one woman and several men, assumed the supreme headship of the Protestant churches. The ecclesiastical and secular representatives of the churches accepted them in that position without the slightest indication of displeasure. The initiator of this curious development was one of the very few leading female political officials in Hungary, Queen Isabella. She sanctioned a law stipulating that “everybody should follow the faith of their choice.” As a result, religious tolerance could be used for the political apportion of subjects, which is discussed in more detail in Part II Chapter 4.

There is no space here for the acknowledgements customarily expressed in the introductions of books. I became indebted to very many people during the decades spent doing historical research. Citing their names and saying thank you to all of them would require another entire volume.

Part I
Coercion or Choice?
The Early Reformation in Hungary

An Opening Word

I must first make it clear that although this book concerns matters of religion it does not deal with personal faith.¹ This is a serious shortcoming, since the connection of most people to a religion or a church is based upon faith. Some historians believe that religious themes should be left to theologians, while others decline to deal with issues of faith because they themselves espouse no spiritual creed. I uphold the commonly held conviction that faith manifests itself in deed. Therefore, one cannot stray too far from the mark if one examines the actions of others without dissecting personal faith, though always presuming its influence.

The usage of the term “church” is closely connected to this issue. I use this word in a secular sense in this work to refer to the ecclesiastical organizations of various religious denominations. Although I know that in theological terms there is a single Christian mother church, this tenet can scarcely be applied within the context of a secular historical narrative. The fact that most Christians regard their own denomination as the sole true church and embodiment of original Christianity makes application of this doctrine impossible. Since I strive to emphasize the essential unity within the Christian church in this book, I do not use the distinction between Catholic Christian and Protestant Christian that is expressed so frequently in Hungarian public discourse.

For citations I used *The Bible: New International Version*. International Bible Society, 1973. Many editions.

1 Part I of this volume was first published in Hungarian: *A reformáció: kényszer vagy választás?* (Budapest, 2004).



Fig. 1. Master MS, *The Visitation*

1 Introduction: Art Treasures and Historiography

One of the most surprising experiences of my life took place at the Hungarian National Gallery. After walking through the gallery's permanent exhibition of Late Gothic religious art two or three times, I suddenly realized that the vast majority of beautiful winged altarpieces and church statues on display had originated from the period just prior to the Reformation or during the years around 1520 when evangelical teachings reached Hungary.

Standing right next to the entry of this exhibition of Late Gothic religious art, for example, stands a stunning, larger-than-life-size sixteenth-century carved wooden statue of the crucified Christ bleeding from five wounds from a church in Gyöngyös. It was made sometime in the early sixteenth century. The following room contains Master MS's 1506 painting *The Visitation*, depicting the meeting of the Virgin Mary pregnant with Christ and Saint Elizabeth pregnant with Saint John the Baptist. In my opinion, this is the most beautiful painting ever created in old Hungary. The Visitation is a peerless work, even though from the standpoint of mere dry facts there is nothing exceptional about it. Both the color of the clothing of the two figures shown in the painting as well as the movement with which Elizabeth touches Mary's abdomen are familiar from other depictions of this scene on numerous artefacts. However, no other artist has evinced the harmony of the earthly and transcendent that is embodied in the persons of Mary and Elizabeth as well as Master MS did in *The Visitation*. This painting is rightfully contained in most histories and albums regarding the art of Hungary.

Standing next to *The Visitation* in the Hungarian National Gallery exhibition are elements of altarpieces produced at the beginning of the sixteenth century. To the left of the painting is an ornately carved wooden *Pietà*, a broad-cloaked Madonna with the dead Christ in her lap. This image of a woman whose face is beset with pain, and the male figure showing many marks of suffering, was originally located above the altar of the church in Keszthely. To the right of the *Visitation* painting is an image of John the Evangelist from a church in Okolicsnó (Okoličné, Slovakia). In it, he looks on it like a living person. The *Pietà* and the John the Evangelist works are smaller than life-size. Among the very large winged altarpieces and statues in the next room stands

an enormous Saint Nicholas triptych from a church in Nagyszalók (Vel'ký Slavkov, Slovakia). According to the date on the picture, it was made in 1503. The gold statue of Nicholas wearing his bishop's clothing rises up halfway from the opulently gilded background on the central panel of the triptych, while the wings contain panels showing the four episodes of the legend of the saintly bishop. I did not find the half statue and the panel paintings to be particularly captivating.

