



The Central Location of the Hungarian Culture in the Syrmia Region: Maradék

Attila KASZNÁR

PhD, Associate Professor, Head of Department
John von Neumann University, Faculty of Economics and Business, Department of
International Economics
e-mail: kasznar.attila@gtk.uni-neumann.hu

Ádám HÁGEN

Researcher
John von Neumann University, MNB Knowledge Centre, Centre for Economic,
Geography, Urban Marketing and Geopolitics
e-mail: hagen.adam@uni-neumann.hu

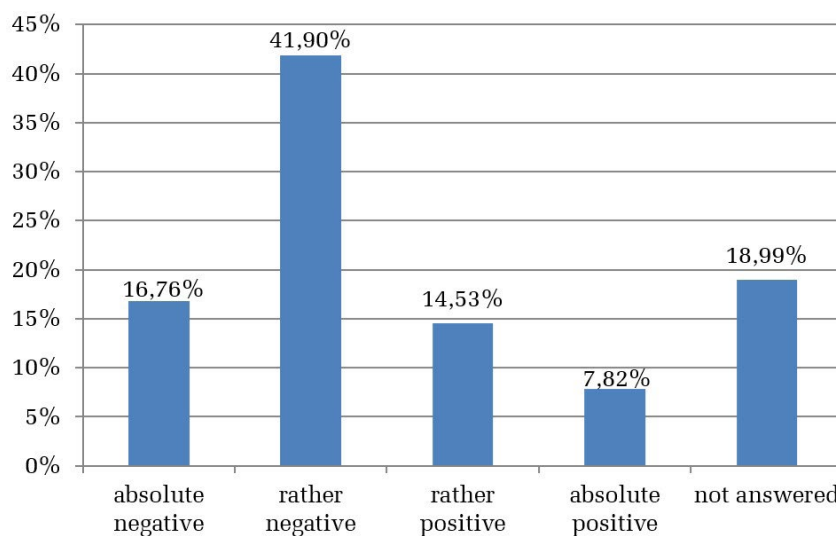
Abstract: The southernmost part of Vojvodina is the Syrmia region. The Hungarian presence here is only sporadic. The area is the most Serbian part of Vojvodina. The central settlement of the Hungarian diaspora in the region is Maradék. Maradék is the last stronghold of local Hungarian culture. The settlement is home to the Petőfi Sándor Cultural Association. The Association is the dominant community of the Hungarian culture in the Syrmia region. The local primary school has a Hungarian-language class, which is unique in the region. Maradék was also the economic centre of the region's Hungarian population. However, historical and economic changes have had a very negative impact on the settlement. Living in Maradék is difficult, and many people, especially Hungarians, are moving away.

Keywords: minority, diaspora, ethnic culture, emigration, religion

Introduction

The southernmost region of Vojvodina is Syrmia, named after the Roman name of the region, Syrmium. The area was part of the province of Pannonia in Roman times, and it is part of Vojvodina in the classical Hungarian regional division. Geographically, it is the southern part of Vojvodina, between the Danube and the Sava. "The Szerémség was one of the most notorious areas on the border between Western and Eastern Christianity and on the line of contact between the Christian

and Ottoman worlds' (Sarány 2018: 83).¹ The Hungarian population, fleeing from the Turks, was replaced by a mixed population. After the expulsion of the Turks, the Hungarians also moved back to Szerémség, but their demographic situation changed fundamentally. By the 21st century, the proportion of the Hungarian minority population in the region had declined sharply. Compared to other Hungarian communities living beyond the border, the Hungarians living here are 'geographically more separated from the motherland and have found themselves in an environment where they are not only in a minority but also further apart' (Nagy-Hágen 2020: 201).² However, the assimilation of Hungarians has not yet taken place, even though the environment predisposes them to it (Bodó 2003: 48).³ But the environment helps assimilation. The majority of Hungarians in Syrmia are not optimistic about a positive future.



Source: research on Szerémség Kollégium

Figure 1. *The future vision of the people in the region of Syrmia*

The Hungarians living here do not 'renounce their ethnocultural identity and their specific traditions' (Bodó 2014: 16).⁴ It is the protection of ethnoculture that has shaped the people living here into a functioning ethnosporus. The Hungarian term *szorvány* accurately expresses this meaning – it is not the same as the term 'traditional minority', as it means a group of small minority communities of

1 Translated by the author.

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people of the same culture, living far apart from each other, an ethnoculturally cohesive group, i.e. ethnospora, to use Barna Bodó's idea.

