

## Family Microhistory: Genealogical Research in Szentes, Hungary

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**Abstract:** This paper provides an account of the author's family history in the context of her microhistorical research into the lives of her mostly peasant ancestors living in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Szentes, a small agricultural town in the middle of the Great Hungarian Plain. After becoming a recognized branch of historical research, in the past decade microhistory has made its way into genealogical research, offering an approach and methodology that allows for the piecing together of information about ancestors even when detailed accounts or documents are missing – either because they were lost or because they never existed in the first place. Such microhistories then offer insight into and provide important details for local social history, results that take family history work well beyond the personal scope.

**Keywords:** *genealogy, family history, microhistory, social history, Szentes*

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### Genealogical Research as Microhistory

Genealogy has become fashionable in recent decades – according to Lowenthal (2015), his recent revised edition of his 1985 classic *The Past Is a Foreign Country* – as a result of our general preoccupation with the past and its preservation. He quotes Wagner (1960: 3, and 1961: 6, respectively) to contextualize and explain our collective need for the search for the ancestral past, who states that “[t]hrough genealogy the transient flat-dweller of the cities can join himself to the peasant rooted in ancestral soil,” since “[c]ut off from his roots by profound changes in ways of living, by migration from home and by loss of contact with his kindred, modern man seeks...to reconstruct human links” (cited in Lowenthal 2015: 84). In addition, the popularity of genealogical research has only grown in the age of the internet. Beyond the personal aspects and gain (of roots, a past, a pedigree), lie its wider benefits, notably, in providing insight into the settlement history, local history, and/or social history of the place where the ancestors lived, if a microhistorical analysis is done into the personal fates of a family and their motivations to act under the forces of history.



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Microhistory as a genre of historical research emerged in the 1970s in Italy and has gained considerable following since the 1990s (cf. Burke 1991, Ginzburg et al. 1993), and produced a major work on its theory and practice in 2013 (cf. Magnússon and Szijártó 2013). Microhistorians aim to study a relatively small object, "a village community, a group of families, even an individual person" (Ginzburg and Poni 1991: 3, cited in Magnússon and Szijártó 2013: 25), to capture the experience of the people involved in the given historical circumstances, "with the microscope," to allow insights and understanding that would not be possible "with the telescope." Genealogical studies using the microhistorical approach and methodology have now been published by authors wishing to contextualize their findings more widely than the personal relevance. For example, Emma Rotschild's 2011 book about her family's history in France is a microhistorical family history narrative. Anne Patterson Rodda's 2012 book also provides a microhistorical account of her personal family history of Danish immigrants to the US, applying the approach consciously and explicitly, while her 2014 book discusses the methodology of applying the microhistorical method in genealogical research and writing in general. Just recently, Reginald Bacon (2019) produced a guide to microhistorical research aimed at the wider audience, from historians to local history enthusiasts.

Today's boom in genealogy is, of course, also fueled by the digital revolution, namely, the fact that billions of historical records – birth, marriage, and death registers; ship manifests; census records, etc. – are now available digitally and accessible from the convenience of one's home. Internet access also allows for various kinds of searches of data sources the like of which were simply impossible before. Such digital genealogy, for instance, made it possible for me to find – after a bit of detailed searching – the place where some of my ancestors lived in the 1730s, twenty years before coming to Szentes where they settled, and provide empirical evidence for at least one of the sources of the new settlers of the town in the mid-eighteenth century (Fenyvesi 2020). If more microhistories such as these ancestors' history of migration are uncovered, the settlement history of the town could be described in much more detail than it is now.

