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STRUDLI: IDENTITY, ETHNICITY AND REPRESENTATION AMONG THE SWABIANS OF SZATMÁR

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of *strudli*, a traditional Swabian dish, in the ethnic revitalisation of Szatmár's Swabian community in Romania and Hungary after the political transition of these countries from communism to multi-party democracies in 1989. Once suppressed from 1947 to 1989 during the communist era in both of the countries, German heritage became a key element of cultural revival for the Swabian community in the post transition period. This community, once nearly invisible, transformed itself into a national minority asserting its identity, while also forming a strong internal network. And in this process, *strudli* took on a prominent role.

INTRODUCTION

In my study,¹ I aim to examine the role of the *strudli*,² an iconic dish of Swabian cuisine, in the ethnic revitalisation of the Swabian communities of the Szatmár (Satu Mare) region in Romania and Hungary, following the political transition of these countries from communism to multi-party democracies in 1989.³ During the communist era, German ancestry was often suppressed out of political necessity; after the transition, however, it became a starting point for heritage processes then

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2 The word is very similar to the German 'Strudel', but it refers to a completely different dish. *Strudli* is not 'Strudel'.

3 The study was funded by project: FK 143759: 'Economy and Ethnicity. Agricultural Associations as Factors of Social and Economic Resilience in Swabian Villages in Satu Mare Region from the Regime Change to the Present.'

gaining momentum. Shortly after regime change in Romania and Hungary, the previously nearly-invisible Swabian group in the Szatmár region transformed itself into a national minority capable of asserting its interests, while simultaneously developing into a virtual community with strong internal cohesion. The question of preserving the cultural heritage of the Szatmár Swabians and of supporting Swabian traditions, is not only a demand of the Swabian community itself; it has also been a central issue for both the Hungarian and Romanian regional political elites. This interest is motivated, in no small part, by the hope of access to German investment channels available through the Swabian community.

ABOUT THE SWABIANS OF SZATMÁR

The Szatmár Swabians are named after Szatmár County. The ethnically diverse Szatmár County, inhabited by Hungarians, Romanians, Germans, Jews, Rusyns, Roma, and Slovaks, was part of the Kingdom of Hungary until the border changes following the end of World War I, after which the larger part of the county, including the vast majority of the Szatmár Swabians, became part of Romania as one of its north-western counties. Over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, the county's wealthiest family, the Károlyis, settled primarily Catholic Germans on their estates. These German settlers came from Bavaria, Baden, and Hohenzollern, but the majority came from the Upper Swabian region of Württemberg (Oberschwaben).⁴

In Hungary, before World War I, the Szatmár Swabians were among the minority communities most assimilated into Hungarian culture.⁵ Lacking a significant intellectual or bourgeois class, the Szatmár Swabians struggled as a community to resist Hungarian assimilationist pressures. They settled in 31 villages scattered throughout Szatmár (Satu Mare) County, forming clusters in some areas and isolated communities in others, on both sides of the Hungarian-Romanian linguistic border.

4 Vönház, István: *A Szatmár megyei sváb telepítés* ('The Settlement of Swabians in Szatmár County') (Pécs: 1931), 176.

5 Sárándi, Tamás: 'Kísérlet a szatmári svábok visszánémetesítésére a két világháború között' ('An Attempt to Re-Germanise the Swabians of Szatmár between the Two World Wars'), in Nagy, István and Kutnyánszky, Bacska, Eszter eds.: *Bonyhádi evangélikus füzetek 2. Németek a Kárpát-medencében konferencia anyaga* ('Bonyhád Lutheran Booklets 2: Proceedings of the Conference "Germans in the Carpathian Basin"') (Bonyhád: Bonyhádi Petőfi Sándor Evangélikus Gimnázium, 2009), 302.

In predominantly Hungarian regions, the Swabians began shifting to the Hungarian language in the latter half of the 19th century, while in Romanian-majority areas, the use of German generally persisted until the early 1990s, when large-scale emigration to Germany from these areas occurred. After this exodus, compact Swabian communities remained only in the region surrounding Nagykároly (Carei) in present-day Romania. The findings of this presentation are, therefore, limited to this cluster. In the Nagykároly (Carei) area, there are 13 Swabian-inhabited villages, two of which are in Hungary, while the remainder are in Romania.

