

Short Thesis for the degree of doctor of philosophy (PhD)

„What is our God’s will pass away”

**The custom and manuscript memories of funerals and song dictation
in the Reformed communities of Ugocsa county**

by Adél Gál

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Bartha Elek



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN
Doctoral School of History and Ethnography
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1. The aim of the thesis, the delimitation of the topic

In my doctoral thesis entitled "The custom and manuscript memories of funerals and song dictation in the Reformed communities of Ugocsa county", I aim to explore the funeral and dictation customs of the region, as well as present manuscripts used at funerals that are little known and researched in Transcarpathia.

The topic proposal was justified by a number of preliminary, partly personal concerns. Through my direct experiences, I realized that the religious practice, which included the dictation of songs, is not a general phenomenon at all if examined in a wider environment. Approaching the turn of the millennia, the number of settlements and religious communities in Transcarpathia where the custom of song dictation still existed became smaller and smaller. From this point of view, the selected villages are in a specific situation. Thanks to their seclusion, they continued to preserve the main pillars of their national, cultural and, at the same time, religious identity.

At the beginning of my ethnographic research, I came across valuable manuscripts that go back to the last century, or refer to an even earlier era. Among the materials of peasant literature, a good number of booklets containing dirges prepared for funerals were found. Examining the manuscripts proved that their discovery and publication will be complete with the description of the funeral and the introduction of the people who made the manuscripts. According to this, the main chapters of the dissertation consist of a detailed description of the funeral occasions, the custom of song dictation, and the presentation of the manuscripts.

With the results of the research, I want to prove that the once-practiced form of funerals, their order, and the course of the ceremony have kept their important moments over the decades. The form of singing that fit into the ceremonial order was one of the most important pillars of the funeral, the social occasion. In my dissertation, I am looking for answers to the following questions: To what extent did social changes and church regulations influence the order of funerals and the form of the texts belonging to the ceremonies? What role did the former cantors, pre-singers, and dictators play in the settlement, and what tasks did they perform at funerals? What significance did the manuscripts containing the funeral songs have for the cantor and later for the family? How did the community relate to the cessation of song dictation as a church practice?

What connections and correspondences can be found in the case of the texts of funeral manuscripts found in settlements situated far from each other? And what is the reason for the identical editing method? From what source do funeral songs originate? Finally: how can the funeral singing tradition of the examined region be placed in the folklore of Hungarian funerals as a whole?

In our case, in the Transcarpathian communities, it is still a very little researched area. The descriptive nature of the topic has not yet lost its validity, since the social transformation reached the communities living here later than in the other parts of the Hungarian-speaking area further west. Religion and culture still play an important role today. Objects that have been handed down for generations are still guarded with fear. Thanks to this fact, the researchability of the manuscripts that are part of the folk literature in our region still provides enough tasks for the researcher of folklore.

The novelty of the thesis can be captured in the fact that it is the first one in Transcarpathia to talk about the manuscripts containing funeral songs, and it presents in detail the person of the song dictator and the custom of song dictation, which was stopped with great difficulty, almost due to compulsion. Adherence to community norms is still present in the traditional value system of the communities of the researched area. The preservation of customs has become the cornerstone of family, community, religion, national and cultural identity.

2. The applied methods

During the preparation of the thesis, the first task was primarily to collect and organize the relevant literature related to the topic. Empirical methods, fieldwork, interviews with local residents and cantors, discussions, photo documentation, and source exploration form the backbone of the research that is the basis of the thesis. My own personal observations and experiences gained within the community contributed to all of this. The collection of material primarily covered funeral hymnals containing funeral songs, which are among the carefully guarded manuscripts of cantors and cantor families. I digitized the original manuscripts.