The core of the present paper is an essay providing a first pass at uncovering the layers of meaning, an account of the personal and familial findings of the genealogical research into the paternal side of my own family that I have been engaged in since the spring of 2019. Its geographical and historical focus is eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Szentes, a small agricultural town in the middle of the Great Hungarian Plain, where my paternal ancestors lived beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. Szentes is a basically unremarkable town in the sense that no event of national or international history has ever taken place there. It was founded in early medieval times and, unlike many settlements on the Great Hungarian Plain, it survived the 150 years of Ottoman occupation as a settlement, despite the fact that it was plundered on many occasions. Its survival was due to the marshes to the west and south of the town, where the population routinely fled to hide from raiders, to reemerge and start their life anew after the marauders had left. The population of the town embraced the Reformation (probably following their landowner) in its earliest days in Hungary, in the 1540s (Labádi 2003: 13).

After the Ottoman rule ended in 1699, in 1720 the town and the lands around it became the property of Johann Georg Harruckern, an Austrian Imperial Commissioner of Food who, together with several other settlements in Csongrád and neighboring Békés Counties, received it as reward for a very successful transformation of the Habsburg army's provision system for the Habsburg forces that were still engaged in keeping the Ottoman Turks out of southern Hungary in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. One of the main elements of this system was to make Szentes into its center, thereby providing a good opportunity for the locals to sell their

crops as well as bread and cheese. Harruckern began by populating his new estates which, like the rest of the Great Plain, had become depopulated during Ottoman Turkish times. The resettlement process was also supported by the overall policy of the Habsburgs: Law 13 of 1723 regulated the repopulation of "the steppes" while providing a six-year tax exemption to new settlers.

In the early eighteenth century, a mass migration of Hungarian peasants occurred from the more densely populated counties of the country, the Highlands and Transylvania, to the depopulated Great Plain, the region between the Danube and the Tisza rivers, and to Southern Transdanubia. Poles, Czechs and Rusyns moved to the northern areas of the country and new German/Austrian landlords organized the resettlement of Germans, Serbs, and Slovaks to various parts of the country as well, mostly to the Great Plain. During the eighteenth century the population of the country doubled (from four million in 1711 to nine and a half million by the end of the century).

Johann Harruckern did not move new residents to Szentes in an organized manner as he did with the settlements of Békés County, where he did so thoughtfully, moving serfs of the same mother tongue and religion to the same settlement to prevent conflicts. However, he supported volunteer settlers – Protestants or Catholics – coming to Szentes, providing them with food, and completely exempted them from paying taxes for the first two or three years. The Calvinist population of Szentes also began to grow at a rapid rate due to the fact that Harruckern, although he himself was a Catholic Austrian, provided new settlers an important benefit of religious freedom, a right that was unique at the time because Roman Catholicism effectively functioned as a state religion. On his estates, serfs were not tied to the land: the inhabitants became "free-going serfs" who paid their landlord their dues in cash. In 1730, through his intercession, Szentes was granted the right to hold three national fairs, which gave the locals the opportunity to sell their crops and goods locally, and at the same time spared them from having to attend fairs in other places. After the death of Johann Georg Harruckern in 1742, his son Franz Dominik Harruckern (1696–1775) became the new landlord of the town. During his time, the Empress Maria Theresa's *Urbarium* was issued, an order to distribute land among serfs for leasing. Because Franz Harruckern died without a male heir, his estate was inherited by the Károlyi family, into which one of his daughters had married and thus the lands around Szentes became a part of their holdings.

### **My Personal Genealogical Research**

Until my father died in February 2016, it had never occurred to me to research family history, an issue that had always been his domain, not to mention that I have always liked to follow my own path in life. Let us just say it was not too surprising that I did not want to encroach on his domain or remain permanently in his shadow. My father pulled himself out of deep poverty thanks to a truly wonderful gift of fate – in 1941, a wealthy landowner from Szentes offered a scholarship to "a Calvinist child" (this became my father) and another to "a Catholic child" (a later historian and good friend of my father for the rest of his life) to attend the town's *gimnázium*, at the initiative of the local newspaper, *Szentesi Napló*. This is how my father was able to go to school beyond the standard six years of elementary school education at the time. He later attended university in Leningrad and finally became a university lecturer and literary scholar in Szeged, the major university town an hour's drive south of Szentes. He had all the enthusiasm of the first-generation intellectual, their limitless desire for knowledge, and the born teacher's drive to educate – he was ready to improvise a mini-lecture to anyone who would