The Hungarian ethnospora in the Szerém region is a historically and economically distinct region of Vojvodina. The settlements of the region with a verifiably Hungarian population are: Árpatahló (Ruma), Beska (Beška), Dobradópuszta (Dobrodol), Fényberek (Platičevo), Herkóca (Hrtkovci), India (Indija), Karlóca (Sremski Karlovci), Kisrádinca (Mali Radinci), Latyarak (Lačarak), Maradék (Maradik), Nyékinca (Nikinci), Pétervárád (Petrovadin), Satrinca (Šatrinici), Szávaszentdemeter (Sremska Mitrovica), and Ürög (Irig).

The region is mainly agricultural land, traditionally rich in handicrafts. Today, the major cities of the region (Novi Sad, Sremska Mitrovica, and Indija) have established significant industrial plants. As a result, the craft industry has disappeared. Agriculture is facing major problems.

Maradék (Maradik) left as a model settlement in the Syrmia region, which serves as a case study for the local Hungarians, the region's economy and culture, and demographic trends. Maradék is a settlement of Syrmia with the most significant level of Hungarian culture. Village inhabitants' conscience of belonging to the Hungarian ethnicity is strong and is based upon rich and multifaceted traditions. This village with its long traditions may be called the centre of the Hungarian culture of Syrmia since all the inhabitants of the other villages where Hungarians still live are strongly linked to the ongoing processes in Maradék aimed to preserve the Hungarian traditions and culture, called Hungarianness. 'As long as language borders do not coincide with national borders, ethnic minorities will continue to exist' (Bodó 2003: 48).⁵

The study is based on the data from the research work of the Szerémség Kollégium of Lakitelek Népfőiskola [i.e. community college / Volkshochschule]. The authors were participants in the research. The ethno-regional presentation of Maradék can serve as a complex case study for the research on the economy, culture, and Hungarians in the region of Syrmia. In the research conducted by the Lakitelek Népfőiskola in Syrmia, more than one third of the respondents were residents of Maradék. The evaluation of the data thus justified the choice of Maradék as the case study settlement of the region.

General Features

Maradék (in English, the village's name means 'Remnant' or 'Leftover') is situated in the central area of Syrmia. Its history goes back to the 15th century. The area has excellent conditions for agriculture. Its name appears for the first time in a document dated 1498. However, archaeological research has

5 Translated by the author.

already proven that the location was already inhabited in the period of the Roman Empire.

There are three legends related to the origin of the village's name presented in the book 'Maradék maradéka' (The Rest of Maradék). According to the first legend, after a battle, there was only one house and its porch left, and the village was later built around this house. The second legend says that a landlord distributed his land among his sons, but there was one piece of land left. The third legend is of Serbian origin and says that the name of the village was composed from the names of a young couple in love, Mara and Diko (Bögözi 2018: 42).⁶

The Hungarians who lived in the village disappeared during the period of the Turkish domination, i.e. in the 16th-17th centuries. Their place was occupied by Serbians and Croats. After squeezing out the Turks by the end of the 17th century, the Hungarians slowly returned. A new shock hit the Hungarians almost two hundred years later. 'At the Compromise of 1867 [between Austria and Hungary], the Hungarian State exchanged the whole area for the city of Fiume on the Adriatic Sea' (homepage of the Reformed Church of Maradék). That was the time when the Croatization of the mostly Roman Catholic Hungarians started. They lived in the Kingdom of Croatia, and the Croatization went on through their religion.

The Hungarian community passed from the tolerant and permissive atmosphere of nationalities into an ambience aimed at the assimilation and slow reduction of the Hungarian minority. Under these circumstances, the Hungarian community faced the horrors of the two world wars and of the period of Yugoslavia. In spite of having suffered a lot, this unbreakable community still represents a little fortress left from the Hungarians in Syrmia.

National Composition

The number of inhabitants in Vojvodina has been on the decline over the last ten years. In the Vojvodina region, the population of the Syrmia region has also been steadily decreasing.

