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THE FOOD HERITAGE OF THE TRANSYLVANIAN ARMENIANS

ABSTRACT

In my paper I present two dishes of the Transylvanian Armenians, *churut* and *angadjabur*. These, in addition to religion, have remained symbols of Transylvanian Armenian identity to this day although their language has been assimilated to Hungarian since the 19th century.

ARMENIANS IN TRANSYLVANIA

First of all, I shall briefly summarise the history of Transylvania and the settling of the Armenians there.¹ Transylvania has been characterised by ethnic diversity: Hungarians, Szeklers, Romanians, Germans, Armenians, Jews and Gypsies have, for centuries, lived together there and influenced each other's cultures. For centuries, it belonged to Hungary, then to the Habsburg Empire, then to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In the 17th century, when Armenians settled here, the state was the Principality of Transylvania, ruled by Hungarian princes.

Armenians arrived in Transylvania from Moldavia in the last third of the 17th century. Armenian middlemen minorities were mainly cattle traders and leather-working craftsmen who filled an economic gap between the Hungarian nobility (political elite) and peasants. The Transylvanian princes supported their stay with privileges to promote the economic development of Transylvania.²

1 Reference to this study: Vass Erika: The Food Heritage of the Transylvanian Armenians. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 493–503.

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2 Pál, Judit: 'Armenian Image – Armenian Identity – Assimilation of the Transylvanian Armenians in the 18th and 19th Centuries', in Barszczewska, Agnieszka and Peti, Lehel eds.: *Integrating Minorities*:

A larger number of Armenians lived in four settlements (Gheorgheni, Frumoasa, Dumbrăveni and Gherla) in Transylvania, where they built their own churches. The altarpiece to their national saint, St. Gregory the Illuminator, can also be found in the Catholic churches of other settlements (Nușeni, Dej, Făgăraș, Sighetu Marmăției, Sibiu, and Odorheiu Secuiesc).³ The altarpieces show the migration route of Armenian traders. According to a source from 1830, smaller numbers of Armenians also lived in other towns (Brasov, Deva, Târgu Mureș, Târgu Secuiesc, Sibiu, Oradea, Sebeș, and Timișoara).⁴

Armenians were quickly integrated into Transylvanian Hungarian society. The price of integration was religious union: the Armenians converted to Roman Catholicism, but kept their ancient rites, and Armenian remained the liturgical language. Thus, the church played an important role in keeping the community together and preserving Armenian identity. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Armenians also assimilated linguistically and became Hungarian speakers. Some of the descendants of the Transylvanian Armenians have preserved their sense of ancestry to this day.

Transylvania has been part of Romania since 1920. In the 20th century, the Armenians, who defined themselves as part of the Hungarian nation, shared the hardships of the Hungarians who had become a minority in Romania. The Tarisznyás Márton Museum in Gheorgheni is located in one of the most significant buildings of Armenian architectural heritage – an Armenian trading house built in the late 18th century. The new exhibition, opened in 2023 ('With head held high. Trianon Men from Gheorghe') presents the history of the 20th century through the life of the Armenian Vákár family. The head of the family had to leave his homeland after the

Traditional Communities and Modernization (Cluj-Napoca: The Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities – Kriterion Publisher, 2011), 13–32.

3 Pál, Emese: 'Világosító Szent Gergely ábrázolásai Erdélyben' ('Representations of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Transylvania'), in Kovács, Zsolt – Sarkadi Nagy, Emese and Weisz, Attila eds.: *Liber discipulorum. Tanulmányok Kovács András 65. születésnapjára* ('Liber Discipulorum. Studies for the 65th Birthday of András Kovács') (Cluj-Napoca: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület – Entz Géza Művelődéstörténeti Alapítvány, 2011), 239–254.

4 Kovács, Bálint: 'Örmények Erdélyben. A 17. századi letelepedéstől a 20. századig' ('Armenians in Transylvania. From 17th century settlement to the 20th century'), in Bernád, Rita and Kovács, Bálint eds.: *A Szamosújvári Örmény Katolikus Gyűjtőlevéltár* ('The Armenian Catholic Collective Archives of Gherla') (Budapest–Gyulafehérvár–Leipzig: Gyulafehérvári Római Katolikus Érsekség – ELTE Egyetemi Levéltár – Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2011), 21.