The field work was carried out on several occasions and at different times. I

collected part of the materials for the research in the early 2010s, mainly in Salánk and in the Ruthenian settlement near Salánk, Nagykomját (Velyki Komyaty), highlighting then the interethnic features of funeral customs. The latter was included in the scope of the research as a reference, it is included in the thesis only as an addition to some materials. In the years after 2017, I carried out fieldwork at several locations in Ugocsa and incorporated their results into my dissertation. Most of the data was provided by the cantor Árpád Botos living in Fertőszalmás and his family, to whom I returned several times. Due to the nature and scope of the thesis, I did not have the opportunity to process his unique manuscript collection. My work was helped by Lajos Józan, a pastor living in Salánk, who, in addition to numerous data, provided me with his old printed songbooks, which were mainly included in the chapter on the sources of funeral songs.

By organizing and processing the material collected during the interviews and guided conversations, the entire structure and process of the funeral customs circle emerged. It became visible how death was able to activate almost the entire community, to revive and strengthen the ties of relatives and friends. During the research, I tried to shed light on moments and ceremonial elements that have been working in the same way in the settlements for decades. The narratives of cantors who are still alive today or the data of families with cantor ancestors gave clues to the presentation of the person and task of the song dictators. Taking care of the church duties that they performed, which was considered a presbyterian activity, which included dictating songs at funerals, proved to be a priority task. By comparing the results of the investigation carried out in a few selected settlements, I tried to summarize the results covering the whole of Ugocsa.

The examination of the manuscripts forms a separate unit within the dissertation. It was necessary to compare the structural and content elements of the ten funeral songbooks presented in the thesis in order to shed light on their connections and the similarity of their motif systems. For the analysis of the manuscript texts and the examination of sources, I used printed hymnals considered as archival, and church library documents. In order to prepare the audio material for the songs with their own melodies, recordings were made in two settlements, with the participation of the cantors in Almás and the former pastor, cantors and church leaders in Salánk, as well as singers with a good voice. Through the selected ten manuscripts, I present the characteristics of the funeral hymnals and the richness of their texts.

Regarding song dictation, the thesis pays special attention to the opinions

formed about song dictation, since its cessation in the examined area did not take place as a natural process, but due to church intervention.

During the interviews with dictators and cantors recorded on a recorder, not only their church activities were described, but also an interview showing their entire life journey was conducted, the materials of which can be read in a separate chapter at the end of the dissertation in the section presenting the activities of the cantors.

3. A thesis-like listing of the results

The dissertation presents the funeral customs of the historical Ugocsa, song dictation and funeral songbooks, and is divided into eleven chapters. The **first chapter** contains the introductory thoughts, which include the purpose and methods of the research. The **second chapter** presents the investigated area and the selected settlements. The **third chapter** provides an overview of the literature on the most important research related to funerals and song dictation, as well as the most significant results of Transcarpathian ethnographic research on the subject.

The **fourth chapter** summarizes the research results related to funeral customs in the Hungarian settlements of Ugocsa in Transcarpathia. From the signs of death, through the preparation for death and the vigil, it presents the details of the funeral ceremony up to the funeral procession, which is still a living and established practice in the Reformed communities. It shows the funeral procession accompanying the hearse, which is still strictly defined today and takes place according to the previously practiced order. At the end of the chapter, the significance of funeral objects and views on the returning soul are discussed. The descriptions show that in traditional communities, neither the achievements of time nor technology can fundamentally change the previously established order of custom. Although the modernization of the 21st century affected the settlements and infiltrated the traditional plans action, it could not bring about a radical change in the local funeral folklore. The previously established order, according to which, for example, neighbors and relatives gathered at funerals perform the tasks, is still typical today. They still insist on funerals from home even in settlements where, in the meantime, a mortuary designated for this purpose has already

been built at the cemetery. The order of the vigils, the table laid at the vigil, and the prepared food are still key elements of the local tradition. The person of the gravediggers - where they are still available - has to be selected. The congregation arriving for the funeral separates according to gender in the yard according the usual order. The funeral procession also follows this rule. Most places still have a meal after the funeral.