listen. He was eighty years old in 2011 when his two-volume, seven-hundred-page autobiography was published, wherein he also related everything he knew about his ancestors that (he implicitly suggested) was possible to know. He wrote about his childhood, his parents and their world, about the dyke-building which his father, grandfather and uncles did for years to provide for their families, and everything he knew about their lives. Like his male relatives, a lot of the men from penniless peasant families from Szentes worked as *kubikos* workers ['dyke builders'] on the construction of the dykes along Hungary's rivers, usually walking to their job sites, sometimes hundreds of kilometers away from their homes, pushing their wheelbarrows.



Dyke builders, Szentes, 1931. Among the men, the author's grandfather, great-grandfather, and the latter's three other sons. Source: author's personal family photo archive.



The author's father's family in 1938: the author's father (front right), grandparents (center right and back right), and great-grandparents (center left and middle).

Source: author's personal family photo archive.



Students and form master of grade 4 of the Szentes Downtown Calvinist Elementary School (*Szentesi központi református népiskola*), 1941. The author's father at front left.

Source: author's personal family photo archive.

Yet the indication was there all along in my father's memoir that there was still something to discover, on page eleven of the first volume, where he wrote, "I never specifically researched my family tree" [*a családfámat külön sosem kutattam*]. I found this clue only after reading this passage many times over the years – although as a linguist, I had no clear idea as to how a family tree could be researched. Nevertheless, at Christmas 2012 I had become very intrigued when an acquaintance in Budapest posted on social media that, "Hey, people, many millions of old Hungarian birth entries have been published in the American FamilySearch genealogical database online" [*Emberék, kikerült sokmillió régi, magyarországi születési anyakönyvi adat az amerikai FamilySearch családkutató adatbázisban az internetre*]. I registered and made an attempt to figure out the family tree but quickly got stuck, realizing that it is impossible to reconstruct a genealogy from birth data alone. I immediately saw that the transcriptions of the names were very problematic, as the American volunteers who produced them had had difficulty deciphering eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hungarian handwriting, and especially figuring out Hungarian names. (At this time the database did not have photos of the original registers but only the indexed data.)

Actually, one other time, a decade before my father died, not even at the level of thoughts, but at the level of feelings, it had occurred to me how nice it would be to unravel some interesting story in which I was, in one way or another, a character of a story rich in mysteries, possibly requiring intellectual sleuthing. This was back in 2006-2007, when an American colleague of mine connected me with an acquaintance of hers, a Shakespeare scholar living in Hawaii, who was at the time trying to figure out where her father had come from, somewhere in historic Hungary. There were a few written documents from the 1920s when the family emigrated to America, but very little actual physical evidence. I became interested in the mystery, and after a year and a half of searching I figured out where her father was born: in Boian (Alsóbajom in Hungarian), a small village near Medias/Medgyes, Romania. Happy to receive help in her search on the Hungarian end of things, Valerie became a friend. When she and her husband came to Szeged in the spring of 2007, we drove to Boian for a long weekend and found the birth records of her father and his three brothers, as well as the death record of the head of the family (Valerie's grandfather) in the registers kept in the storage room of the Bazna town hall. For Valerie, this information meant the world and the end point of many years of research. Well, this was when I was captivated by some unspoken longing that it would be nice to unravel something like this, to figure out an important story from the past that I had a personal connection with.