Romanian takeover in January 1919. He settled in Budapest, and his family followed him there in 1923.⁵

The assimilation of Armenians into Hungarian society is illustrated by the decrease in the number of foods defined as Armenian. Eszter Kisbán summarised the characteristics of Armenian cuisine based on sources from the 19th and early 20th centuries. She showed that at the end of the 19th century, about 40 dishes were still described as being part of the Armenian canon, but by the 1970s only eight were included.⁶ Of these, *churut* and *angadjabur* have survived to the present day.

ARMENIANS IN GHEORGHENI

In 2015, as a staff member of the Hungarian Open Air Museum I carried out fieldwork in Gheorgheni city (Hungarian: Gyergyószentmiklós) with my photographer colleague, Péter Deim. As part of this, we made a video with three *churut*-making women. Then two women showed us how to cook three types of soup with *churut*. In 2024, as a staff member of the Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, I had the opportunity to return to Gheorgheni, where I participated in the celebration of the saint's day of the Armenian Church and attended the 14th Armenian Art Festival.

Gheorgheni is located in the eastern part of Transylvania, in the Szeklerland. Szeklerland is a historical and ethnographic area, where Szekler people have lived since the 13th century. The main task of the Szeklers was soldiering and border defence, and they were also mainly engaged in agriculture. The Szeklers are a Hungarian-speaking ethnic group, who identify themselves as Hungarian in censuses.

Gheorgheni lies next to the road connecting Moldavia with Transylvania. The settlement was granted the right to hold a national fair in 1607. This made it an important place for Armenian traders still living in Moldavia. For this reason, the first Armenian family settled in Gheorgheni in 1637.⁷ Gheorgheni became a

5 Gál, Levente and Kaján, Imre eds.: *Fölemelt fővel. Trianoni férfiak Gyergyóból.* ('With Head Held High. Trianon Men from Gheorghe') (Gyergyószentmiklós: Tarisznyás Márton Múzeum, 2024).

6 Kisbán, Eszter: 'Örmények: ételek, jelképek Erdélyben és Magyarországon' ('Armanians: Food, Symbols in Transylvania and Hungary'), *Ethnographia* 103 (1992), 1–27.

7 B. Garda, Dezső: 'A gyergyószentmiklósi örmény kereskedők' ('The Armenian traders of Gheorgheni'), in Boér, Hunor et al. eds.: *Acta Siculica 2009* (Sepsiszentgyörgy: Székely Nemzeti Múzeum, 2009), 391–434.

handicraft centre thanks to the Armenian craftsmen who settled there. For a long time, Armenians also had the right of self-government in the city, separate from the Szeklers.⁸

In 1850, 1,144 Armenians were registered in the town of 5,362 inhabitants.⁹ In 20th century censuses, the majority of Armenians identified themselves as Hungarian. Because of their small number, some may have been in the 'other' category, but we do not have precise information on this. Their small number shows the progress of assimilation, and their Armenian identity can only be traced in their religious and food habits.

In 2021, out of the 15,884 inhabitants of Gheorgheni, 12,187 were Hungarian, 1,226 Romanian, and 80 were Roma native speakers.¹⁰

Churut

Churut is a food seasoning made from milk and parsley. *Churut* and *Angadjabur* soup are well known food items among Transylvanian Armenians everywhere, and, because of their common origin, they are also used by Armenians in Moldavia.

There are two reasons for preserving *churut*: it keeps for a long time after drying, and it can be used to prepare a quick, everyday soup. The leftover soup made on festive occasions was not thrown away, but was reused the next day, flavoured with *churut*.

