

# Rethinking the Glorious Past of Hussarism: Cultural heritage as a way of representing identity through the example of Szekler-Hungarians in Romania

**Emese Pál**

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The article examines currently active traditional hussar associations that are part of reenactment movements in Szeklerland (Romania). The concept of the hussar is no longer used in military contexts but rather in leisure time activities. The heritage-preserving hussars actively participate in the cultural life of Harghita County through spectacular hussar parades and colorful performances and customs, rich in representations and symbols. The hussars also have their own invented traditions, where the intention of nation-building is palpable. It is important for them to live and represent their national identity, set examples, preserve traditions, build communities, and revive and live the Szekler-Hungarian traditions. They also play an active role in reviving the historical equestrian past of the Szekler region and promoting equestrian sports.

**Key words:** minorities in Romania; safeguarding of cultural heritage; hussars; invented traditions; identity, representations, nation-building efforts, reenactment

**Contact:** Emese Pál, Doctoral School of Hungarology Studies, Hungarian Department of Ethnography and Anthropology, St. Horea, No. 31, 400202, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; e-mail: emese.pal1@ubbcluj.ro, ORCID 0000-0003-3337-5231

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In Romania, being a post-communist country, the historical reconstruction of identity narratives is extremely complex, especially in the case of ethnic minorities. In the transitional period after the fall of communism, the issue of ethnicity and nationalism continued to dominate, but different interpretations were divisive among Romanians and Hungarians, who seem to have incompatible interests on this issue. The legal, political and economic situation of minorities in Romania has been significantly improved by Romania's accession to NATO and the European Union, which apply international standards on the subject (Salat – Novák 2015: 83). National minorities also played an active role in the overthrow of the communist dictatorship in Romania and in the subsequent period, after 1990, Hungarian minorities had the opportunity to publicly celebrate historical events related to the history of the Hungarian state (Salat – Novák 2015: 67–71).

Also in the post-communist period, Hungary, as the kin state of the largest minority in the country, contributed to the transformation processes in Romania, both through inter-state relations and government measures that directly affected the Hungarian minority in Romania (Salat – Novák 2015: 64). The specific consequences of the country's post-communist situation are also highlighted by Romanian historians, who also emphasise the negative impact of the dictatorship on the suppression and censorship of cultural traditions. Adrian Velicu, quoting Mircea Martin, stresses that the issue of national identity was so significantly distorted and repressed during the communist period that it will be necessary in the coming years to further explore, define and assert it not only for Romanians but also for national minorities within the state (Adrian 2020: 118).

It is undeniable that the communist regime has had a significant impact on post-communist social life in

Romania. Communism and the atomization it brought with it destroyed social cohesion and communities, but in addition to its negative effects, scholars of majority Romanians also emphasize the need to come to terms with and overcome the negative grievances of the past, which requires moral responsibility, dialogue and communication. An authentic democratic community cannot be built on the denial of past crimes and abuses (Stan-Tismăneanu 2015: 23–39).

A great help in understanding the conditions surrounding the fall of communism in Romania is Katherine Verdery, who gives us an insight into the actual letters she received from Romanians. These reveal the double feeling around the protests (fear and power), the desire for freedom, and freedom of the press, the right to abortion and people's optimism about the future (Verdery 2015: 3–21).

In the period following the regime change, in a climate of uncertainty, several traditional hussar associations were established in the predominantly Szekler-populated counties. They have been functioning ever since, enriching the cultural life of the inhabitants of Szekler villages and towns. They are modelled on the traditional hussars in Hungary and were established on the territory of Romania.

These traditional associations are the focus of my research. This form of tradition-keeping, which also seeks to reconstruct history, is part of the reenactment movements that are becoming increasingly widespread today. Within this context, it is linked to one of the most widespread phenomena of this kind, the military reenactment genre (Agnew – Lamb – Tomann 2020).

I will examine the reasons for the associations' launch, their initial and current objectives and their annual activities. I am interested in, who wears the hussar's habit, on what occasion, with what regularity and for what motives they do so. I am also curious to know why there is a need to market the image of historical hussarism today. I try to interpret the traditional hussar movements in Szeklerland against the theoretical background of reenactment studies and invented traditions. My aim is to map this invented tradition of the present day, to put it into a pragmatic framework, and to study the habits of the traditional hussars using ethnographic-anthropological methods. My work is contemporary research, mapping and reflecting current social and cultural realities. I do

not intend to write a military history article, but I believe that a brief overview of the hussars in Szeklerland is essential for my topic.

More and more newspaper articles, sports club slogans, books and programmes claim that the Hungarian nation is a nation of horses. This is mainly proved by the fact that a horse-related legend, the legend of the *white horse*, is closely linked to the historical event of the conquest of Hungary. In addition, hussarism is still alive in the public consciousness as a light cavalry force that became famous throughout Europe on the basis of Hungarian models (Réfi 2021: 5–8).

Throughout the history of Hungary, there have been many glorious hussars who have become the victors of battles through their courage, strength and ingenuity. In addition to the events of the past, the interest in equestrian sports, riding and horsemanship as a way of preserving traditions is also outstanding today.

### **Scope and method of the research**

My current research is based in the county of Harghita, which is located in Transylvania, Romania. This county, which is part of the Szeklerland region, has a population of 85.2% ethnic Hungarians, while the percentage of ethnic Romanians in the county is only 13 %.<sup>1</sup> According to the 2011 census data, more than half of the population (66.4 %) belong to the Roman Catholic denomination.

