The Vehicle of Pilgrimage: Spanning the Geographical and Ideological Horizons of the Way of Mary through Mariazell to Csíksomlyó

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“The end of communism was followed by collective anxiety, disorientation and, more recently, disenchantment. This post-communist situation is propitious ground for exercises in myth making...Ethnic nationalism is only the most ostentatious, visible and, all-embracing of these fantasies. Modernity itself is under attack for its supposed failure to respond to the human need for fraternity and solidarity. The national past is sanctified as the only possible reservoir of hope, pride and dignity.”

A Visceral Historicity: Time, Peripherality and Space

The avid search for the re-unification of the Hungarian peoples has become a persistent and prevalent theme within contemporary nationalistic circles, especially following the Treaty of Trianon which was signed in June 1920 when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken off into several entities, and 75% of Hungary’s territory was sectioned off and redistributed to Romania, Czechoslovakia, and what was to become Yugoslavia. In an effort to link back to the idealized identity of the past and in order to develop a stronger relationship to the historical memory of the Nagy Magyarország, the new location for religion has shifted. The “initial euphoria” that epitomized the attitudes of select members of post-communist Hungarian society eventually subsided, and was replaced by “malaise, widespread exasperation, fatigue and a general sense of

3 The Nagy Magyarország or the “Great” Hungary is a term used to refer to the pre-Trianon Kingdom of Hungary. These terms have become popular jargon for nationalistic citizens of Hungary and for quasi-“Hungarian” individuals who live outside the border. These individuals do not have citizenship but claim to be of Hungarian descent.
exhaustion.” Returning to the idealistic “fatherland” of the Nagy Magyarország, a sacred space that does not exist in the tangible, physical world is an effort to re-create a community where Hungarians from all over the world can unite in equality and solidarity through heightened emotional catharsis.

The idea of the collective, shared Hungarian nation stands as a new realm of the sacred, which remains guarded and guided by Christian symbols and saints, regardless of the push away from religion during the Communist era. Subsequently, those who identify as Hungarian have been led to reignite latent symbols of the Nagy Magyarország in order to collectively re-define and re-characterize the nation. Figurative images, such as a coloured geographic map of the historic Nagy Magyarország with an iron Cross of Lorraine placed at the center of the country, have become prevalent signs and signals of post-communist fervor. This double cross symbol was most likely introduced to Hungary during the reign of King Béla III, who was raised in the Byzantine court in the 12th century. Nine of the twelve heraldic coat of arms that have been used as national symbols of Hungary since that time bear the motif of the double cross in some shape or form. The official Hungarian coat of arms is composed of three distinct parts. A red and white shield that contains the double cross symbol on top of a crown on a three curved hill, is situated underneath a highly decorative presentation of the royal crown of St. Stephen, the first Christian king of the Kingdom of Hungary. This coat of arms, which was been in use again since 1990, was initially instigated around the reign of King Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490), who is often revered as the greatest humanist Hungarian King of the Renaissance. Corvinus was born in 1443, in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), Transylvania which is located half-way between the

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4 Tismaneanu, Fantasies of Salvation, 14.
eastern Hungarian borderline and the city of Csíkszereda. Csíkszereda is the capital of the
Hargita County and is located near the city of Ghimeş-Făget (Gyímesbükk), where the 1000 year
old eastern border of Hungary used to be prior to the Treaty of Trianon. A large double cross lies
on top of a triple curved altar approximately three kilometers from the center of Csíkszereda; this
altar is reminiscent of the right side of the Hungarian coat of arms, which is also decorated with a
double cross on top of three “mountains” (the Tátra, Mátra and Fátra mountain ranges). These
nationalistic symbols are prevalent in this geographic area and often appear as emblems of the
physical border between Hungary and Romania. These symbols also represent the ideological
border between the historical Nagy Magyarország and the “martyred” post-communist Hungary
as well as the spiritual border between the sacred land of the Catholic Magyars in comparison to
the profane landscape of the Romanians.

Figure 1- Official Hungarian Coat of Arms

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8 The Tátra, Mátra and Fátra are the tallest mountain ranges within the borders of the Nagy
Magyarország. Here, the symbol of the three curved mountain range induces feelings of power and a
claim to the land lost after the First World War. See Figure 1 and Figure 3.
Here, Transylvania is the sacred space that represents the remnant memories of the Nagy Magyarország and Romania, is personified as the profane, a nation that has unjustly claimed the land that should inherently belong to Hungary. These raging sentiments are common among modern day Hungarians and pervade as the unanimously accepted truth.