After World War II, the Swabians, also, faced numerous reprisals and, under the principle of collective guilt, a significant portion of the Szatmár Swabian population in Romania, as well as in Hungary, was deported to the Soviet Union for forced labour, resulting in considerable loss of life. Many did not survive the five- to six-year-long captivity. The humiliations endured, the inhumane conditions, the struggle for survival, and the resilience shown by the deportees, became central elements in local history among the Swabians. To this day, the memory of deportation is a core narrative in the self-representation of the Szatmár Swabians.⁶ However, under communism, this narrative was suppressed and forbidden.

In the 1990s, political changes in Romania and Hungary unleashed a powerful release of stories about deportation from the hitherto enforced silence, and these accounts became foundational to the revitalised Swabian identity.⁷ New cultural and social initiatives emerged based on German identity: on the Romanian side, Swabian folk dance and music groups were established, brass bands were re-formed, and the first deportee gatherings were organised. At this time, the Swabian ethnic movement in both countries centred primarily on commemorative ceremonies related to deportation.

For a long period, the national border between Romania and Hungary nearly hermetically separated communities that had previously maintained very close

6 Szilágyi, Levente: 'A deportálások emlékezete és a múlt feldolgozásának alakzatai a szatmári sváboknál' ('The Memory of Deportations and the Forms of Coming to Terms with the Past among the Swabians of Szatmár'), in Eszter Csikós, Eszter – Kiss, Réka and Ö. Kovács, József eds.: *Váltóállítás: diktatúrák a vidéki Magyarországon 1945-ben* ('Switching Tracks: Dictatorships in Rural Hungary in 1945') (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont – Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 2017), 328.

7 Marinka, Melinda: '21. századi sváb ünnepek identitásörző jellege Szatmárban. Ünnepek, ünnepekörök történelmi és néprajzi vonatkozásai' ('The Identity-Preserving Nature of 21st-Century Swabian Festivals in Szatmár: Historical and Ethnographic Aspects of Festivals and Festive Cycles'), *Studia Folkloristica et Ethnographica* (2013), 53.

social and economic ties.⁸ This division later led to different practices of ethnic revitalisation on either side of the border. While in Romanian communities, commemorative practices associated with deportation dominated Swabian identity representation, Hungarian communities emphasised heritage and festivity, particularly through events like the ‘Strudli Festival’. These two ethnic revitalisation paths intersected frequently, as increasingly formalised connections brought the two communities closer after the political transition, thereby creating cross-border influences. The organisation of commemorative ceremonies in Hungarian villages like Vállaj and Mérk was greatly aided by close ties with Swabian twin communities in Romania. The first Szatmár Swabian deportation memorial was erected in Kisdengeleg (Dindeştiu Mic), Romania,⁹ in 1992, while in Vállaj, Hungary, the first public celebration and memorial unveiling did not take place until 2006. Even in 2006, the mayor of Vállaj, who organised the commemorations, felt that it took significant courage to bring the memory of deportations into the public space.

M: – And actually, it was in 2006 that the breakthrough happened, when a bit of spirit was needed for someone to stand up and talk about the ‘malenkij robot’ – the forced labour of Hungarians and Germans in the Soviet Union – in front of a microphone. Because until then, this topic was indeed very taboo.

I: – Even until 2006?

M: – Yes, even until 2006. That’s why I say there was a little movement in ’06, but even then, people looked around when I was standing at the microphone.

I: – But why?

M: – Well, you see, this persecution had a significant impact on us; it was very much dependent on the community, but generally, about twenty to twenty-five per cent of people never returned at that time. So it left a really deep mark. There’s hardly a house, hardly a family, that hasn’t been affected. So, a grandfather, a cousin, a brother-in-law, a friend – everyone had someone who was affected (Translation by the author).