Szeklerland is a distinct region, whose inhabitants have a specific regional identity, which is a result of the region's former religious identity and its Hungarian character. Szeklerland is the most extensive ethnic block of the Carpathian Basin Hungarian communities. It is the only coherent Hungarian-majority region in Transylvania, with a total of 475,000 Hungarians, 38 % of Transylvanian Hungarians. Covering the central part of the counties of Harghita, Covasna and Mures, the region still has an 80 % Hungarian population. The Hungarian character of the area, its Hungarian institutional systems, as well as the political goals and language use of its inhabitants, create a unique situation (Kiss 2017: 138).

For the purposes of my research, I also consider it important to point out that, according to a survey commissioned by the Eurotrans Foundation, the proportion of adult Hungarians in Romania with Hungarian citizenship exceeded 60% by the beginning of 2024<sup>2</sup>.

Hungarian is a *minority mother tongue*, belonging to a national minority in Transylvania. And its use is derived from the right of individuals to their identity (Horváth 2017: 198).

Transylvania was part of Hungary until 1920, when it was annexed (together with Harghita County) to Romania under the Treaty of Trianon. This also explains the fact that the population of Hungarian ethnicity is so high in Harghita County. In Romania, the communist rule lasted until the end of 1989, and it was only in the years following the change of regime that the Hungarians in Transylvania had the opportunity to live and express their Szekler-Hungarian identity.

In order to better understand and learn about the currently active traditional associations in the county, which has a historical past that includes military service on horseback, I used a mixed research methodology. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the leaders of the traditional hussars associations, as well as focus group and individual interviews with members of the associations. I also examined their annual activities, their objectives and the way they operate, as well as their traditional customary practices. I also personally visited hussars-related events and examined their agendas and scenarios. During the participant observation, I also categorized the codes of the hussars' customary systems using the theoretical and methodological specificities of custom research (Pozsony 2006: 65–123). In addition to this, I conducted a questionnaire survey with members of traditional hussar associations, which focused on the demographic background of the individuals, their national identity, their feelings and activities related to hussarism and the association, and I also tried to investigate their consumption habits. The questionnaire contains fifty-eight questions, fourteen of which are open questions. By combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, I sought to obtain answers to both qualitative and quantitative questions.

I was also interested to know why people became traditional hussars, how and why they became interested in this form of traditionalism and what motivated them to join the associations. As there is a rich use of symbols in hussar parades and events, I also examined this separately. In Harghita County, 10 traditional hussar associations are functioning today.

My basic working hypothesis is that after the regime change, in an unknown and uncertain world, in a situation of crisis, Szekler men needed a tangible, recallable and prominent figure in the glorious past, which would provide an opportunity to redefine elements of identity. I believe that being an ethnic minority, it is important for the Szeklers to regularly emphasize and live their identity in such a horse-riding community event, wearing Szekler costumes, using flags and various visual representational elements.

### Overview of the history of hussars

Today, there are no professional hussars in Romania, but interestingly, the historical figure of the hussar lives on and is no longer a prominent figure in military life, but in leisure activities. Throughout history, the hussars of the county I am researching initially served as border guards, and in the feudal period, the social structure of Szeklerland was dominated by the horsemen, who were obliged to serve on horseback.

The Szekler soldiers were also granted stable social, political and economic rights by the community privileges they received in exchange for their military services during the Middle Ages. It also provided them with a strong bond and privileges such as tax exemption, self-government and privileged rank (Hermann 2009: 38).

Thus, the fact that the Szekler people performed significant border protection and military functions in the feudal era had a strong impact on their mentality, identity and self-consciousness (Hermann 2003: 98). Until the end of the 1700s, military service was one of the most important references of Szekler identity. Self-confidence based on Szekler freedom and independence became part of the national identity (Egyed 2009: 23–24).

Not only during the Middle Ages, but also during most of the modern era, Szeklerism and soldiering were inseparable concepts, and even social relations were in many cases mainly dependent on professional soldiering (Kordé 2009: 137).

In Transylvania, between 1762 and 1764, an attempt was made to set up a new socio-military corps on the orders of Maria Theresa, but in Szeklerland the organisation was protracted due to popular resistance. History associates the establishment of the Border Guard with the “Madéfalvi Calamity”. The Szeklers complained

that their military traditions and Szekler characteristics were ignored during the organisation and that they were obliged to serve outside the borders of their homeland. The Szeklers tried to implement a way of united action and solidarity, and contemporary sources show that many of them recognised the danger of the dismemberment of Szeklerland (Egyed 2016: 388–393).

The history of the Szekler Border Guard is detailed in numerous historical works. The book published from the manuscript of Domokos Gróf Teleki, which was left behind, tells the history of border guards, extending up to the revolution (Gróf Teleki 1877). In the early 1900s, the work was criticised for not being based on the complete historical material, since Domokos Gróf Teleki did not carry out archival research either in Vienna or in Szeklerland, and thus did not provide a complete picture of the organisation of the Szekler border guards, and he was largely familiar only with the official files, not with the Szekler people's point of view (Szádeczky 1908). The author of the review tries to present the events related to the establishment and operation of the border guards on the basis of proven historical facts, a detailed documentary archive, texts in Latin and Hungarian, letters, censuses, tables, indexes of names and subjects.

The details of the forcible setting up of the border police and the associated massacre of innocent people are summarised by Ernő Albert (Albert 2004).

The history of the regiment, its formation, operation and battles are described by many Hungarian historians. I would like to highlight the work of Tamás Csikány, Attila Süli and József Nagy, who describe not only the border guards' battles, but also their equipment and the current social context.

Interestingly, I would also like to mention that the Szekler hussar regiment even fought in Bohemia, in 1778–79 during the War of the Bavarian Succession, showing great valour (Gróf Teleki 1877: 151–152).

Despite the fact that the border guard system had been consolidated, the Szekler people took every opportunity to demand its destruction or at least its reform. In 1848–49 the Szekler border guard troops switched to the side of the Hungarian War of Independence and remained with it throughout, so the victorious Habsburg power disbanded the Szekler border guard system in 1851 (Egyed 2016: 399).