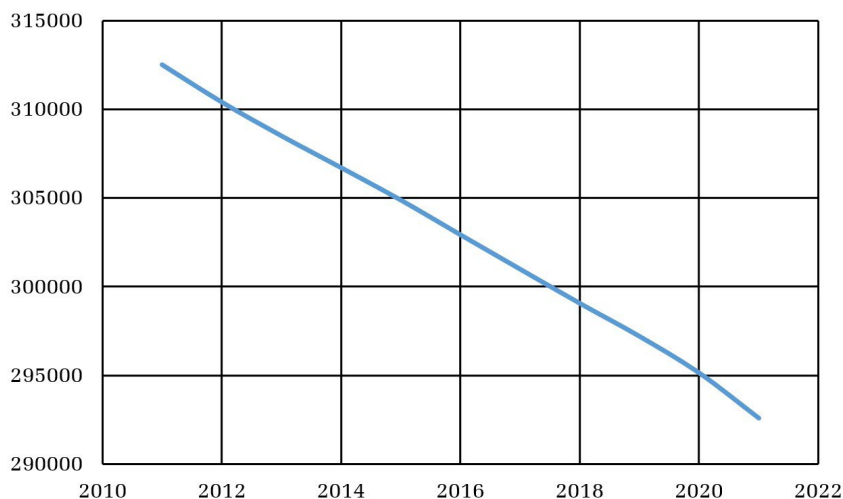
Maradék has a total of 2,100 inhabitants. It is a miracle that after so many devastations Hungarians still live in this village. More than 550 people consider themselves Hungarians, representing over 25% of the local population. It is an outstanding level among the Hungarian diaspora (Kasznár-Kőrösy-Ludvig-Poczki 2020: 118).⁷

More than 60% of the population in Maradék is of Serbian nationality. The process of the growth of the Serbian majority is permanent since new Serbian settlers arrive to the village quite often. The Balkan wars accelerated this process

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when the majority of the Serbian nationals living in their nation-states split from Yugoslavia moved to the actual Serbia.



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Figure 2. *Estimated number of population in the Syrmia region, 2011–2021*

Due to the historical changes, a huge number of Croatian nationals used to live in the village. Actually, their population is much reduced now, amounting to around 100 persons. At the same time, the Croats in the village had a very special status. During the Balkan wars, they did not suffer atrocities since they were considered part of the local Hungarians and were not treated as enemies.

Once a huge number of German nationals also lived on the territory of Syrmia, but due to the persecutions after WWII and the expatriation, their actual number has been considerably reduced, and they virtually disappeared from the area. Germans also lived in the old Maradék, but today there are no inhabitants of German nationality.

Religious Background

If we look at the village, we can see three churches. The majority of the population is Serbian, and they are Orthodox Christians. The Hungarians and the small number of other nationals are either Catholics or adhere to the Reformed Church.

The local Hungarians preserved their Catholic belief until the last decade of the 19th century, but the activities of the Croatian leadership of the time aimed at undermining religious identity created unbearable conditions. All the Catholics of Maradék were Hungarians, and their mother tongue was the Hungarian

language. They submitted a petition in 1897 to have a Hungarian priest, which was denied by the Croatian bishop. After that, the majority of the Hungarians joined the Reformed Church.

After the conversion of the Hungarians to the Reformed faith, the Croatian Catholic Church sent three Jesuits to Maradék, who unsuccessfully tried to reconvert the believers in 1898. The Reformed Church started the education in Hungarian language of the children of Maradék, in the newly built community house. This church is still playing an important role in preserving the Hungarian culture and language. (Bögözi 2018: 43)⁸

The new Catholic church of the village was opened in 2017. Unfortunately, the masses are still held in Croatian language, which does not help strengthening the links of the local Hungarians with the Roman Catholic Church. ‘A little consolation for the Hungarian believers is that every second week the psalms are sung in Hungarian during the masses’ (Bögözi 2018: 31).⁹ This question, unresolved for more than a century, causes and can cause further problems in the future from the point of view of the Hungarians because ‘the Catholic children attend the Hungarian language courses at the Community House of the Reformed Church. Although the Hungarians living in Maradék and its surroundings are Catholics, the preservation of the mother tongue and the Hungarian culture is mostly practised among the Calvinists’ (Bögözi 2018: 31).¹⁰

The Economic Situation in Maradék

Vojvodina’s economy is growing, and its role in Serbia’s economy is significant. However, the situation for small and medium-sized companies is difficult. It is mainly the industrial centres that are growing. The craft industry is slowly disappearing.