However, there is a wonderful scene depicted on the predella of the altarpiece. If viewers did not know that the image illustrated figures from the Bible, they might believe that it portrayed an ordinary family idyll: two female figures, a younger one sitting on the left and an older one sitting on the right, with a nude little boy stepping from the former toward the latter. In his hand the child holds a rose branch with bud and open flower. The older woman with covered head extends an apple toward the boy. Because the image is on an altarpiece, it clearly shows the mother Virgin Mary and her mother Saint Anne playing with the child Christ, though any mother or grandmother could imagine themselves in their place.

Certain church paintings and statues, in fact, display the features of genuine people. I consider the most interesting such work in the Hungarian National Gallery to be the votive image of Johan Hütter, citizen of Kassa (Košice, Slovakia). The details on this image are clearly visible due to the fact that it is practically the same size as the 140 cm x 95 cm *The Visitation*. Sitting on the right side of the painting is the Virgin Mary, to whom flying angels carry a crown. Enthroned on the clouds at the top of the image is God the Father. Three kneeling figures represent the central motif and most conspicuous element in the image. Clearly recognizable on the left-hand side is the person of John the Evangelist, who is almost always depicted, as in this image, with short, curly hair and wearing claret-colored clothing. John the Evangelist may have been the patron saint of Johan Hütter. Kneeling before Saint John with hands clasped in prayer, Hütter is likely depicted as realistically as he could have been in an early sixteenth-century painting. Next to Hütter kneels another, disproportionally small male figure, obviously his son, who may have already been dead. This painting originates from around the year 1520.

The reader may ask: what was so surprising about these works on display at the gallery?

It is well-known that the late Gothic style, which emerged in Central Europe in the years 1440–1470 and flourished for more than a century, constituted an organic component of art in Hungary. Why is it not natural that church interiors in Central Europe should be abundantly adorned with winged altarpieces, statues and paintings near the end of this period?

The answer is simple: because these art treasures did not fit the generally accepted historical picture of the Reformation. The Hungarian National Gallery opened its permanent exhibitions in 1979, when we still thought that the Reformation became part of the agenda of history as a result of the decline of the medieval Roman church.

According to the prevailing concept in the late 1970s, the people had turned away from the late medieval church. The spiritual needs of the laity were not satisfied by a clergy that lived in a manner unworthy of its calling, while the dissolute life of monks scandalized the people. Conditions within the church cried out for renewal and reform. One of my unforgettable memories from this time was reading the introduction to a source publication in which the Jesuit author scourged the scandalous conditions of the old church using such scathing words that I initially thought it was a sixteenth-century text.

The unambiguous and positive judgment throughout Europe of the Reformation as a force challenging a decadent old church originated in the middle of the nineteenth century. It took shape under the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution or maybe emerged within the generally optimistic evolutionist atmosphere of nineteenth-century scholarship. This evolutionist approach has made the Reformation an important phase of European economic, social and cultural development. Friedrich Engels regarded the Reformation as the first early capitalist revolution, while Leopold Ranke believed it initiated the spread of vernacular culture.

Ranke exercised a greater direct impact than Engels on historiography regarding the Reformation. One of the possible reasons for this is that Engels formulated his thesis as part of a complex conception bearing firm political and ideological connotations, whereas Ranke presents a simple, unambiguous and seemingly unassailable argument in support of the Reformation. Ranke contended that the Reformation had placed the vernacular Bible into the hands of the people, thus permitting independent reading and interpretation. This laid the foundation for the connection between the Reformation and the appearance of the modern individual. Leopold Ranke's postulates regarding the Reformation became so widely accepted that it was not proper to question them in the writing of history.

Engels' thesis on the Reformation constituted a component of Marxist historiography until the middle of the 1980s, while that of Ranke exercised an impact that transcended various schools of thought and historiographic trends. Those who counted as serious researchers could hardly write about the Reformation from another perspective. Catholic authors either avoided the subject or embraced the philosophy of Joseph Lortz, one of the greatest Catholic church historians of the twentieth century, who published an influential two-volume monograph on the Reformation, and attributed Martin Luther's protest against the Catholic Church to the Holy See's negligence and theologically assailable deeds and decisions. However, only Protestant authors such as Max Weber, Christopher Hill and László Makkai claimed that the most important elements of Europe's cultural and economic development were products of the Reformation.

The situation has changed significantly in this regard. I once hoped that a historical narrative of the Reformation would emerge that was devoid of confessional prejudice. My hopes have not been realized. Time and time again I have encountered