The War of Independence of 1848–49 can be seen as the last outstanding battle in the history of hussars, who became heroes of national mythology. The emergence of mass armies, the perfection of firearms and technical progress did not favour the hussars, so their decline was observed in the second half of the 19th century (Réfi 2021: 9–11). Many believe that the heyday of the cavalry came to an end with the arrival of large-scale handguns and the rise of mechanisation, but according to Gyula Kedves, the picture is more nuanced than that. He argues that the change was not linear, but that it was not favourable to the cavalry at a rapid pace (Kedves 2021: 46).

World War I was an extraordinary loss of life for the Szekler people, with approximately more than 80,000 Szekler soldiers killed, wounded or taken prisoner of war. And the fact that Szeklerland was annexed to Romania still has significant consequences. During the years of World War II, the hussar battalions and the hussar squadrons operated in a variety of organisational frameworks. The historian Tamás Csikány describes these in detail, as well as the journey of the Szekler regiments on the Eastern Front (Csikány 2016: 361–364).

In the period between the two world wars, Szeklerland was characterised by a change of empire, the annexation of its territory from Hungary to Romania, adaptation to the minority situation and a break from Hungarian nation-building. The border position of Szeklerland also changed, it was placed in the centre of the new country, but its peripheral position remained (Bárdi 2016: 393).

Following the Second Vienna Decision, the troops of the Hungarian Royal Army entered Northern Transylvania in the autumn of 1940. In Szeklerland, the entry was accompanied by a veritable national celebration. In the period that followed, the troops permanently stationed in Szeklerland began to settle down. József Nagy summarises the history of the Szekler Border Defence Forces between 1940 and 1944, which is of great importance for the memory and heritage of the region. The border guard troops stationed in Szeklerland, the 27th Szekler Light Division and the Szekler Border Guard together formed the Szekler Border Guard Force. In March 1944, Hungary was again forced to send a full army to the battlefield following the German invasion. The Army had nine corps at that time, which were organised into three armies. The 1st Army went on the offensive against



the Red Army on the German side in mid-April 1944. The 27th Szekler Light Division from Târgu Mures was also assigned to the army, as well as the 2nd Independent Szekler Mountain Hussar Squadron, whose departure took a heavy toll on the Szekler border defences (Nagy 2016: 665–668).

The short transitional period after World War II and the establishment of the Communist Party dictatorship (1944–1989) marked a new chapter in the history of Hungarians in Romania, which also meant a break in the conditions of minority existence. Private property and the rule of law were abolished, and the specific minority cultural institutions and networks were dismantled or largely reorganised. The political, economic and cultural frameworks that had previously determined the life of the Hungarian minority community to a significant extent also disappeared (Novák 2016: 675).

Szeklerland was still in the grip of an economic crisis, severe energy and food supply problems, and complete

ideological rigidity in early December 1989. The changes in nationality policy only exacerbated the problems at the national level, minority institutions were depleted and deliberately suppressed, local Hungarian cadres were repressed, and assimilationist tendencies and nationalist stigmatisation were reinforced in school education. By the end of the 1980s, the institutional background of Hungarians in Romania had been considerably reduced. Only the historical churches had an institutional system covering the whole of Transylvania. There were small intellectual groups in almost every settlement, but these could only be networked nationally by the cultural elite grouped around the still-existing Hungarian media. March 15, 1990, was an outstanding celebration for the Hungarians of Szeklerland, as it was the first time in many years that they had the opportunity to celebrate the 1848 revolution in a public space. It was also the first time since 1945 that Hungarian national symbols appeared in public space (Novák 2016: 786–795).



Fig. 1. Equestrian skill competition. Photo by Emese Pál, 2023



### Traditional hussars after the change of regime

In a military context, there are no more professional hussars in Harghita County, or in Romania. However, the reputation and the sense of life of the hussars has not disappeared after the last hussars were disbanded. The figure of the hussar is present in many layers of high and popular culture and is accessible to all ages. The figure of the hussar is not only found in folk poetry, fairy tales, sagas, folk songs and ballads in Hungarian-speaking areas, but also in fiction, historical accounts, military letters and fictional literature. There are also proverbs about the hussars that are still in use today. The term hussar still exists as a street name and surname in Szeklerland. Light cavalymen in fancy dress are characters that often



Fig. 2. Hussar from generation Z. Photo by Emese Pál, 2023

appear on postcards, in plays, operettas and films. Many works of art are associated with them, both in the form of sculptures and paintings. There is also a museum in Harghita County, where my fieldwork is taking place, which details the past of the Szekler border guards.<sup>3</sup> An interesting gastronomic peculiarity in Hungarian-speaking areas is that the figure of the hussar even appears on gingerbread. The hussar is a Hungarian national symbol, cultural heritage and Hungaricum<sup>4</sup>, and is still very popular and famous today, and is also known across borders.

Horse breeding has always played a prominent role in the life of rural societies in Szeklerland, playing a distinguished function in both economic life and social structure. In addition to their military functions, horses were (and still are) used for transporting people, agricultural produce and timber, and they also play a key role in ritual and religious life. The traditional hussar activities that I have been researching are also closely linked to horses and horse-keeping. In Hungarian literature, there is a distinct and valuable breed of horse called the Szekler horse, whose characteristics are detailed in several studies.<sup>5</sup>

Traditional hussar teams in Harghita County were usually formed with 5–6 members, and then gradually, year by year, new members were added to the teams. Nowadays, the average number of members is 20, which means that there are approximately 200 active traditional hussars in Harghita County.