The veneration and adoration of the Virgin Mary as our Lady of Hungary, has characterized and defined the Hungarian nation from the onset of the Christianization of the land under St. Stephen, the first official king of Hungary who reigned during the early eleventh century. On the eve prior to the solemn feast of the Annunciation on August the 15th in 1038 CE, he boldly offered the nation his royal crown as well as the entirety of his soul to the Blessed Virgin. This solemn act of supplication elucidated cultural change through the repeated return to the prolific image of Mary, as the mother of the great Hungarian nation. This special allegiance to the Patrona Hungariae has acted as a powerful symbol of the nation where Mary has become a guardian of the keys to the mysteries of unlocking the great Hungarian past.

The Mária Út (Way of Mary), which is a pilgrimage and recreational hiking route system that came to fruition in 2007 as an avenue to re-unite the nation through the veneration of our Lady. The first primary route spans from Mariazell in Austria to Csíksomlyó in Transylvania,

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9 Anne-Marie Losonczy, “Pilgrims of the “Fatherland”: Emblems and Religious Rituals in the Construction of an Inter-Patriotic Space between Hungary and Transylvania,” 279.
10 Patrona Hungariae is the Latin translation of the Hungarian, Magyarok Nagyasszonya (Patroness of Hungary)
Romania, a walking distance of 1400 km, which takes around 60 days to complete in its entirety.\textsuperscript{12}

The following part of my essay will draw on personal experience from visiting six of the sixty Marian shrines along the Way of Mary, in addition to careful analysis of Hungarian articles about various pilgrimage sites. I will reference scholarly literature regarding the historical significance of the concept of pilgrimage in Eastern Europe in order to argue that the Csíksomlyói pilgrimage geographically and conceptually spans the borders of the Nagy Magyarország in an effort to re-create the Great Hungarian state. I will argue that the transitional nature of the concept of pilgrimage shows physical, geographical movement in space and time, as well as ideological movement from conceptualizing the Nagy Magyarország as the distant fatherland, to where the pilgrimage aims to return. Here, the Way of Mary mobilizes the inauguration of the masses through the collective rites of separation from normal life. The feast day in Csíksomlyó on the day prior to Pentecost acts as a liminal phase, where pilgrims and tourists embark on a journey towards an alluring yet temporal sensory threshold. Finally, the re-aggregation or reintegration phase is marked by the physical passage down the mountain side of Mt. Somlyó back to the village of Csíksomlyó; thus marking the inevitable and solemn return to normal life. Essentially, pilgrims return in order to bridge through the temporality and instability of the liminal phase of the pilgrimage, leaving yearning for the fulfillment of their aspirations.

The pilgrimage site works because it is like an eternal water bank, gushing forth from the Somlyó; a place those who claim to be Hungarian can continually return to, a place where anything and everything is still possible. For the Hungarian people, there is joy and security in being able to return to this unstructured state of “togetherness”, though clouded by the dim shade

of reality, they will never seize to believe that one day, these mountain top experiences will flower and bear supple fruit for generations to come, now and for years to come through the guidance, protection, and prayers of our Lady of Hungary.

Moving Memories: Restoring the Past

The Marian pilgrimage site in Mariazell is one of the most prestigious pilgrimage sites in all of Central Europe and has become an important Hungarian shrine, regardless of the fact that this city was actually never a part of the Nagy Magyarország. The miracles associated with King Louis I of Hungary in 1487 are reminiscent of the foundation of the Csiksomlyó pilgrimage site in Romania. Louis I allegedly had a dream about the statue of Mary instructing him to be brave in battle against the imminent rise of the Turks, whose army numbered 80 000 while the Hungarians merely had 20 000 men. Louis I’s success was immediately accredited to the Virgin of Mariazell. They immediately rushed to the shrine to pay homage following their victorious triumph and pursued to restore the church later that year by means of their own expenses. The small wooden Romanesque statue of the Virgin (Magna Mater Austriae), holding a Christ Child, is now housed in the Lady Chapel. Christ holds an apple and a fig, which recalls the Fall of Adam in communion with the ultimate redemption of man through the Son of God. Both Mary and Jesus are completely covered in lavish garments imbued with the Hungarian, Croatian,

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Czech, Slovak and Austrian coat of arms respectively. In considering the variety of nations that claim to have direct access or privilege with the *Magna Mater Austriae* in Mariazell, these details suggest that this site might double as a public arena for political and social competition.