It was only after my mother and then also my father had died and the possibilities of telling and listening to oral family history were gone, that the door through which I got to research family history opened. In the spring of 2019, I discovered that photos of parish registers (not only of births but also of marriages and deaths) had been uploaded to the U.S. database by this time. It is true that only births could still be keyword searched. Due to the faulty indexing, the search words were still ridden with errors, but with a little patience, all of them could be viewed online. After a month of searching the internet database, finally, at the suggestion of a colleague in the ethnography department at my university – the same institution where my father had taught –, in mid-May I took a bus to Szentes and showed up at the town's archives, a treasury of family history. By the end of the year, I had spent about thirty days in the research room, almost always from opening to closing, sometimes testing archivists to the limits of their patience, with the always calm and kind, super-professional Zsolt in the lead, as I was asking them for more and more and more eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents. What I found

can actually be summarized in one sentence: land-leasing and landless serfs, day laborers and dyke builders in the market town of Szentes on the Great Hungarian Plain, many destitute men and women whose lives left no trace beyond the registry data, except – very rarely! – if they had a little more than nothing, or if they came into conflict with the law; plus a questionable but colorful line of petty nobility that ended in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet it all meant a whole new world to me.

As I visited Szentes again and again and traveled back in time, discovering the generations before my great-grandparents, known by name from my father, the many serfs and laborers, and some nobles, everyone on the branches of the family tree of ancestors going back to the 1750s acquired a name, dates of birth and death, spouses, children, and fates that could be peeled off from the curt registry entries: *juhász* ['shepherd'], *földműves* ['farmer'], *Körösbe fúlt* ['drowned in the Körös river'], *törvénytelen ágyból* ['from an illegitimate bed'], *méhlob* ['inflammation of the uterus'], *tífusz* ['typhoid fever'], *gyerekágy* ['childbirth'], *cholera* ['cholera'], *szárazbetegség* ['tuberculosis'], *kútba esett* ['fell into a well']. The many thousands of registry entries I reviewed, and the several hundred I used to put the family tree together, eventually condensed the family beyond what had been mapped out into a bird's-eye view spanning two centuries, making it an unavoidable and tangible fact that, indeed, everyone born to this world dies, and amplifying the question of, well then, what is the meaning of all of this? The ancestors' world had remained unchanged for over two centuries: everybody lived in the same town, living the same kind of life as their parents did before them, nobody emigrated to America, nobody even moved to another town. (My father was the first to go to high school, and his cousin Lajos the only one to leave the country – but all of that happened much later, in the 1940s and in 1956, respectively.)

My universe became populated with my ancestors, offsetting the hard to comprehend fact that with the death of our father, my sister and I had become the oldest generation in the family (and also the last to bear the family name). I was not blessed with uncles and aunts, both of my parents being only children, and although my sister was (she was born from my father's first marriage), by this time all of them had passed.

The devil is in the detail. It is one thing to know that the ancestors in Szentes had difficult lives (and especially to hear this constantly as a child!), and yet another to put this together from the life stories that unfolded before me. As a child, when my father would tell me about the poverty they lived in: he had toys made by his grandfather out of cornhusks, and their family dinner was usually corn on the cob, which even later, as an adult, he would not eat, not even as a summer snack popular at the city beach. I always felt bad about it all, and only heard that I, on the other hand, had everything, and should appreciate it. Today, I do not know any more if this was because my father really said it with such an overtone, intentionally, or maybe involuntarily, or because kids, in the absence of experience and a broader frame of reference, take on a lot of things they should not. This feeling lasted for a long time, and I did not really like to listen to my father about his difficult childhood even as an adult, at the same time knowing full well that it was really high time to get over this dislike.

The longer I worked in the archives, unearthing detail after detail, the more I realized that my resentment towards my Szentes relatives was slowly melting away. As a child, I experienced only the distorted late twentieth-century remnants of the peasant society that was now emerging before my eyes here in the archives. The mudbrick house in the center of Szentes that my grandfather built in the 1950s had running water, but it only had an outhouse at the end of the garden path (equipped with toilet paper, thank God). When we visited Szentes at the end of the