8 Szilágyi, Levente: ‘Párválasztási preferenciák a magyar–román határ által elválasztott két sváb településen, Csanáloson és Vállajon az 1825-től 1944-ig terjedő időszakban’ (‘Marriage Preferences in Two Swabian Villages Separated by the Hungarian-Romanian Border, Csanálos and Vállaj, from 1825 to 1944’), in Ispán, Ágota Lídia and Magyar, Zoltán eds.: *Ethno-lore XXXI. A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Néprajztudományi Intézetének Évkönyve (Ethno-lore XXXI. Yearbook of the Institute of Ethnology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences)*, (Budapest: MTA BTK Néprajztudományi Intézet, 2014), 123–144.

9 Marinka: ‘21. századi sváb ünnepek identitásörző jellege Szatmárban. Ünnepek, ünnepkörök történelmi és néprajzi vonatkozásai’, 153.

Memory studies define society as a community of memory.¹⁰ According to Jan Assmann, individuals acquire memories through socialisation and communication processes,¹¹ which ultimately makes them members of a community. In this sense, the Szatmár Swabians in either country cannot initially be regarded as a memory community, as the silence driven by fear and anxiety hindered direct intergenerational transmission of biographical narratives.¹² After the political transition, however, they became a community capable of advocating for its interests. Stories of deportation emerged almost explosively, once freed from the perceived and real pressures of the communist political regimes, becoming one of the core structures of the re-emerging Swabian identity.

The commemorations that began in Vállaj, Hungary, in 2006 marked a conspicuous start to the domestication of history; the deportation memorial in the memorial park was followed by other statues and monuments. Today, in the memorial park near the church in Vállaj, there are five monuments or statues, four of which honour Swabian identity: the settlement memorial, a bust of Gyula Láng (the church's builder), the deportation memorial, and a model of the *Ulmer Schachtel*.¹³ The fifth commemorates Sándor Becsky, who played a key role in ensuring that Vállaj and Mérk remained within Hungary when the Treaty of Trianon (1920) defined new borders.¹⁴

As the number of commemorative ceremonies increased and the number of deportees declined, knowledge of the deportation transitioned from *communicative memory* – essentially a *generational memory*¹⁵ – to collective memory. Memory requires specific locations, and this need is met by monuments, statues, and plaques.

10 Keszeg, Vilmos: 'Élettörténetek populáris regiszterekben' ('Life Stories in Popular Registers'), in Jakab Albert, Zsolt – Keszeg, Anna and Keszeg, Vilmos eds.: *'Emberek, életpályák történetek'* ('People, Life Paths, Stories') (Cluj-Napoca: BBTE Magyar Néprajz és Antropológia Tanszék – Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság, 2007), 184.

11 Jan, Assmann: *A kulturális emlékezet. Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban* ('Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination') (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999), 35–37.

12 Biographical narratives are stories in which those remembering recall certain phases and events of their life paths – in this case, the deportations.

13 The Ulm barge is a symbol of the Danube Swabian settlement and has also been included in the coat of arms of the Szatmár Swabians.

14 An important episode in the collective memory of Vállaj is the idea of the 'most loyal village', which suggests that Vállaj's affiliation with Hungary is attributed solely to the preparedness and cunning of the village leaders, primarily the notary Sándor Becsky.

15 Generational memory is historically tied to a group and fades away with its bearers. (Assmann: *A kulturális emlékezet. Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban* ('Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination'), 51.



Fig. 1. The Vállaj Memorial Park, Hungary. In the foreground, the model of the Ulmer Schachtel, with the Roman Catholic Church in the background. (Photo by Levente Szilágyi, 2024)

For the Swabian villages in both Romania and Hungary these places of memory¹⁶ are especially significant, as they represent, not merely a relocation of memory, but also primary symbols of Swabian history and identity. They serve not only as memory sites but also as monuments that bear witness to the community about past events, as well as to the production and display of memory, given that they are located in accessible public spaces and are regularly used symbolically.