In terms of gender distribution, the hussars can be considered homogeneous, as only in exceptional cases do hussar girls appear as members of the association. This is a masculine form of traditionalism, which includes exercises of skill, competitions, gallops and imitation battle scenes.

Many of the outstanding figures of the hussars' past are still role models for traditional hussars today. Generationally, the hussars' associations are mixed, with members from the Z, Y, X and baby boomer generations, as well as veterans.

During our interviews, the leaders of the associations testified that the traditional hussar movements spread in Harghita County based on Hungarian models. The associations were initially formed on their own, then they collected membership fees and tried to survive and operate that way. At the local level, they first sought sponsors and

then tried to raise funds through various municipal and other tenders, in many cases in Hungary.

Naturally, I also focused my research on the motivations behind the creation of these traditional associations and their initial objectives. In the majority of cases, the reasons for their creation include the following: *the desire to preserve traditions and strengthen national identity, to promote the equestrian way of life, to promote the love of horses, to promote equestrian parades, to encourage the equestrian soldiering, to pass on historical knowledge to young people, to teach poetry and songs, to celebrate commemorative and national holidays, to promote national consciousness, to express respect for ancestors, to preserve and transmit values.* The initial objectives of the 10 associations show that they were founded with conscious nation-building and identity-shaping intentions.

Each association is headed by a hussar captain, who I also asked about the current objectives of their teams. Their answers were related to the following themes: *involving children in traditional activities, moving children away from the virtual world towards real values, recruiting new recruits, looking after the future, passing on historical knowledge to young people, keeping the existing group together, bringing historical events to life, providing quality hussars activities, leading by example, creating and maintaining historical sites.*

The annual activities of the traditional hussars are mostly linked to the turning points of human life, calendar customs and national holidays. The active hussars today play a prominent role in the cultural life of Harghita County. They are public figures on various festivals, commemorations, religious, historical and political events, and embody the hussar tradition with spectacular parades and symbolic representations. Their parades and their own events are usually entertaining and have a tourist-attracting function.

The activities of the traditional hussars fall into two different categories: there are public events, which are open to the general public and usually take place in public spaces, and there are private events, which I was able to attend as a researcher by prior arrangement, such as meetings of association members.

I have divided their public events into four subcategories. The first category includes their own events, which

are created and organised by the associations. The second subcategory is their public events, when they are not the organisers of the event, but some other hussars' association of Harghita County and they participate in it, as an invited persons and not as organisers. These events and meetings clearly fall under the heading of invented traditions. In the third category, I have included the participation of traditional hussars in commemorative ceremonies, local festive occasions of towns/villages, at the invitation of municipal/church leaders, as well as in customs related to the turns of human life and calendar customs. And the fourth subsection is their "appearances" abroad, when they are invited to events in Hungary. However, the categories are permeable and the boundaries are often blurred.

The traditional teams of Harghita County take part in many equestrian and hussar events in present-day Hungary. These include the *Spring Memorial March*, the *Carpathian Basin Wheat Harvest Festival in Szarvas*, the *Hussar Ball in Hódmezővásárhely*, the *National Horse Slaughter*, the *Hussar Academy in Sümeg*, the *Battle of Pákozdi*, the *Battle of Tápióbicske*, and the *Hussar Camp in Simonpuszta*. These events are communal occasions that symbolise and strengthen national solidarity and provide a great opportunity to build bridges between hussar teams from Harghita County and Hungary.

The hussar teams of Harghita County try to respond to all invitations and requests, so they take part in the annual commemoration of the *Madéfalvi Calamity* in Szeklerland, the *Horse Pilgrimage on Horseback to Csíksomlyó*, the *Easter Border-Crossings*, national commemorations, town and village days, the *Szekler Horse Slaughter*, the *Szekler Equestrian Festival*, local festivals, harvest balls and many association members also undertake to give live history lessons for schoolchildren and kindergarten children. During such history lessons, students have the opportunity to learn more about a historical battle and the hussars, and to study the hussar costume. These are usually public events where representatives of the press are also present and thus also give the hussars the opportunity to represent themselves and their identity. The traditional hussars are also represented at weddings and funerals by members of the associations, in justified cases.



The list of events created by the hussar teams includes: The *Szekler National Assembly in Agyagfalva*, the *Árpád Győrffy Memorial Tournament*, the commemorative tour in memory of the *Battle of Bekecs in World War I*, the organisation of the *Pentecostal Celebration on the Madaras Harghita*, the organisation of the *Autumn Campaign*, the organisation of *Hussar Balls*, the *Hussar Pentecost*, the *Hussar School* and the *Hussar Academy*.

These events include team building, community building, living the Szekler virtus, symbolising masculinity, horse riding competitions, historical commemorations, religious and spiritual horse rides, and joint singing and celebrations. Public rites and ceremonies, as well as memorials, play a significant role in invented traditions (Hobsbawm 1987: 138).

An interesting fact about the customs of the traditional hussar groups in Harghita County is that they do not celebrate Romanian national holidays, and do not hold performances and ceremonies related to them, but they

prefer Hungarian national holidays and have activities related to them only, which they organise at local level.

There are four prominent Hungarian national historical commemorations in the Szekler hussars' customary system, which are linked to the following dates: 15 March, 4 June, 20 August, and 6 October.

The 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence broke out on 15 March on the territory of historical Hungary, and to commemorate this, the traditional hussars of Szeklerland hold annual performances, commemorations, parades and wreath-laying ceremonies. On 4 June, the Day of National Unity, the date of the signing of the Trianon Peace Treaty in 1920, is commemorated, which is also a kind of mourning day in the life of the traditional hussars. To mark the occasion, musical and poetry performances are held, with speeches by various leaders.

The national holiday of the foundation of the state and the memory of the founder of the state, King Saint Stephen, is celebrated on 20 August in Hungary.