summer holidays to celebrate my grandmother's birthday, I had only seen in her and her siblings the uneducated, loud peasants with whom I could never identify. Between whose lives and my own I found nothing in common other than our mere origins. There was a "clean room"<sup>1</sup> here, a granary, an increasingly less-utilized chicken coop, while in our two-room apartment in Szeged, the money left over from sustaining life turned into books. Whenever we visited Szentes, my father somehow was able to transform himself and talk to them all, and they loved him as their own, while looking up to him as the only college graduate among them. My father somehow managed to straddle both worlds, theirs and what I knew as ours. As I already clearly understood as a teenager, my mother, however, did not fit in the former at all. She was Russian and had grown up in Moscow, among the intellectual friends of a family of teachers and on the performances of the Bolshoi and classical Russian ballet, then studied at Lomonosov University, and from there she came to Szeged after she married my father. There was a palpable, impenetrable wall between my grandmother and my mother, one that my father had obviously given up trying to dismantle by then, and which fundamentally defined my attitude also. When my grandmother used the words *drastuti* "good day!" and *pasiba* "thank you" (Russian *zdrastvuyte* and *spasiba*, which she picked up from the Soviet troops in 1945, and which went through considerable adaptation in her mouth) to please my mother, I was ashamed. I knew that these tortured words achieved the exact opposite effect and in fact increased the feeling of alienation for her in the Szentes environment to the extreme. The two of us went to Szentes only to survive these visits, and then later, we did not go at all, instead preferring that my father bring Grandma (widowed by then) to Szeged for Christmas and Easter. On our home turf the whole experience somehow became more tolerable.

The life stories and destinies that emerged from the pages of the registers I researched touched my heart. For example, when I found Gergely Fenyvesi, my earliest Fenyvesi ancestor in Szentes, on the list of needy residents, compiled by the town in 1791. Another pang hit me when I saw the death entry for the youngest of Gergely's nine children (and one of only three who grew up to be adults), András in 1866, marked as *beggar* ['koldús'], even though when he died he still had at least three living children (out of the fourteen he had begotten of two wives). The cholera epidemic of 1831 became personal when I found János Lénárt, the later father-in-law of Gergely Fenyvesi's grandson, István (who was the first among successive Istváns, the fifth of whom was my father, born exactly a century later), listed as the person who reported the death of his wife, Sára Kis, at the height of the epidemic in August that year, when there were days when 90 people died in Szentes, then a town of not quite seventeen thousand). Even though I found this out in the summer of 2019, I had not yet had any experience about or real knowledge of the meaning of the word *epidemic*.

For days I tried to imagine the fate of one of my great-great-grandfathers, László Dancsó, who had seven children in eleven years from his first marriage, in 1835 at the age of twenty-two, all of whom died one after the other, at the age of thirteen months or earlier, four of the boys named László, after their father. The last of them was one month old when he died two days before Christmas in 1847, following his mother, barely thirty years old, to the grave.

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<sup>1</sup> The "clean room" (*tisztaszoba*) was a room in peasant houses which was not used day by day but kept clean, containing a house altar, a richly decorated seating area, and a bed towered high with pillows.



Finding himself thus back to square one, with no wife or children, Dancsó finally remarried two years later, at the age of thirty-seven, and had only one child with his new wife, Rozália Sütő, 15 years his junior: also named Rozália, their daughter would become my great-great-grandmother. Having succumbed, nine months prior, to *görcs* ['spasms'] (from a blog post I learn that nineteenth-century medicine was symptom- rather than cause-based), Dancsó had seen the birth of four of his grandchildren, but not the death of his second wife in 1873, caused by another cholera epidemic. The fate of Dancsó's eldest grandson, my great-grandfather, László Aradi, did not shake me so much, if only because I had heard a lot about him from my father when growing up: he married four times and (supposedly) had twenty-one children, of whom only the first wife's two sons and the last wife's four children (including the eldest, who would become my grandmother) reached adulthood. In the registers I find the marriages, the wives, their deaths, but only a total of nine children – the other twelve were probably unborn babies, remembered only by their father for the rest of his long life.