I distinguish four different levels of remembrance regarding the deportations to the Soviet Union: individual memory, generational memory, communicative memory, and collective memory. Hungarian government-level rehabilitation of the Swabians and the official acknowledgment of the deportation narrative, took place in 2007, when the Speaker of the National Assembly formally apologised at a conference held in Parliament on the sixtieth anniversary of the deportations. On December 17, 2013, the National Assembly declared January 19 as the Day of Remembrance for the Deportation and Expulsion of Germans from Hungary, thereby commemorating the departure of the first train carrying German residents from Hungary to Germany on that day.

At deportee gatherings, *strudli* had only a 'supporting role' initially: during the commemorative ceremony, it was served alongside other refreshments at receptions for the participants. *Strudli* took center stage for the first time in Vállaj, in 2001, when the 'Strudli Festival' was held as part of the first wave of festival initiatives in Hungary. Since then, it has been held every year at Pentecost, evolving from a local event into a regional-scale festival. In recent years, the festival has become a two-day event with entry tickets, drawing thousands of visitors. Gradually, the festival has taken the place of traditional commemorative ceremonies as a space for identity representation. While deportee gatherings are primarily for those directly affected – deportees, their relatives, descendants, and (required) invited guests, including representatives of Swabian, German, Romanian, and Hungarian political and civil organisations – the festival aims to reach a much wider audience.

While the deportee gatherings serve as commemorative ceremonies that fulfill the internal need for community solidarity, the 'Strudli Festival' is a platform for identity expression and community presence for Swabian-origin groups. The former follows the choreography of ritual, while the latter follows the choreography of celebration.

16 Pierre, Nora: 'Emlékezet és történelem között. A helyek problematikája' ('Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire'), *Aetas* 10/3 (1999), 142–157; Assmann: *A kulturális emlékezet. Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*, 40.



Fig. 2, 3. Posters of 'Strudli Festivals' in Vállaj, Hungary, 2009, 2019

Put starkly, as the number of former deportees decreased, the number of (non-Swabian) *strudli*-consumers grew in inverse proportion. *Strudli* has become the most widely-recognised symbol of Swabian identity and cultural heritage.

WHAT IS STRUDLI?

Although *strudli* plays an important role as a fasting dish in the religious meals of the Szatmár Swabians, it is not considered a holiday food. It is a simple, quickly-prepared dough-based dish, fried in abundant oil or fat and filled with potatoes, plum jam, or sometimes cottage cheese or whipped egg whites. Traditionally, *strudli* was made on Fridays as the main dish after returning from work in the fields. For home consumption, it was typically prepared with one kilogram of flour, yielding enough dough to form four ‘leaves’ – 22–24 pieces.

The ingredients for *strudli* include flour, sour milk, egg yolk, salt, a small amount of fat (or oil), and oil for frying. For the filling, traditionally-cooked plum jam (thinned with water for easier spreading), potatoes, cottage cheese, or whipped egg whites are used. The dough is made neither too hard nor too soft and it is not rested but rolled out, filled, and immediately fried in hot oil – previously in lard. For frying, a tall-sided metal pot made specially by local tinsmiths was used.

Those who make *strudli* always highlight its simplicity and quick preparation, often in the context of working in the fields:

We had cows, we had potatoes, they’d come home from the fields, and it was ready in no time. There was sour milk, and that was a main meal. If you know how to make the dough, it’s done in no time. You really have to know the dough, though. It mustn’t be too hard or too soft, because a lot depends on that (Woman from Vállaj; translation by the author).

‘Why *strudli*?’ Because Swabian women always had everything, they needed at home to make it. Almost every house had a cow, so there was sour cream, cottage cheese, flour, sunflower oil, or sometimes lard; they’d use oil for frying but mix the dough with lard. And then, it was done in no time (Woman from Mezőfény; translation by the author).

By six in the evening, they came home from work and had dinner by half past six. The first thing to do was always to peel the potatoes so they could cook. They’d knead the dough, make it, and it was done’ (Man from Csanálos; translation by the author).