Fig. 3. Agyagfalvi Szekler National Assembly. Photo by Emese Pál, 2023



The Szekler hussars also pay tribute to this holiday with wreath-laying ceremonies.

October 6 is the Day of Remembrance of the Execution of the Martyrs of Arad, on which the traditional hussars pay tribute to the heroes. They have also organised their own event on this day of mourning, called the Autumn Campaign. It is an invented tradition that imitates the march to war with horses and chariots. During the events they organise, the traditional hussars often emphasise that spectators and visitors are expected to wear period costumes and folk costumes and are encouraged to participate in their events.

Among the activities of the hussars of Harghita County, one of the most outstanding is a team of hussars who used to organise horse carousel shows. This is essentially the movement of several horsemen at the same time to the accompanying music, a kind of dancing, which is a great artistic experience. The hussars move simultaneously in different formations during the choreography, sitting on horseback. It is an incredibly spectacular and impressive performance, which requires a lot of practice and great discipline and concentration.

During my research I also tried to investigate the motivations behind these traditional activities and I was also interested in why people became traditional hussars. The most common answers were: *because of a sense of belonging and community, because of keeping traditions, because of a love of history, because of a love of horses, because of a childhood dream and desire, because I joined the group at the invitation of others, because I joined for a challenge, because I joined because of my ancestors, out of respect for my ancestors and because this is where the national feeling is really fulfilled.* Based on my research, I believe that there are two types of traditional hussars in Harghita County, some who join these associations just for the sense of belonging and see this form of traditionalism as a way of having fun and relaxation. While in the second category, I would put those traditional hussars who have a serious knowledge of history and it is really important for them to live and experience certain moments of history in this way. They are very often touched and moved when they take part in parades and events, and take their association duties and their respect for their ancestors very seriously. People in this category are very keen and interested in participating in

events for traditional hussars, which focus on the accurate acquisition of historical knowledge and the correct use of horses and riding. These presentations are often given by academics, historians, veterinarians and equestrian experts, so that the traditional hussars of Szeklerland can learn from an authentic source, and most of them are open to learning and gaining knowledge and developing their skills.

In the course of my research, I also got an idea of the important role played by Szekler symbols, cultural memorial sites and Szekler-Hungarian traditions in the life of traditional hussars. For all the hussars, most of whom identify themselves as Szekler and Hungarian, the conscious living and displaying of their national identity is a very important factor.

In their opinion, the most important Szekler symbols are: *The Szekler flag, the Szekler gate, the Szekler knife (bicska), the costume, the hat, the coat of arms, the hussar's cap, the moustache, the sun, the moon and the stars.* In addition to the hussar costume, the members of the associations also have their own Szekler costume



Fig. 4. Carousel performance. Photo by Emese Pál, 2023

and a significant majority of my interviewees stated that they have both Hungarian and Szekler flags in their homes. These indicate a strong attachment to the Szekler-Hungarian nation and the importance they attach to expressing their identity through symbolic means. They use only Hungarian and Szekler symbols, and do not use any other symbol or means of representation linked to Romanians or Romania.

My research also reveals that the traditional hussars of Harghita County feel most at home where they currently live, and that Szeklerland means *home, homeland, life, everything to them*, according to their answers.

Among the traditional hussars, the most popular poet is Sándor Petőfi, known as a national hero and revolutionary. His poems are the ones that most of the members of the association can identify with. The work of Albert Wass is also a favourite among the hussars I interviewed. In the category of favourite writers/poets, Sándor Petőfi was the most popular, alongside the name of Albert Wass. Petőfi and Wass' works mainly convey the ideals of homeland, patriotism, and respect for the homeland, freedom, independence, courage and heroism. The key words associated with them also play a prominent role in the life and activities of the hussars.

I was also curious to find out whether the members of the associations think that there is a characteristic that is common to all traditional hussars in Szeklerland and could help to form a group identity. The following qualities were highlighted: *they like beautiful women, they like to have fun, they like their horses, they are traditionalists, they care about their country, they like to sing/song, they are brave, confident, daring and stubborn, and they stand by their comrades*.

I also investigated whether they think that the Hungarian hussar and the Szekler hussar are different. I received very different answers on this topic. Many think that there is no difference between the Szekler and the Hungarian hussar, but the majority think that there are differences, and they gave examples of what they think they might be. As differences, several of them highlighted differences in *mentality, the attitude to the horse, the way of riding, the dialect, the way of dressing, the singing, the vigour, the different ways of entertainment*, but I also received answers such as *the Szekler is stronger than the Hungarian; the Szekler is braver; we are more*

*enthusiastic*. One of the Szekler traditionalist hussars replied: *yes, but it is not important to formulate it, we have served and are serving a common cause*.

The genres closest to the respondents' hearts include national rock and folk music. The traditional hussars also prefer to read the online or printed press, and Hungarian-language newspapers and portals are always popular among them. They also prefer the local Hungarian-language press and the Hungarian-language press to the Romanian-language press.

It is important for the heritage associations I studied to promote their own activities and to attract and recruit new members, to encourage them to experience this form of heritage. Public events and live history lessons are good opportunities to do this. However, recruiting a new member is not always easy, with certain initiation rites and tests of endurance and skill to decide whether a new applicant deserves to be part of the team, to become a traditionalist hussar.

The traditional hussars associations of Harghita County are also present on social media platforms, which are also used to promote their events.

### **Theoretical framework**

My current work is part of a series of historical, ethnographic and anthropological studies. A considerable amount of work on my subject has been done in recent years in the fields of church history, ecclesiastical art, military history, literature, ethnography and cultural anthropology. Both international and Hungarian literature deals with the topic of hussarism. The thematic and thematic area of my work is extremely diverse. Using ethnographic, historical and anthropological findings, I try to outline a theoretical approach to the topic. However, this requires the presentation and explanation of some important theoretical results, analytical aspects and concepts that are central to my research. These ideas provide a solid background for researching and experiencing hussarism and horsemanship traditions. Without them, the very concept of hussarism would be almost unresearchable.