I was surprised at how quickly some ancestors remarried after the loss of their wives (is it possible to get over the death of a spouse so quickly?): my father's great-great-grandfather, István Fenyvesi, was twenty-seven years old when, eight years into the marriage, he lost his wife, Zsuzsanna Lénárt to a stroke (ten years before it was her mother who died of cholera), however, he remarried a month after being widowed. This was not at all unique: I saw similar cases elsewhere in the family tree also. Then I realized that the grim practical considerations of life obviously overwrote everything: István's two children were four and one years old when his first wife died, and their survival was more likely in a two-parent family.... In any event, István lived together with his second wife for forty-three years, until her death.

I had been going to the archives in Szentes for a month already when Zsolt offered that I accompany him to the storage room to retrieve a batch of documents I had requested. I jumped at the opportunity. The storage room is located in the right wing of the ground floor of the "county hall" of Szentes (the building indeed used to be that, but now houses the museum and archives), its largest room a two-story system of robust metal shelves, densely stocked, with several centuries of county and town records in a myriad of cardboard boxes on the shelves. Zsolt gave me a small tour, which felt nice in that it made me feel accepted, even though I acutely sensed the lack of my historical knowledge at every step (I had double majored in English and Russian at university). In a box on a table by the window, taken from a shelf and not returned to its place, we noticed documentation of the nobility families of Szentes, and Zsolt quickly remarked that I should look into it as well. I politely declined, explaining that there were no nobles in my family's past. "You should still take a look" [*Azért csak nézze meg!*], he suggested gently. Out of courtesy, I looked inside, flipping through the alphabetized stacks of documents. I stopped at the letter D: Dancsó. Even then, I was in disbelief, surely this must be some other family, not "my Dancsós." I took the handful of papers with me to the research room, and Zsolt explained that these were documents of admission to the general assembly of the nobles of the county, from the mid-18th century, half in Latin and half in Hungarian (Latin was the official language of the Habsburg Empire then). A colleague of mine, an expert in Old Hungarian literature, helped me later with the Latin, and it turned out that in 1663 Balázs Dancsó had received the charter of nobility from Emperor Leopold, which extended to his brothers (János, Gergely, Imre, György, and Albert) as well. Balázs' younger brother, János, moved from Veszprém County to Ipolykeszi in Hont County, and his children moved from there to Zsámbok (in Pest County), and then after the anti-Habsburg revolt led by Rákóczi in the early 1700s, they scattered across the Great Hungarian Plain. The youngest son, György, moved to Csongrád County (specifically, to the

town of Csongrád, and then on to Szentes) together with his sons and their families. The papers were the documentation of the nobility certificate for Csongrád County: their nobility was recognized in 1749 (and extended to further members of the family in the mid-1760s). I easily put together the descent from György: in fact, all the Szentes Dancsós – a populous clan in the nineteenth century – descended from him. I attempted to find out what Balázs Dancsó got the nobility for but found nothing.

It is a surprising mystery why I never heard about this noble branch before: my father never referred to it, either in his memoir or in his informal storytelling. I know that if he had known about it, he certainly would have made reference to it in the stories he told us, at least in passing, most likely accompanied by his signature ironic half-smile. Why didn't his grandfather, László Aradi, tell him about his noble ancestors? After all, his own grandfather was László Dancsó, and the noble family member was thus not very far removed. (I only realized later that although in earlier documents László Dancsó was referred to everywhere as *Ns.* [i.e., *nemes*, 'noble'] László Dancsó, in the registry entries of his second marriage and of the birth of his daughter Rozália, *Ns.* did not appear in front of his name.)