Sixty smaller Marian shrines, churches, and major basilicas are located on the Way of Mary route, which cuts through national boundaries, and in a way, re-unites the historical memory of the Nagy Magyarország through the personage of Mary. Within the borders of the 125,641 mile long Nagy Magyarország there are 140 other Marian shrines, ten of which are linked to weeping icons of the Madonna. Pilgrims and tourists continually walk the Way of Mary route in shorter or longer segments throughout the year, for recreational, social, physical and spiritual reasons. I personally have visited six of the primary Marian shrines in Hungary on this route, which are as follows: the Primatial Basilica of the Blessed Virgin Mary Assumed Into Heaven Basilica in Esztergomb, the Kútvolgyi Joyful Mother Chapel in Budapest, the National Joyful Mother Center in Mátraverebély-Szentkút, the Our Lady Queen of Hungary Basilica and shrine in Márianosztra, the Little Joyful Mother Basilica in Budapest, and the Snowy Joyful Mother church in Szeged. Apart from the Marian shrines in Budapest, these churches are located in close proximity to the current national borderlines of the post-Trianon Hungary.

Esztergom, Márianosztra and Mátraverebély-Szentkút are all located within 50 km of the Slovak border while Szeged is approximately 50 km away from the southern Romanian border line. It is this emphasis on outside vs. inside, free land vs. lost land, sacred space vs. secular space that

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17 In Hungarian the original names of the shrines are as follows: Nagyboldogasszony és Szent Adalbert primási főszékesegyház- Esztergom, Kútvolgyi Boldogasszony Kápolna- Budapest, Nemzeti Kegyhelye Nagyboldogasszony templom- Mátraverebély-Szentkút, Istennek és a Boldogságos Szűz Márianak, Magyarok Nagyasszonyának főszentelt kegy templom- Márianosztra, Máriaremetei Kisboldogasszony Bazilika- Máriaremete, Havas Boldogasszony templom- Szeged.
characterizes these shrines. Esztergom, Márianosztra and Mátraverebély-Szentkút as well as both churches in Budapest are all located on steep hills that are incredibly difficult to climb by foot, while the shrine in Szeged is located on the outskirts of the city. The fact that it is difficult to get to these shrines elevates their status and appeal for pilgrims who aspire to “fight” for the prize of their laborious journeys. Varying in size from minute, such as the Kútvölgyi Joyful Mother Chapel in Budapest, to the grandiose Basilica in Esztergomb, the tallest church cathedral in Hungary, these shrines are major touristic sites for religious pilgrims and generally all citizens of the Hungarian nation. Travelling to these borderline destinations recalls the aforementioned general yearning to reclaim territory beyond the boundaries of the Hungarian nation and in essence, beyond the sacred space located inside these churches.

Pilgrimage and Peregrination: A Hungarian Rhapsody

The most influential and culturally significant pilgrimage event associated with the Way of Mary takes place around the feast of Pentecost, around fifty days after Easter. The culmination of the pilgrimage takes place in Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc) Transylvania, a small village in the Hargita county along the banks of the Somlyó River. In 1567, János Zsigmond who was the king of Hungary and the Prince of Transylvania, sought to reform the people of the Csík, Gergyó, and Kászon regions and force them to take on Unitarianism, which was favored by the king at that time. According to popular folk legend, on Pentecost Saturday of that year, Zsigmond and his army attacked the Csík region where the Catholic community of Csíksomlyó

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19 Transylvanian Hungarians from these regions are referred to as the “Székely” people (Szekels) Anne-Marie Losonczy, “Pilgrims of the “Fatherland”: Emblems and Religious Rituals in the Construction of an Inter-Patriotic Space between Hungary and Transylvania,” 271.
fought relentlessly in order to maintain their Catholic roots. Their success was accredited to the prayers dedicated to our Lady of Hungary (*Babba Maria* for the Csángó Hungarians living in Transylvania), to whom the women, children, and elderly prayed in the Franciscan Sarlós Boldogasszony church while the men were fighting for their freedom. Upon their success, Zsigmond and his army immediately went to pay homage at the statue of the Csíksomlyói Virgin, which was given to the community as a gift somewhere around 1510 to 1520. This Middle Renaissance statue of pure linden tree is allegedly one of the tallest wooden shrine statues in the entire world, measuring 2.27m high. This statue portrays the royal Mother of God depicted as the “woman clothed with the sun” (Rev.12:1), with the infant Jesus on her arm, the moon before her feet, a halo of twelve stars above her head, and a scepter in her left hand (Figure 2).