Good quality cow's milk is important for the *churut*. The women who make *churut* buy the necessary milk from farmers they know. I interviewed three women who make *churut*. One of the women boils 25 litres of milk and then puts it into bottles where it ferments over a period of 5 to 6 weeks. During this time, the milk is stirred twice daily so that it does not become bitter. The whey produced in the process is then removed, as the aim is to end up with a dense stock. In recent years some people are speeding up the process by using kefir mushrooms in the milk, obtained from dairy factories. When the milk has fermented, it is cooked with 1.3 kg of parsley

8 Pál, Judit: *Városfejlődés a Székelyföldön 1750–1914* ('Urban development in Szeklerland 1750–1914') (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print Könyvkiadó, 2003), 107, 161.

9 Pál: *Városfejlődés a Székelyföldön 1750–1914*, 637.

10 <<https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive/>> accessed 8 August 2024.

leaves, which have been minced in a meat grinder, for 8 to 10 hours, on a low heat so that the water will evaporate. Before the spread of the deep freezers, the parsley that was used was that which had been dried for winter use, but more recently it is stored in the freezer prior to use.

It is important to note that the woman who makes the *churut* uses a copper pot for cooking, which, in Hungary, was specially made for this purpose. After cooking, the woman hangs the resulting thick mass in a tea towel to drain off the water. After two days, she uses an ice-cream scoop to form the mass into uniform dumpling-like shapes. She wraps them in a tablecloth overnight so that the textile can absorb the remaining water.

The next day, she forms the 'dumpling' into cone-shaped pieces by hand. She puts the cones in an airy place and lets them dry for two weeks. One litre of milk makes 5 to 6 pieces of *churut*. One piece of *churut* is sufficient for the making of about 2 litres of soup.

Before the refrigerator came into use, the cones were dried out for 5 to 6 weeks, so that they would last for a long time. Because of their hard texture, they were grated into the soup when cooking. Nowadays, many people store fresh pieces of *churut* in the freezer, so that they will stay soft and are easier to use when cooking. Some people put the thick *churut* mass in jars, pour oil on top to prevent it from spoiling, and store the jars in the refrigerator. This method saves time because the maker does not have to form the mass into cones.

All of the three women whom I interviewed are of Szekler origin. Two learned how to make *churut* from their grandmothers and mothers, while the third woman learned it from her mother-in-law, who served in an Armenian family. All three now supplement their pensions with the income they gain from making *churut*. The women's husbands and daughters also do their part in the work – they help with the lifting of the heavy pots and in the selling of the finished product.

In the past, families used to prepare *churut* for themselves at home, but now they no longer do so. This is due to the complexity of the process and the strong smell of the product. One of my interviewees told me that she had tried to make *churut* in her block of flats, but the strong smell spread to the neighbours. So, she now buys the *churut* ready-made.

Buyers either visit the women who make the *churut* in their homes, or they can buy *churut* at the market. Each producer has an established customer-base. Some of the customers were born in Gheorgheni and live abroad. In their new home, they are connecting with their roots by eating *churut* bought in the market.

Churut is known in the surrounding villages only to those who have had or still have contact with Armenians. During the 19th century, Armenians moved to several settlements around Gheorgheni, and opened up shops locally. Some of the rural Szekler girls also served as maids for Armenian families in the town. One of my Szekler interviewees still keeps a photograph of her mother, born in 1922 in Remetea, who had worked in the kitchen of a wealthy Armenian family in the 1930s. There she learned how to make *churut*. Later, she also made *churut* for her family.

Among the Szeklers, there are those who got to know *churut* through marriage with Armenians, and then some of their relatives also took a liking to it. So, it is not only the Armenians who eat it, as some of the Szeklers also like it, and cook it on a regular basis every week or two. I have Szekler friends from Gheorgheni who regularly bring this speciality as a gift to their friends when they travel.

Angadjabur soup with *churut*

In 2015, during my fieldwork visit to Gheorgheni city, two Szekler women made three types of soup with *churut*. One of the women learned about these dishes from her Armenian husband's family.

Angadjabur soup with *churut* is preserved as a festive dish. It is prepared on 24 December, which was once a fasting day. So it was cooked on the 25th, Christmas Day. In addition to Christmas Day, it was also eaten on Easter Sunday.