In this paper, I would like to demonstrate, along three themes, by presenting the results of the theoretical sources I have used, that the events of the hussars exemplify (1) the practices of invented traditions, (2) cultural heritage / hungaricum and (3) reenactment movements.

### **Invented tradition**

The effects of globalisation were also felt in the Carpathian Basin after the regime change in 1989, thanks to free migration and the spread of mass media. In parallel with the sense of a fast-paced world, locals increasingly felt the need to represent their local identity through specific cultural elements. To counterbalance global cultural patterns of foreign origin, they invented new local traditions that reflected their specificities (Pozsony 2019: 20).

Local festivals and celebrations spread and consolidated throughout Transylvania, following the Hungarian pattern. They have flourished in the decades following the change of regime. The structure of such celebrations has incorporated elements that emphasise and strengthen a sense of belonging and identity. In most cases, it was no longer the church that took the initiative to organise these celebrations, but the local political and administrative elites, who used them to represent their own status and to strengthen the local community (Pozsony 2015a, 2015b).

Eric Hobsbawm understands collective memory as a tradition invented in the process of tradition-making. Political ideas, movements and institutions play a prominent role in invented traditions. Without social and political functions, they would be unable to come into being and consolidate. It is indisputable that they are created for manipulative purposes (Hobsbawm 1987: 181).

Ákos Kovács highlights the importance of critical reflection on invented traditions and illustrates their specificities through five examples. He analyses by whom and at what stages local customs are placed in new contexts, and when and by whom it is in the inventor's interest to invent a new ethnographic tradition. It also presents a number of processes that show how political elites, churches and local leaders have often used and exploited folk traditions. He also reflects in his study on the fact that national traditions are increasingly losing their connection with history and that, in his view, the pleasure of a momentarily exhaustible memory has become the primary goal rather than authenticity. According to Kovács, almost all Hungarian traditions can be regarded as invented traditions, and their historical analyses can be used to explore the effects and different directions of changing political regimes (Kovács 2006).

The organisation of recurring celebrations to commemorate the past of a national community began at the same time as the rise of modern civil states and the development of nations and cultures. In each case, commemoration is linked to a specific time and place, which is specific to a particular group and inherently reconstructive (Assmann 1999: 39).

A Transylvanian Hungarian ethnographer also emphasises the socialising role of invented traditions, which indoctrinate individuals into a particular belief system, values and behavioural model. Alongside this, they also create a sense of community belonging and can reinforce the power status of various institutions and leaders (Vajda 2016: 31).

From the end of the 18th century, the creation and construction of bourgeois national states became a widespread process throughout Europe. Different peoples usually formulate their individuality and characteristics in opposition and in relation to another people. Alongside the growing nationalism of the 19th century, the development of a popular cultural image reflecting Hungarian primacy was emphasised. Artists, not ethnographers, began to promote the marketing of this cultural image. Folk traditions were considered the fundamental cultural element and uniqueness of an ethnic group or national community. Folk traditions were considered to play an important role in the construction of national cultures, especially in cases where the creation of nation states was delayed and the great traditions transmitted by institutions were lacking (Hofer 1989: 59–74, 1991: 7–14).

### **Cultural heritage, Hungaricum**

With the establishment of the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage in 1998, the concept of cultural heritage is given a prominent place in Hungarian political and academic discourse. In Hungary, the first conferences on the concept of heritage and the relationship between concepts with similar meanings (monument, memorial site, historical monument, etc.) were organised in the first half of the 2000s (Sonkoly 2000: 45).

The heritage discourse has a relatively short history in Romania, too, starting to spread after the regime change and only becoming dominant since the 2000s. This initial period was mainly characterised by uncertainty in the use of the term (Jakab – Vajda 2018: 10).



However, cultural heritage projects have also become more common in Transylvania in recent years. A growing number of disciplines have started to address the issue of cultural heritage, including at the theoretical/academic level, while the concept has also become prevalent in political discourse, the media, the economic sphere and among rural advocates (Jakab – Vajda 2018: 7).

According to Gábor Sonkoly's theory, the concept of cultural heritage appears in the national political-scientific discourse when the principles that used to unite a nation become discredited and questioned. A social practice in this case is the definition of cultural heritage that activates all members of the nation, as it seeks to elevate individual memory to a communal level (Sonkoly 2000: 51).

In the international literature on the concept, it is increasingly observed that heritage has become a kind of umbrella term and is beginning to replace or supplant the concept of culture (Jakab – Vajda 2018: 9).

The relationship between tourism and heritage is also discussed by József Gagyi who believes that local communities must be able to articulate, present and visualise their past, themselves and their heritage. There is no hidden agenda behind this process of commodification. A kind of effort is being made at local level to ensure that if there has been no past and no heritage of its own, there will be one afterwards (Gagyi 2004: 50).

A set of objects or intangible things with a special meaning for a community is cultural heritage, which can become a means of representing a community's sense of identity or an organising principle from the level of village communities to the whole of humanity (Sonkoly 2000: 46–47).

A special initiative developed in Hungary in the 2000s. A multi-directional movement has been launched to organise and summarise the values of the Hungarian people. The values of the Hungarian nation are beginning to be collected and organised into value libraries. This is an attempt to ensure that they are properly safeguarded, recorded and preserved for posterity.<sup>6</sup>

Hungaricums and national values are a set of assets that are important to Hungarians, handed down from the past, but which determine both our ideas for the future and our decisions in the present. The movement pursues a dual objective: it tries to draw the attention of communities to local traditions and values, while at the same time

it puts the task of preserving and nurturing tradition back on the level of local communities (Vajda 2016: 44).