There is no significant industrial activity in Maradék. In the past, the most important industrial object of the area had been the brick-producing workshop of Kálmán Birinyi. During Yugoslavian communism, the workshop was nationalized, and its deterioration started. Actually, it operates from spring to autumn. The workers are mostly from other regions of Serbia. There are a few locals working at the workshop. They do this job only seldom, or do not work there at all, wherefore none of the Hungarian-speaking inhabitants could give any information about the workshop.

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GDP, 2018–2019 (RSD million)



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Figure 3. GDP of Serbia and Vojvodina

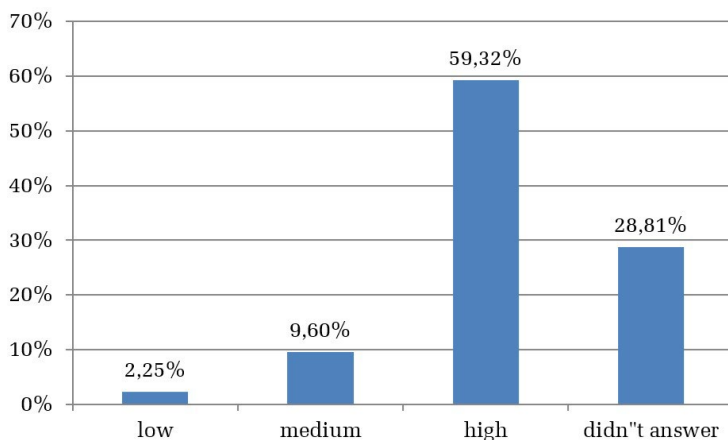
Artisanship has practically disappeared from Maradék. The flourishing period of the past enterprises came to an end as a consequence of large-scale industrial production. Basket weavers, broom knitters are not needed, the world has changed, and artisanship is not profitable any more. Today only hairdressing is a profitable business.

‘The largest problem in Maradék is poverty, as there are not enough and appropriate jobs’ (Virág 2017: 120).¹¹ Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that a significant part of the economically active population commutes to India, a town 10 kilometres from Maradék. This town has become one of the most prosperous industrial centres of Serbia during the last 10 years, and it can absorb all the labour force of the region.

‘Those who have remained here live from agriculture’ (Virág 2017: 120).¹² Most people in the municipality find work in agriculture. The most important produces are the traditional cereals, wheat and corn. As a result of the industrial and market changes during the past years, the importance of tobacco production is growing, which seems to be highly profitable in the region. In the production of fruits, apple still has the leading position, but apricot and plum are also popular produces.

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Source: research on Szerémség Kollégium

Figure 4. Workers not working in the municipality according to residents

In Syrmia, cattle had the leading role in stock-raising, but it has been losing its importance. Actually, farming is the dominant activity, but it is far from industrial dimensions.

The Role of Language and Culture in the Life of the Hungarians in Maradék

Although there were opinions that the Hungarians in Maradék did not care about the preservation of their Hungarianness, ‘during the last couple of years, fundamental changes have started, the first results of which are already visible’ (Virág 2017: 117).¹³

It is a general problem in the diaspora that a significant part of those who consider themselves Hungarians do not speak the Hungarian language. This problem exists in many locations of Syrmia, among them in Maradék as well, and it is even bigger among the young generation who lives every day in a Serbianized environment and hardly speaks the Hungarian language even at home in the family. The nation lives in its language, and thus the transmission of the language is a key question in preserving Hungarianness.

The locals also consider that the role of the mother tongue is very important, since in families where the mother does not speak Hungarian the knowledge of the language disappears. Parallel to this, the links with the Hungarian culture become very weak, and this leads to the loss of Hungarian identity. Avoiding this

¹³ Translated by the author.

is a highly important national political goal since this is the way to guarantee the survival of the Hungarians in the area.

According to the locals of Maradék, the problem is very complicated. One of its root causes is that there are less and less places where they can use the Hungarian language. In public administration, they cannot use it at all, wherefore youngsters often reject to use the Hungarian language at home. Even if they understand Hungarian, they cannot answer or they do not want to. Mixed couples or mixed marriages also cause problems because most of the time the common language is obviously the Serbian and not the Hungarian. In the families where the communication is in any other language than Hungarian, there is a slight chance to preserve Hungarianness in the long term.