![Figure 2- The Statue of the Csíksomlyói Virgin](image)

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20 This church was built by the Franciscan Fathers in the 1440s, in honor of the *Sarlós Boldogasszony*, the Virgin of the Visitation. The veracity of this event is questioned by modern day scholars. The Way of Mary Association 2008-2014. “Csíksomlyó”. Accessed October 21, 2014. [http://mariaut.hu/tart-farticle-2-74-1/Mi_a_Maria_Ut](http://mariaut.hu/tart-farticle-2-74-1/Mi_a_Maria_Ut).

János Zsigmond and his army communally decided to celebrate their victory on an annual basis on Pentecost Saturday in honor of the miracle of the Csíksomlyói Virgin—a tradition which has persisted throughout the tumultuous history of Hungarian and Romanian relations throughout the centuries. The Franciscan church that houses the statue was acknowledged as a basilica minor papalis in 1948 by Pope Pius XII and has continued to flourish since. In essence, the “true revival” of the shrine took place in the 1990’s when the religious ban of the communists was lifted after 40 years of the restriction of the pilgrimage. In the early 1990s, pilgrims came from anywhere between 60 to 80 different regions in Hungary and Transylvania. This number continued to grow as in 1996 pilgrims arrived from 131 regions, which nearly doubled in 1997 as pilgrims came from over 240 regions. In 2013, it was estimated that around 300,000 international and local Hungarian pilgrims flocked to this Marian shrine on Pentecost Saturday for the open air mass dedicated to the Holy Spirit, the statue of the Csíksomlyói Virgin, and in commemoration of the Nagy Magyarország. These modern-day pilgrims, who travel to Csíksomlyó in order to take part in the ritual cleansing of their sins through participation in the Feast of Pentecost and by taking part in the Sacraments of the Altar, ultimately become transformed through their yearning to become whole and holy once again. Pilgrims become unified with Christ through their suffering induced by their journey to the difficult and distant location of the shrine. These pilgrims eventually arrive at the destination of the open-air three-curved altar, which is located in between two mountains in the valley (Figure 3).

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Those who partake in this Pilgrimage on Pentecost Saturday unite themselves with both the multifaceted body of Christ through the cleansing of their sins, and with the broader culturally diverse Hungarian community who have come to Csíksomlyó in honor of their religious identity and their connection to the Fatherland (Nagy Magyarország).

Every year, arriving on foot or conveniently on expensive train tours, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, tourists, and nationalists arrive to this Marian shrine, the destination of the Way of Mary in order to pay tribute to our Lady of Hungary in a collective, mass exaltation of the cult of the Virgin and the cult of the Nagy Magyarország. This pilgrimage brings together the once separated Hungarian peoples from all around the world, where pilgrims essentially journey to a sacred place where the concept of the Nagy Magyarország remains under the protection of our Lady of Hungary. The incredible diversity of individuals that arrive at this pilgrimage site, where citizenship, age, culture, financial status, and gender are breached, depicts that Turner’s communitas model does indeed exist where the idea of the Nagy Magyarország acts as the sacred, and the concept of our Lady of Hungary acts as an intercessory for the new civil religion.
of the nation. Using a common guardian from the past in order to re-create a unified Hungary, these pilgrims strive to create a normative communitas community where their differences are overlooked in favor of the collective goal of unifying the lost nation of Hungary (Figure 4).

The formal procession of the pilgrims during the 12:30 pm mass on Pentecost Saturday in the Csíksomlyó valley is marked by hundreds of thousands of flags, crosses, and cultural emblems signifying different localities in Transylvania and Hungary. All regions, namely the Gyergyó, Felcsík, Alcsík, Felsőnárádremete, Sóvidék, Udvarhely vidéke, Maros, Háromszék, Brasso, Gyímes, and the Csangó Hungarians from Moldva proceed in orderly fashion to the field which is sectioned off accordingly into square units identified by flags that bear the names of the villages, cities, and counties to which the pilgrims belong.\textsuperscript{26} The solemn mass concludes with the

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{inscription on double cross}
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\textit{We Belong Together, Every Hungarian is Responsible for Every Hungarian.}

\textsuperscript{26} Tamás Mohay, “Vonzáskor Változásban: Búcsújárás Csíksomlyóra,” 291.
communal singing of the Hungarian Anthem, the new Szekel Anthem and the ancient Szekel Anthem which is dedicated to the Virgin of Csíksomlyó.  