*The Kassai method of horsemanship* and *The Hungarian hussar* are also included in the list of the collection of Hungaricums under the category of cultural heritage, which proves the importance of preserving and passing on these traditions to posterity at the national level.

### Reenactment movement

This is a rapidly evolving and changing conceptual framework, which is not only important for historical events, but also for ethnographic and anthropological research. The definition of reenactment has changed and broadened over the last 20 years. It can be seen as a neighbouring discipline to theatre, heritage, media and performance studies, where it would be important to realise the potential for joint research. Reenactment can also mean the desire to copy and imitate the past, but also the desire and possibility to experience the past. Reenactments affect both the participants and the observers. Their interests may include themes of local, cultural, political or national affiliation. It can be an attractive tool for conveying historical knowledge, even if reenactment does not always generate a realistic, emotional engagement with the past (Agnew – Lamb – Tomann 2020: 1–3).

Most reenactments are not about what exactly a particular historical event was like, but rather focus on getting a sense of what it might have been like. Reenactments allow a degree of playfulness between the prototype and the replica. The reconstructions aim to capture moments in history. Reenactments oscillate between then and now and this makes it difficult to categorise them as strictly historical or social phenomena. In reenactment, the protagonists are often laypeople who see this kind of activity as a mere hobby (Agnew – Lamb – Tomann 2020: 5–7).

In reenactment phenomena, it is crucial to ask where reenactors derive their historical sources and to what extent commercial interests drive the reenactment. Reenactment can act as a filter bubble on the past, a field that has the potential to exercise rigorous chirc and analyse its own methodological works, as there may be common social and political interests around it. Reenactments can also provide insights into broader theoretical issues such as the production, (mis)use, staging/performing of knowledge about the past and through them we can also

gain insights into how certain social groups or societies imagine the relationship between past, present and future (Agnew–Lamb–Tomann 2020: 9).

A common feature of these forms of living history is their theatricality, where not only the costumes, objects and buildings are significant, but also the performers and the performance itself (Dean 2020: 123–124).

The motivation for reenactors to reenact past events may stem from the need to preserve memory. This may apply to ancestors and their communities, or to commemorations of specific historical events, including battles, disasters, and massacres. Closely related to individual and collective forms of memory, reenactment can maintain and transform collective memory by referring to important battles and events of a nation (Tomann 2020: 138–140).

Many people see these reenactments as an eccentric hobby, which can symbolise a sense of nostalgia for a lost community, as well as a sense of contemporary alienation. The best-known forms of historical reenactment involve a wide range of groups, from enthusiastic amateurs to state-funded performers and scholars. Their aims can also range from the deeply personal to the educational to the aggressively political. Some reenactment movements may also seek to process traumatic parts of the past, playing a therapeutic role for communities that have to live with difficult historical facts (Cook 2020: 187–190).

But the reenactment of traumatic events can not only facilitate the healing of communities that have been damaged throughout history, but also prevent effective closure because of the repetitive nature of the reenactment. It can break the cycle of hostile emotions such as anger, fear and frustration, and thus trigger a process of reconciliation, but it can also perpetuate further violence (Močnik 2020: 222–223).

## Conclusions

When examining the activities of the hussars of Harghita County, I observed in many cases a conscious intention of tradition and nation-building on the part of the leaders of the associations and the organisers of events. The choice of means of representation, the use of symbolic memorials and the symbolic dates also suggest this.

For the members of the traditional associations I researched, public ceremonies, the veneration of monuments, the honouring of the past, the love of the homeland,

the living and representation of their national identity, the Szekler-Hungarian identity, the preservation of tradition and the transmission of values, as well as religiosity and the use of symbols and emblems are also important. They also play an important role in their everyday life and whenever they can they participate with great enthusiasm in hussars' parades, ceremonies and other traditional events, dressed in hussar costumes.

For many traditional horsemanship is just a leisure activity, a hobby, but most of them are willing to regularly give of their free time to horsemanship activities, sparing no time, energy and in many cases financial contributions from the association.

Many, if not all, of the members of the associations take part in events for hussars where the emphasis is on education. These mainly focus on horse keeping skills and look at historical events, prominent historical figures and battles related to the hussars. Their customs and the Hungarian national commemorations are uplifting communal occasions, rich in both visual and auditory elements, based on shared historical connections that are familiar to all individuals and to which both participants and spectators can relate through the shared past and use of symbols. Thanks to the fact that representations project onto reality the signs known to all members of society, they are able to create a real context and evoke what we imagine and perceive through traditions (Moscovici 2002: 220).

The Hungarian educational and political trends in Szeklerland also favour this form of tradition-keeping, as they provide many opportunities for hussars to apply for funding and resources to organise large-scale events. In the run-up to the national holidays, schools announce hussar drawing competitions for children, make hussar picks in needlework classes, or organise living history lessons where traditional hussars dressed as hussars try to pass on their knowledge of history.

There is a strong group identity among the members of the associations, which is expressed and symbolised by their different costumes. Even if an individual does not appear in public spaces with the troop, the hussar uniform distinguishes him from other people. It also reflects the traditional group to which a particular hussar belongs.

The leaders of the associations are concerned about the issue of succession and are very confident that years from now there will still be people who are interested in

living and passing on this form of tradition to the next generation. The horse is a kind of companion for the people of Szeklerland in work, in traditional activities, in leisure activities, in religious and ritual acts and once it was a faithful companion in battle.

The traditional hussar associations established in Harghita County have an extraordinary role in living, preserving and passing on the Szekler-Hungarian traditions, in the nation-building efforts, in reviving the equestrian history of Szeklerland, and in the significant turns of human life.