The policy towards the minorities of the Yugoslavian decades did not facilitate the preservation of Hungarianness either. After the tendencies of Croatization, Hungarians faced the growing threat of Serbianization, which became more explicit after the collapse of former Yugoslavia.¹⁴ The most critical period of the survival of the Hungarians was the 70s of the 20th century. 'Even the director of the school tried to convince the parents that the children would have a better chance for a good career in life if they studied in Serbo-Croatian language, and it would be also easier for the teachers and the pupils if they did not have the burden of studying the [Hungarian] language in the superior classes' (Ambrus 2018: 17).¹⁵

These mistaken views led to the termination of Hungarian-language courses in the village in 1978, where an impressive Julianic School had existed earlier.¹⁶ By now, only the ruins of this school are visible.¹⁷

It may be an important step forward that the locals of Maradék succeeded in teaching the inferior classes in Hungarian language in the Serbian school. It causes serious problems that Hungarian teachers change quite often. In the 2018/2019 academic year, two young Hungarian teachers undertook the responsibility of teaching the children. As they told us, it is difficult to convince the Hungarian children to speak this language. After a long and exhausting work with them, the children started to communicate with the teachers in Hungarian but still used the Serbian language to talk to each other. As Ms Lívia Bárdos and Ms Hargita Halász, the young teachers said, almost heroic efforts are needed to teach the children the Hungarian language, but the results can bring positive changes in the life of the local Hungarians. At the beginning of the 2019/2020 academic year, none of the teachers were in the village; however, there were chances that one of them would return.

14 In addition, huge groups of Hungarians left the land where they were born.

15 Translated by the author.

16 The Julianic Association was created in 1904 as a network for teaching Hungarian language for the Hungarian diaspora in the Southern Land (Hetzmann 2014).

17 It has for long been the wish of the local Hungarians to build the new Hungarian community house on the place of the former Julianic School.

Independently from these difficulties, teaching the Hungarian language in a Serbian school is successful: the teachers and the pupils receive all the support for their job that the Serbian education system can offer. The available means are sufficient to carry out the teaching of the Hungarian language under appropriate conditions.

The pupils can attend the superior classes in Újvidék, where they are transported in organized groups.

The main factor of coherence of the local Hungarians is the Sándor Petőfi Cultural Association in the courtyard of the priest of the Reformed Church, which is famous in Syrmia for its folklore chorus, tambourine orchestra, and dancers. Its main mission is to become the transmission centre of the Hungarian way of life in the diaspora. As the locals call it, 'The Petőfi' is known all around Syrmia, and it is recognized as an association aimed at preserving and strengthening identity, as the most important centre of Hungarian culture in the area. The Hungarian community concentrates around 'The Petőfi' serving as a key institution of preserving the Hungarian diaspora (Kasznár 2020).¹⁸

From the point of view of tourism, the County House in Maradék is a beloved place to visit, mentioned by the Serbians as "etno-kuca". The tools, artefacts collected and exhibited in this house demonstrate the peculiarities of the life of the Hungarians in Syrmia. Once this house was the scene of a movie filmed here on country life. Unfortunately, this house is not run and maintained by Hungarians. The person who operates the house does not even live in Maradék.

The Hungarians of Maradék

The Head of the Sándor Petőfi Cultural Association, an active promoter of the preservation of the local Hungarian community, Mr Géza Berta works day and night. Besides farming on his lands, he organizes and supports with his presence the activities of the Hungarian community aimed at preserving the cultural heritage. He is a guardian of many cultural values, a musician, a singer and played an outstanding role in the history of the bell of the local Reformed Church, closely linked to German culture and nationality. The bell was originally not made for the Maradék Reformed Church. Its place was in the bell tower of the church in Beska. The people of that village also suffered from WWII, and after the takeover by the Yugoslavian communists, German nationals were forced to move out, i.e. they were expatriated. As usual, the communists wanted to annihilate not only the enemy but also wanted to do away with all the monuments in order to prevent any remembrance. From this point of view, the bell of the church of the German community of Beska became the symbol of the hated hostile past to