A vast network of enthusiastic pilgrims still travel by way of foot along the Way of Mary and along other routes from the entire span of the Carpathian Basin towards Csíksomlyó, several days before the pinnacle of the feast on the Saturday before Pentecost. Pilgrims who are restricted in terms of age or health can rely on other more convenient modes of transportation such as arriving via pre-booked bus tours, train, or car-pooling. A plethora of travel companies have begun to grapple with this sensational return to the ideological “fatherland” of the Nagy Magyarország by planning exciting four day travel packages that incorporate the Csíksomlyói pilgrimage within the nostalgia tour program. The journey begins in the capital of Hungary, Budapest, with most tourists leaving from the Keleti Railway Station or the Népliget Bus Terminal in Pest. Tourists and pilgrims alike who choose to travel to Romania via rail stay in remote countryside villages on the first day of the tour, predominantly in the Csík county in villages such as Csíkkarcfalva, Csíkdánfalva, Csíkmadaras, Csíkrákos and Madéfalva. They continue on towards Csíkszereda the following day, where they join the flock of thousands that charge and proceed toward the Csíksomlyói pilgrimage site. Exhausted and enthralled these pilgrim-tourists finish their tour of Transylvania on Pentecost Monday. This four day program costs approximately 62 900 forints (210 Euros) per person depending on which travel company they book their tickets with and how many months in advance they pre-register. It is imperative to note that the average monthly salary of a middle class Hungarian citizen who would be interested in such a tour is approximately 80 000 forints (264 Euros). 

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27 See Appendix I.
29 80 000 HUF – 358 CAN
popular for pilgrims on a lower budget, where tickets for four day tours begin around 40 000 forints, which is around half of an average worker’s monthly pay. One such tour led by the Ken-Edi Travel group begins in Budapest and incorporates visits to Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), the Gyíkos Lake, the Bekás Cliffs, the Maros River and quite naturally, incorporates opportunities to taste the culinary delights of the rural Szekel people in Transylvania. These quasi-religious tourists are essentially trying to find the sacred within the profane. Their actions denote that they are attempting to sacralise the regions that they travel to in order to immortalize and transfigure the current political state of the counties located within the Carpathian Basin.

Identity and Liminality: The Religio-Politics of Ethnic Identity

The pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó brings together a plethora of diverse and unique individuals who build upon their common cultural heritage based on the ideals of the past, the solicitious motherly miracle working statue of the Virgin, and the overly idealistic memories of the façade of the Nagy Magyarország. The Way of Mary, beginning in Mariazell and culminating in Csíksomlyó breaches physical time, geographical space, political and social conflict and financial loss. It is a route that mends lost bonds through the amalgamation and albiet, temporary reunification of those who hold true to thier Hungarian anscestry. The feast day in Csíksomlyó acts as a liminal phase where religious pilgrims and secular nationalists put aside differences in favor of feeling as they are still a living part of the web of the Hungarian line. Submerging into the crowd, where individuality is fenced in by the greater collective, participants may, though impermenantly, begin to foster utopian ideas about the future Nagy

Magyarország. There is a surrender of statuses where all Hungarians become united through their common ancestry. In Csíksomlyó, claiming to be a *Magyar* is more important than what country you were born in or what religious denomination you belong to. Here, the ideological boundaries of culture and religion amalgamate in order to accommodate a revitalized notion of Christianity—one that is both global and local. All pilgrimage sites built in close proximity to the historic Hungarian border seem to bridge the gap between the past and the present. These geographic spaces become ideological; they become avenues for pilgrims to be able to safely meander into the realms of the sacred. These sites are imbued with a lively duality, where pilgrims become entranced by the allure of a waiting space where the weight of everyday life is lifted. Even the feast in Csíksomlyó at Pentecost is clouded by profane rituals, commercialist endeavors and pleasure seeking individuals who only see the monetary profit behind the smiles and songs of the ecstatic pilgrims. In essence, pilgrims geographically travel beyond the periphery of the familiar and ideologically into the wild unknown in order to gaze into the all-knowing pupils of Our Lady of Csíksomlyó. In seeking the protection of the *Patrona Hungariae* they believe that they might finally be able to journey towards the realms of the ancient Fatherland and find their way back to the newly restored Nagy Magyarország. In moving beyond boundaries they might finally get a glimpse of what was and what could be.
Bibliography


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