Angadjabur is a small dumpling filled with meat. Its name comes from the Armenian word for 'earlobe', as the shape of the dumpling resembles this. Approximately 1,000–1,300 pieces are made from 1 kg of flour, 10 eggs, and 25 dkg of beef. Nowadays, it is called *angadjabur laska*; the word *laska* means 'pasta' for Szekler people, so the term also points to the coexistence of Armenians and Szeklers.

In order to make *angadjabur*, the two women scraped the beef with a knife – since there was no meat grinder originally – which resulted in a mushy texture. They cut the thinly-rolled dough into 2x2 cm pieces, then put beef seasoned with pepper into

each piece. The meat was not salted so that the noodle would not soften from the salt. Then, the dough was shaped into an earlobe shape with a special hand movement. In the past, the dumpling was dried, so it could last for a long time. Nowadays, the leftovers are stored frozen in the freezer.

The soup is made with a base stock of beef and marrowy bones. Carrots, parsley, a little celery, a slice of kohlrabi, and *churut*, are added to the soup stock. One of the ladies pointed out that they never put sour cream in their *angadjabur* soup, but that nowadays everyone makes it with sour cream.

Since the preparation of *angadjabur* is labour- and time-intensive, fewer and fewer people are taking on the task of making it nowadays. At the Armenian festival, a woman from Gherla told me that she makes *angadjabur* for others to sell, but I have not heard of such a person in Gheorgheni. Instead of homemade *angadjabur*, many people nowadays prepare *angadjabur* soup with store-bought tortellini.

In Gheorgheni today, *angadjabur* soup with *churut* can be found only in one restaurant – owned by an Armenian. The soup has undergone two innovations: firstly, instead of using homemade dumplings they use tortellini, which is a semi-prepared product available in larger supermarkets. Secondly, the soup contains a variety of vegetables, including mushrooms, which are also easily available. Gyros, hamburger, french fries offered by the restaurant are much more popular among young people than *angadjabur* soup.

The preparation of *churut* and *angadjabur* was also featured in a popular Hungarian television gastronomy programme ('Gasztroangyal'). It can also be found in many recipe books from Transylvania or Szeklerland and it can be read about on the internet. In 2008, the Transylvanian Armenian Roots Cultural Association in Hungary published a recipe book which included details of the preparation of *churut* and *angadjabur*.¹¹ The book can also be found in some of the families of Armenian origin in Gheorgheni. This is a tangible expression of Armenian identity, but it is not used in everyday life.

11 Issekutz, Sarolta ed.: *Erdélyi örmény konyha, fűszerezve* ('Transylvanian Armenian cuisine, seasoned') (Budapest: Erdélyi Örmény Gyökerek Kulturális Egyesület, 2008).

THE ARMENIAN CULTURAL FESTIVAL

After the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship in Romania in 1989, free expression of ethnic identity in Szeklerland was also made possible – through events or festivals linked to religious and historical celebrations. At this time, both in Hungary and in Transylvania, new attempts to revive the 'lost Armenian identity' were made.

With this aim in mind, the Armenian Catholic Association of Gheorgheni was founded in 2009. Among their important programmes is the Armenian Cultural Festival which has been organised since 2011. The Association and the Armenian Festival have created an institutional framework for the preservation of Armenian traditions.

The festival, organised around the saint's day of the Armenian Church (birthday of the Virgin Mary's), brings together the religious and gastronomic heritage of the Armenians. In addition, cultural events (book reviews, lectures on the history of Transylvanian Armenians) have been included in the programme to strengthen the Armenian roots of the participants.

At the festival, food becomes a symbol of a shared past that can be interpreted by all members of the community, and from the beginning, the programme included the presentation of *churut* and *angadjabur* as typical Armenian dishes.

The festival participants could get acquainted with the making of *churut*. Two Szekler sisters demonstrated the making of *angadjabur*, which visitors could taste. One of the women's husbands is Armenian and this was the thread that connected them to the festival in 2016. They are also members of the Armenian church choir. The two women use a dough-straightening machine and a meat grinder so that the making of the *angadjabur* soup has become easier; in addition, this method is much faster than the traditional way of making it.