The static points are counterbalanced by change, the relaxation of rules, the order imposed by the church. The song dictation used during vigils and funerals has now ceased, instead of the manuscript containing the songs for the dead, they sing from a book corresponding to the church ceremony. Neighbors and relatives gathered for the funeral come with the intention of helping, but in most places the baking and cooking is done for a fee by the people hired to do so. The invitation to the funeral has now been cancelled. In the smaller settlements of the region, the graves are dug by commissioned men instead of friends and relatives, also for a fee.

The **fifth chapter** presents vocal dictation. It describes its development, introduces the person of the dictators, the aspects of their selection, and the scenes of dictation. The cessation of song dictation took place gradually, first being pushed out of the walls of the church, and then also from funerals. Opinions on this are divided locally. Members of the older generation preferred to sing with dictation, while young people prefer more rhythmic songs.

The **sixth chapter** presents ten funeral hymnals. First of all, it provides information on the manuscripts, their authors, and their content. It is a significant research result that, in the case of songs in the booklets that were previously believed to be self-composed or unsourced, the investigation succeeded in proving the sources of the manuscript's texts in printed books. I divided the source into several groups according to text matching. The chapter deals with the symbolism of the texts and also provides the sheet music of some songs with their own melodies.

The **seventh chapter** presents the life and activities of two cantors, who helped the research work with a lot of information, and also provided me with their funeral hymnals and manuscripts.

The **eighth chapter** summarizes the results of the research, the **ninth chapter** gives a summary of the work in English. The **tenth chapter** lists the interviewees. The **eleventh chapter** lists the bibliography. This is followed by the appendix, which

contains photographs, texts and other images related to the chapters of the thesis.

The changes of recent decades have left their mark on society and communities, among whose members the rites and courses of action that were once believed to be traditional and accepted have become formal. During the changes at the turn of the millennia, the former standards no longer have the same importance as before.

We are all witnesses to the change and evolution of funeral customs. Thanks to the rapid social transformation experienced at the turn of the millennia and the change in people's worldview, some occasions have changed radically, while others, retaining the essential moments rooted in the ancient past, continue to live on in the present. The past roots of funeral customs can still be seen in the researched settlements. The stricter adherence to church practice, or the period of 2020 full of restrictions, could not completely erase the usual order and actions.

The order and sequence of actions of the funeral, inherited from the past and still existing to this day, is the result of family, kinship, and community cohesion. To this day, it defines its moral order. With the loosening of community and family relations experienced in recent decades, certain elements of the funeral have changed, but it does not end as long as the community preserves its identity, holds together, and as long as all this represents an obligation to the members of the community.

The custom of song dictation, which forms a large part of the thesis, as well as the texts and manuscripts related to it, are an integral part of our folk-rooted culture and Reformed religiosity. The songs that sometimes hide ancient Hungarian melodies and the manuscripts that contain them cannot be ignored. Their collection can be regarded as an important milestone in Transcarpathian ethnographic research. Introducing the ancient singing tradition and dictation method opened a new chapter in the research.

So far, a few ethnographic studies and monographs presenting settlements in our region have talked about singing with dictation, primarily highlighting the tradition. In addition, we could read about this way of singing embedded in the history and customs of some settlements. We have even less information about the manuscripts, we can only rely on data from short descriptions. No summary work was produced, just as most of the manuscripts are undiscovered.

My work attempts to do this. This thesis undertook to collect and present the

Ugocsa manuscripts. The presented booklets and notes are unique manuscripts from the point of view of the research of folk writing, and testify to the richness of folk writing.

The interviewees and cantors who are still alive today are among the church employees who were still part of the dictation of the chants, experienced it themselves, and thus could speak as an authentic source about the custom and the creation of their own manuscripts.