Their role in the celebration of folk customs, festivals and calendars, and the community-building and example-setting they promote, is emphasised. Their national identity and patriotism are manifested in all their activities and they consider it important to emphasise this externally.

In my opinion, the date of their establishment can also be explained by the fact that in the uncertainty of the regime change it was justified to set an example and a glorious historical past for the members of the Hungarian society living in Romania, so they reached back to an outstanding figure of Hungarian history, and created traditional associations (the image of the brave, action-oriented cavalry soldier).

This pattern of action also involves the emergence of an idealised past in the face of the present, and then, by highlighting and focusing on it, a kind of action and will to act at the local level in the present. The historical past of Szeklerland is taken up and lived on in the present, reinterpreted and given underlying content.

Local commemorations have been banned in many historical periods. Different ideas, systems of power and eras have influenced their structure and content. Nowadays, these structural changes often include hyper-representation at the level of texts and symbols (Pozsony 2015b: 237–244).

It can be proved that the events of the traditional hussars of Harghita County can be classified under the theme of invented traditions. These associations were established after the change of regime, during the last 34 years, and they date back to a historical figure, the hussar, which was created under external pressure and against which there was a rebellion for years throughout history. The events have a tourist and political dimension, but there is also a strong emotional attachment and

experience that is more than just the revival of an invented tradition. It is also a way of experiencing their minority fate, of underlining their national identity, of coming to terms with the grievances they suffered in the past and of honouring their heroes.

This kind of tradition-keeping can create a sense of belonging and bring local communities together by involving them in events. It is undeniable that these invented traditions have strong social functions. If we apply critical reflection to these associations, we can question the accuracy of historical events, their period costumes, which do not always match the costumes of the historical hussars, and their lack of armaments compared to those of the traditional hussar troops in Hungary.

My research results also prove that the hussar units of Harghita County were formed despite and independently on the fact that the figure of the Hungarian hussar had become a *Hungaricum*. hussar associations were active in Harghita County even before that time. But I believe that the fact that the figure of the Hungarian hussar has become an important value at the national level means even more to them and confirms that they represent a value.

This kind of movement is an invented tradition, a cultural heritage, a nation-building effort, in many cases also an effort of the political elite, a kind of nostalgia for the past, a romantic nationalism, but more than that because of its emotional surplus.

The reenactment of history is a great opportunity to convey historical knowledge to the people of Harghita County. Often during a performance, there is a sense of deep emotion and sublime feelings on the part of both the performers and the audience. In the reenactments, the leaders of the associations and the organisers of the events are free to choose which part, element or battle of history they want to focus on, and can choose what and how to present to the audience.

It is also true from the theory of reenactment movements in the Harghita County that the actors are amateurs who see this as a hobby, a leisure activity, and not professional actors who do it for a living.

The performance of a traditionalist association can also give an idea of how the Hungarian traditionalists of Szeklerland imagine the past and its relation to the present. The period costumes, the use of symbols and weapons enhance the theatrical character of the events.



There is no doubt that the members of the traditional hussar units in Hungary and the members of the traditional hussar unit in Harghita County share the trauma of Trianon, which can be helped by repeated reenactments and the singing of hussar songs and military songs in the same language.

There are currently 200 men in Harghita County who spend their free time and energy on this form of tradition, in addition to their work, studies and families. The skill, speed and precision shown during skill competitions and battlefield events can be a source of high prestige within the community. Among themselves and among each other, they often award medals, prizes and promotions. Regular reenactments during national holidays can be a way of reconciliation, and commemorating the heroes of the past year after year can also set an example.

#### NOTES:

1. "Regionális, megyei, települési statisztikai adatlapok." *Erdélystat – statisztikai* [online]. Available from: <<http://statisztikak.erdelystat.ro/datasheets/harghita/3256>> [accessed May 13, 2024].
2. "Eurotrans Alapítvány: A romániai magyarok több mint fele igényelte a magyar állampolgárságot." *Eurotrans Alapítvány* [online]. Available from: <<https://eurotransalapitvany.ro/2024/03/05/eurotrans-alapitvany-a-romaniai-magyarok-tobb-mint-fele-igenyelte-a-magyar-allampolgarsagot/>> [accessed May 13, 2024].
3. The name of the museum is Szekler Border Guard Memorial Center.

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In my opinion, the hussar reenactment events in Harghita County provide a good opportunity for local communities to live and represent their identity and to live individual and collective identity in community in a moving and interesting way. The reenactments aim to both disseminate historical knowledge, educate, transfer information, have an impact and evoke empathy, while also dealing with historical trauma. For viewers who speak/understand Hungarian, these reenactments have an affirming function, but for the majority Romanian population they can have an alienating and tension-building effect. The customs of individuals be truly understood and studied (Keszeg 2006: 5–6) only within their own culture can, a theory that also applies to the specificities of the customs of hussar activities.

4. See item 62. of the list of the Collection of Hungarikums. Available from: <[https://www.hungarikum.hu/sites/default/files/hungarikumok-lista\\_2023.10.17.pdf](https://www.hungarikum.hu/sites/default/files/hungarikumok-lista_2023.10.17.pdf)> [accessed May 13, 2024].
  5. For more details see Hankó, Béla 1943: *Székely lovak*. Kolozsvár: Nagy Jenő és fia Könyvnyomdája; Bodó, Imre – Hecker, Walter – Surján, György 2021: *A székely ló*. Budapest: Székelylő Tenyészt Egyesüle.
  6. "Hungarikumok Gyűjteményé - Magyar Értéktár." *Hungarikum* [online]. Available from: <<http://www.hungarikum.hu/hu/gyik/all>> [accessed May 13, 2024].
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