The festival brings together Armenian communities living in different settlements and helps to foster friendships. It also plays an important role in introducing Armenian food to younger generations, even if there is no opportunity to pass on the food heritage in families.

In 2024, teams (representing Gheorgheni, Toplița, Gherla, Miercurea Ciuc and Frumoasa) cooked *angadjabur* soup with *churut*. The soups prepared were similar in taste, but there were differences in the proportion of ingredients used by the

different teams. Furthermore, the team from Toplița used store-bought tortellini instead of home-made *angadjabur*. The members of the local team from Gheorgheni also cooked goulash alongside Armenian food, thus expressing their dual identity.

The different teams had their own uniforms, which were an expression of their belonging to the communities in question. The team from Gheorgheni also wore aprons. The material for these was brought from Armenia last year (2023) by the Association's President. The material has a pomegranate pattern, which the locals consider to be an Armenian characteristic. This apron also represents a link between Armenia of the present and Armenians settled in the past.

One of the aims of the festival is to connect with the Armenians of today. As part of this, a group of Armenians from Karabakh and a Szekler folk dance group from Remetea (a village next to Gheorgheni) performed a dance show. Among the Armenian gastronomic specialities of the day, cognac and coffee were also on offer. Although it should be noted that the Armenian name for coffee referred only to the technology used in its preparation: finely ground coffee was brewed in copper pots with water. We know this as 'Turkish coffee'. In addition to Armenian food, chimney cakes (*kürtőskalács*) related to Szekler gastronomy were also available for purchase at the festival.

MUSEUM REPRESENTATION OF TRANSYLVANIAN ARMENIAN FOOD IN THE HUNGARIAN OPEN AIR MUSEUM

The Transylvanian building complex¹² was opened in the Hungarian Open Air Museum, Szentendre, in 2022. The visitors can see Transylvania's rural and urban past. The ground floor of the house from Târgu Secuiesc (Hungarian: Kézdivásárhely) is a fashion retail shop owned by the Armenian merchant, Antal Dávid. The interior reflects the early 20th century. Antal Dávid's flat can be found upstairs. In the dining room, *angadjabur* soup can be seen in the form of an artificial dish on the festive table. The other part of the exhibition presents the history of the Transylvanian Armenians. Visitors can explore the two pillars of Armenian identity: religion and

12 See the paper by Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna about food representation in open air museums in this volume.

food heritage, the latter including *churut* and *angadjabur*. The curator of the exhibition was Tamás Szegedy-Kloska.¹³

SUMMARY

Although the language and much of the traditional culture of Armenians disappeared during the assimilation processes of the 18th and 19th centuries, the two dishes – *churut* and *angadjabur* – have remained as symbols of Armenian identity to this day. They were also adopted by the Szeklers, who are related to the Armenians, and thus became a symbol of the Gheorgheni region within Szeklerland.

At home, within the family, the making of *churut* had been discontinued by the end of the 20th century, as it was time-consuming and had a strong smell, but some women took up the making and selling of *churut* as an income supplement. On festive occasions, the elderly still make *angadjabur*, but in the long term, I think that tortellini from the shop in the making of *angadjabur* soup, represents the future.

The festival plays an important role in articulating and making visible Armenian identity. It also helps to promote these dishes – *churut* and *angadjabur* – among those who have forgotten or who never knew them.

The festival is held on the day before the saint's day of the Armenian Church (birthday of the Virgin Mary), that the sacred and profane pillars of Armenian identity are interconnected. Both play an important role in community building.

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¹³ Szegedy-Kloska, Tamás: 'Dávid Antal divatáru-kereskedése. Egy kézdivásárhelyi örmény származású kereskedőcsalád története' ('Antal Dávid's Fashion Retail Shop. The History of a Merchant Family of Armenian Origin in Kézdivásárhely [Târgu Secuiesc]'), in Bereczki, Ibolya et al. eds.: *Ház és Ember 34* (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2022), 169–196.

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