Although the collection did not extend beyond the borders of Ugocsa, we do have data that in other settlements, similar to the villages I examined, the custom of singing with dictation existed until recently. Moreover, there are a large number of manuscripts with a similar purpose and content. Thus, we can confidently say that the Ugocsa manuscripts preserve the memory of dictation at funerals as permanent objects and are an integral part of a large whole, the connections of which are among my further goals. The material of the manuscripts is still unprocessed. Dealing with this issue is not only expedient and necessary, but also timely.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Gál, A.:** Szövegek sokfélesége a kéziratos füzetekben: Adalékok a salánki népi írásbeliség vizsgálatához.
In: *Értékek és kihívások II. : A Nyelvi és kulturális sokszínűség Kelet-Közép-Európában: érték és kihívások.* Szerk.: Gazdag Vilmos, Karmacsi Zoltán, Tóth Enikő, Autdor-Shark, Ungvár, 29-40, 2016. ISBN: 9786177132508
2. **Gál, A.:** A lokális hagyomány és hiedelem szerepe a kisebbségi magyar közösségek kulturális identitásában: Salánk népi hiedelemvilága.
In: *Határhelyzetek V. : Sztereotípiák, választások és túlélési stratégiák kisebbségi léhelyzetekben.* Szerk.: Szoták Szilvia, Balassi Intézet Márton Áron Szakkollégium, Budapest, 154-172, 2013. ISBN: 9789638742346

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

3. **Gál, A.:** Az énekiktálás hagyománya Salánkon.
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Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (2)

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Narodna tvorčist' ta etnologija. 1, 58-63, 2022. ISSN: 2664-4282.
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Hungarian conference proceedings (1)

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Foreign language conference proceedings (1)

7. Gál, A.: The Role of the Dictation in Reformed Religiosity.

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List of other publications

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

8. Gál, A.: A néprajzi ismeretek átadásának lehetőségei a magyar mint idegen nyelvi órákon.
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11. Gál, A.: A II. világháború emlékei Jana Ferenc Kéziratos füzetében.
Ethnica. 13 (1), 10-13, 2011. ISSN: 1419-8177.

Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (7)

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Közoktatás (Kárpátalja) 25 (1-2), 34-39, 2021.
13. Gál, A.: Az "égből érkező szent levelek" a népi kéziratokban.
Limes. 7 (1), 149-156, 2020. ISSN: 2411-4081.
14. Gál, A.: Az égből érkező szent levelek: Adalékok a salánki népi írásbeliség vizsgálatához.
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15. Gál, A.: Archaikus imádságok a szakrális népi kéziratos füzetekben.
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16. Gál, A.: Salánki kéziratos imádságos füzetek elemzése: Sarkadi Etelka kéziratai.
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Hungarian conference proceedings (4)

19. **Gál, A.**: Az "égből érkező szent levelek": Adalékok a salánki népi írásbeliség vizsgálatához.
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20. **Gál, A.**: A vallási kölcsönhatások nyomai a népi kéziratos füzetekben.
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21. **Gál, A.**: Kéziratos imádságos füzetek Salánkról.
In: Vallásos kultúra és életmód a Kárpát-medencében 10. : konferencia Veszprémben a Laczkó Dezső Múzeum és a Veszprémi Hittudományi Főiskola közös szervezésében, 2014. május 20-23. Szerk.: Pilipkó Erzsébet, Fogl Krisztián Sándor, Laczkó Dezső Múzeum, Veszprém, 882-908, 2017. ISBN: 9789639938229
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Foreign language conference proceedings (1)

23. **Gál, A.**: Pro nadiktuvan" pisen" ta ĭ teksti u seli Shalanki.
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Hungarian abstracts (1)

24. **Gál, A.**: Szövegek sokfélesége a kéziratos füzetekben. Adalékok a salánki népi írásbeliség vizsgálatához.
In: Nyelvi és kulturális sokszínűség Kelet-Közép-Európában: érték és kihívások. Szerk.: Gazdag Vilmos, II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskola, Beregszász, 21, 2015.

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