18 Translated by the author.

be destroyed by melting. At this point, Géza Berta saved the bell. He recalled the story as follows. That time, the believers of the Reformed Church in Maradék did not have a church; they just had a house for praying. In the past, in Kalapérka, a small bell was tolled, signalling lunchtime for the people working in the fields. The community of the Reformed Church bought this bell first and built a small bell tower for it. The fundament of the church was laid before WWII. The local entrepreneurs provided the materials, the bricks, cement for the foundation. During the war, construction works stopped, and the materials disappeared. After the war, a nicer bell tower was built in Maradék. Once, when Mr Berta visited Beska with his father, they saw that the demolition of the Lutheran Church of the local German community had already been started. The two bells were already on the ground. Mr Berta thought these two bells originally brought from Germany had to be saved. They returned home and went back to Beska with chariots. Near the church being demolished, they took the wheels off to make it easier to roll the bells on the chariots. After that, they returned to Maradék, and the bells were transported there and placed first in the belfry and later in the church tower built in 1953. The Yugoslavian government was not opposed to Hungarians using the bells. After the change of the political system, the Hungarians visiting the land where they were born expressed their gratitude to the local Hungarian community for having saved the valuable monument of their ancestors.

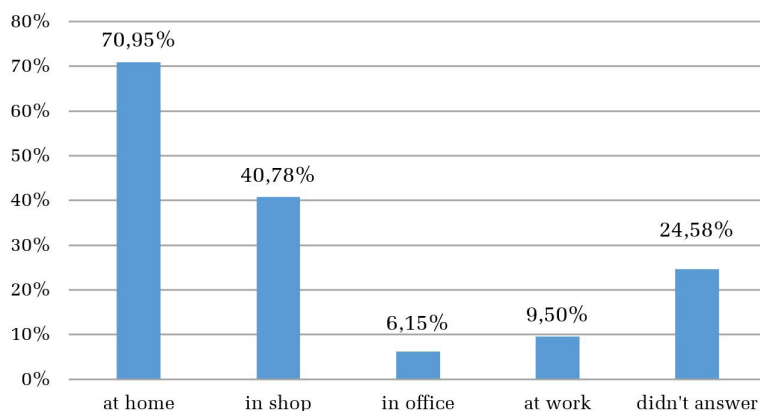
Uncle Géza renewed the activities of 'The Petőfi', and thus a new important opportunity for the survival of the local Hungarians appeared. The work he does in spite of his age serves as an eternal and historic example from the point of view of preserving Hungarianness.

His son, Mr Zoltán Berta, is the manager of Typography 'Forum' in Újvidék. He supports his father working on the preservation of the values and culture of Hungarians in Syrmia and also towards increasing the ability of Hungarian identity to form communities. He is convinced that the Serbian society makes possible to take further steps, thus step by step meeting the new, even the small results with happiness, making the majoritarian society accept the existence of the Hungarian community with its own independent identity. As an example, he mentioned that the first bilingual, Serbian–Hungarian place name sign of the location was erected in Maradék. Shortly after, the nameplate was taken off, but the Hungarians returned it to its place. Once again, the nameplate was taken off, but it was restored to the previous place. Next time it was only painted and scribbled. After a brief cleaning, it was restored again. Actually, everybody got used to the names of the locations being written in Hungarian as well.

The history of commemorating 15 March, the National Day of Hungary, also proves the success of the small steps. For the first time, the Hungarian community – only part of it – had an organized celebration on 15 March in 2009. The number of the participants that time was only 15. Ten years later, in 2019, a hundred

persons participated, and even the Serbians accepted the celebration with understanding and sympathy.

Mr Zoltán Berta considers the growth of activity among the Hungarians to be the result of ‘The Petőfi’, and there are some visible achievements in preserving the Hungarian identity. More and more people in their twenties who do not speak Hungarian sign up for language courses to study the language of their ancestors. The demand to approach the children to the Hungarian culture grows in the generations, and thus the “Tarcalka” children’s folk dance group will be introduced soon.



Source: research on Szerémség Kollégium

Figure 5. *Language use*

According the Mr Zoltán Berta, the united Hungarian community, which has put aside the controversies, is able to act with a force never seen before to guarantee its survival in the diaspora.