Fig. 4. A snapshot from a Csanálos 'Strudli Festival', Romania. (Photo by Levente Szilágyi, 2024)



*A short film about
the 'Strudli Festival'.
Created by: Levente
Szilágyi*

There are significant differences in the everyday *strudli*-baking practices of the Swabian communities on either side of the border. While in Romanian villages, making and consuming *strudli* is completely common and regular, in Hungarian villages it is more occasional. There are other differences as well between the *strudli* baked on either side of the border. In Romanian villages, they use a wider variety of fillings than in the Hungarian ones. Characteristics of Transylvanian cuisine have gradually been incorporated into this traditional Swabian dish, so that *strudli* filled with dill and cottage cheese is typical only on the eastern side of the border (Romania), mainly during festivals. The ‘dessert’ *strudli*, made with a filling of sweetened whipped egg whites, is not made at all in Hungary, nor is it found everywhere in Romanian villages either:

It was usually for the children or for the cook, whoever liked it. The egg whites are whipped into a foam, and then that foam – well-beaten egg whites with a bit of sugar and salt – is spread onto the dough just like jam. When it is baked, it rises to about 5–6 cm. The only thing is that you have to eat the *strudli* quickly, because it softens very fast. And then it’s sweet (Woman from Mezőfény; translation by the author).

In the traditional dietary regime of the Swabians a ‘byproduct’ of making *strudli* was *strudli* soup, which was based on the cooking liquids and trimmings left over from making the *strudli*, combined with the indispensable roux and milk in Swabian cuisine:

The Swabians have always been clever, and when the housewife came home from the fields, she needed food quickly. So, when she rolled out the *strudli*, the water was already boiling...; they even did it so that they cooked the potatoes, took them out of the water, and then boiled the *strudli* in the potato-cooking water for the *strudli* soup. That way, there was a little leftover potato, and both were done in one go (Woman from Mezőfény; translation by the author).

STRUDLI AS A FESTIVAL FOOD

The success of the ‘Strudli Festival’ in Hungary has also influenced the Romanian villages. In Csanálos, for example, the village day celebration, organised as the new-bread harvest feast in 2022, has been renamed the ‘Strudli Festival’. *Strudli* festivals are also organised in the county seat of Szatmárnémeti, and *strudli* baking-tents have appeared at the village days of other settlements as well. Today, these *strudli* festivals on either sides of the border are more than just gastronomic festivals; they

have become the most important events for ethnic self-representation and regional identity.

One significant reason why *strudli*, among many Swabian specialties, has ‘loaded’ itself with identity-carrying and representative content, is likely due to the fact that its preparation is relatively simple, easily mobilisable, and primarily, because it can be excellently marketed and sold, and it is inexpensive. With a bit of exaggeration, one might say that it is the ideal festival food.

Every Swabian settlement around Nagykároly on the both sides of the border has at least one *strudli* baking-team. These teams, typically consisting of 5 to 7 members – mostly women from the middle generation – participate in an increasing number of organised events, but they have many more members since not everyone can be present everywhere. The teams are, therefore, mainly composed of women, but not exclusively; the male members play important roles in transportation and in the preparation of the ingredients. Depending on the size of each event, 3 to 6 teams from different villages participate. The local municipalities pay a daily fee to the *strudli* makers, which, due to the large number of festivals, provides significant supplementary income from *strudli* baking. At larger festivals, it is common for male members to handle the kneading of the *strudli* dough, as they can prepare much larger quantities of dough for rolling out than the women can.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ‘HOMEMADE’ STRUDLI AND FESTIVAL STRUDLI

Although *strudli* made at home and at festivals is very similar, there are some differences, primarily as regards the ingredients used. At home – unlike how the festival *strudli* is made – the flour is typically sifted before use; lard instead of oil is used, and sour milk instead of yogurt; eggs are sourced from home rather than purchased from a store, and the jam used for filling is homemade, typically made from plums cooked in a cauldron, rather than store-bought plum jam.

SUMMARY

After a successful introduction, *strudli* soon took on a ‘life of its own,’ stepping out of the Swabian microcontext to become a regional product and a Swabian brand. It has also become a permanent feature of cultural events in the region, both Hungarian

and Romanian. Through national Hungarian and Romanian television cooking shows, a wide audience has come to know, not only the dish, but also the community that produces it.

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