Rev. Daniel Halász has been the Reformed priest of the village for seven years. He has made great efforts to forge Hungarians into a real community. He launched the initiative to open a private kindergarten, which took place in 2013. This kindergarten can provide the framework for teaching the children the Hungarian language and culture as early as possible. ‘In September 2013, the General Convention (the representative body of the Reformed Churches of the Carpathian Basin) helped to launch a weekend kindergarten, and in 2014, with the help of the Hungarian State, the daily education started in the kindergarten set up in the Community Hall’ (Farkas-Ráduly 2018: 66).¹⁹ The kindergarten is the first place to form the identity in Maradék where the children can meet the linguistic and cultural traditions of their ancestors on a day-to-day basis. Many of them come from families where the Hungarian language is not used at all or only on rare occasions, wherefore it is important to teach them how to communicate

¹⁹ Translated by the author.

fluently in this language. As a result, they will be able to successfully attend the classes in Hungarian in the school. Due to the devoted work of Rev. Daniel Halász and his wife, the kindergarten has the necessary toys and tools for education, and thus it is a Hungarian heaven for the children.

After a complete renovation and refurbishment, some accommodation possibilities were formed in the attic of the priest's house, where the visitors of the village can spend the night. The activity of Rev. Dániel Halász has boosted the tourism of the region but has also involved the locals into the hospitality business. Among them, many have started the business of renting rooms for tourists. This development of the local tourism can also play an important role in preserving the local values. In the rooms in the attic of the priest's house, the Hungarian teachers and the scholarship holders of the Petőfi programme are accommodated. The latter group has the task of contributing to the local cultural life.

The day-care of the Hungarian class is also here besides the Hungarian pre-school course; the pupils can spend the afternoon with the teachers after the classes. The library with 3,000 books donated by the parsonage helps learning the Hungarian language.

We should not forget about Aunt Irénke, who takes care of the children's lunch every day. She also pays attention to offering the children – if possible – meals of Hungarian style that they can enjoy.

In the courtyard of the Reformed priest's house, the construction of the newest and the most modern kindergarten in Vojvodina started in 2019. The Hungarian Government also supported this project. The kindergarten has a hall for different events and offers accommodation for the visitors of the village. The event hall is in the basement of the three-storey building. The capacity of the hall is 150 persons, which can hopefully become the home for Hungarian cultural gatherings in Syrmia. On the ground floor, there will be a kindergarten for two groups and on the first floor rooms for the guests and visitors and an apartment for the teacher when she returns and for her husband, who will be the assistant pastor. This would be an important step forward in the village, as 'thirty years ago the young people went to the cities searching for a better life. Those who graduated ten years ago and have double citizenship went to the West. One of the biggest problems is that more than seventy graduated people left Maradék during the past couple of years, but these educated people could be very useful for the village' (Virág 2017: 120).²⁰ Although two people cannot replace seventy intellectuals, the fact that they are in Maradék is more than important, since no intellectual wanted to settle down here over the last decades. Further chances will open to preserve the Hungarian identity if the teacher of the local youngsters will be a local young lady who will help the local children to find their way. The young Rev. Dániel Halász is shaping the local Hungarian community with his plans and actions.

20 Translated by the author.

The recognized and highly respected expert of the values of the local Hungarians, Mr József Szabó, or Uncle Józsi, as everyone calls him, helped the researchers visit the village house by house to find and discover the traces of the local Hungarians. It is an interesting fact that Uncle Józsi, who plays a key role in the life of the local community, was not born here, in Maradék, but he is linked to the village through his wife. He could be an example for all the Hungarians living in diaspora. His energy, joyful attitude, and unbreakable commitment are the values local Hungarians can draw strength from for the further promotion of this heritage. Mr József Szabó is also known for his gastronomic knowledge and culinary art. People usually turn to him if they want to buy good-quality sausage, kulen, or smoked meat products. He adds carefully selected spices, so if anyone has tasted his products, they will never choose anything else. He is a frequent participant of the activities of the Petőfi Sándor Cultural Association, an active member of the chorus, a devoted guardian and teacher of the local culture. Uncle Józsi is an inexhaustible source of information about the local Hungarian life.

Maradék as the Guarantee of the Local Hungarians' Future

It is very hard to survive in the diaspora as part of the nation. The Hungarians of Maradék make increasing efforts to preserve the heritage of their ancestors, carefully protecting their Hungarianness. The building of the Hungarian identity has received new visible impulses after the lost decades. Concerning the people of Maradék as a Hungarian community at the heart of Syrmia, we share Zoltán Berta's thoughts: 'I cannot betray the past, otherwise I betray the future.' If the Hungarians in Maradék as a community can truly find the way to identify themselves with their past, they will find the way to survival in the future of the Hungarians in Syrmia.

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