The pieces about the ancestors slowly began to fall into place and form a coherent picture. Representatives of the three main branches of the family, the Aradis (my grandmother's paternal ancestors, Roman Catholics), the Dancsós (also Roman Catholics, on my grandmother's side, connecting to the Aradis in my great-great-grandparents' generation), and the Fenyvesis (my grandfather's Calvinist ancestors) all settled in Szentes in the mid-eighteenth century. The Aradi family – János Aradi, Anna Vesszős and their six children – in 1750, the Dancsós in the mid-1750s, and the Fenyvesis in the mid-1760s. At this time the repopulation of the Great Hungarian Plain, depopulated during the 150-year-long Ottoman Turkish occupation of Hungary, was still going on, in an organized manner and spontaneously, with the migration of serf families fleeing the more densely populated northern and eastern parts of the country in search of a better life on the plain. I found the Aradi family in Zsadány, in the southern part of Heves County, the northern edge of the Great Plain, in the 1730s, from where they came to Szentes after a decade long detour to Kiskunfélegyháza (30 kilometers to the west of Szentes). Where the Fenyvesis came from cannot be figured out, because there is no trace of them in the registers: at the time of the eighteenth-century Counter Reformation, the Calvinist parishes rarely kept registers. In fact, it is a wonder that some of them kept registers at all (from 1741 in Szentes, from 1712 in Kecskemét), since the right to keep registers was granted to the Protestant churches by Emperor Joseph II only in 1785.

In Szentes, after the 1775 distribution of serf plots, the Aradis became land-leasing *jobbágy* ['serfs'], two of the sons of the family receiving leased land. The Fenyvesis remained *zsellér* ['landless serfs'], working other people's land for money or a share of the crops, and several of the Fenyvesi males were later employed as shepherds. I wondered for a long time how the decision was made about who among the serfs was given land to lease (I found no indication in the records). A historian and ethnographer colleague finally provided the key from his own many decade long research: only serfs who were wealthy enough to own livestock were given land to lease – and, clearly, the Fenyvesis were not. Some of the Dancsós received plots of land to lease, some helped cultivate land leased by others, but they were all listed in the censuses of the nobles (a favorable position, since nobility paid no taxes, only serfs did). The Kálmáns, also landless serfs, joined the Fenyvesi branch of the family, and according to the documents, they were the oldest branch of the family living in Szentes given that their representatives are traceable back to the late seventeenth century. They appeared several times in the town chronicle

entitled *A szentesi református eklézsia története* [‘The History of the Reformed Church in Szentes’], which was kept from the middle of the eighteenth century but recounts events dating back to the beginning of the century.

The documents clearly show that by the early nineteenth century, the Aradis would become a populous, affluent, and prominent family of serfs in the town’s Roman Catholic community. According to the periodical censuses, they had an extensive herd of livestock, and there are several signs of their above-average social status in the local peasant society. From the 1790s onwards, several Aradi male family members served as members of the town council. One of them even held the office of deputy head of council, while one of the Aradi sons married the daughter of a local noble family, Anna Fridvalszki, despite being “just a serf.” In the indices of the court documents, I could not find any Aradis at all, no brushes with the law (but a whole lot of Fenyvesi and Dancsó family members). In addition to their personal and family prosperity, the Aradis also left their mark on the built heritage of the town by erecting and maintaining a roadside crucifix known as the Aradi Cross, which, according to records, was put up by members of the Aradi family back in the late eighteenth century.

What did not compute is how, if the Aradis did so well, the family ended up in deep poverty by the end of the nineteenth century. Then I came across the 1816 list of “flood and thunderstorm victims” in the town, finding three Aradis, two of whom were my ancestors, a father and son, plus another son. All had suffered devastating financial loss. The history of the town written by László Sima and published in 1914 mentions (on pages 444-445) that in 1815, after several years of poor harvests, “a good harvest promises, but this is destroyed on June 21 by a terrible hail, which devastated all the crops of 212 farmers. The awful hail started in the afternoon. The dangerous cloud came from the west with a horrible windstorm. Wherever the thunderstorm passed, it destroyed the crops, the grapes, struck the small cattle left outside, the lambs, the piglets. Many people were hit in the head by ice the size of chicken eggs and of human fists, and even the next day people struggled to shovel away ice from the vineyards. After the terrible hail, a relief operation was launched. The 212 farmers who went bankrupt received seed and food aid and tax exemptions” [*Bő termés ígérkezik, de ezt meg június 21-én tönkre veri a borzalmas jégeső, mely 212 gazda minden termését elpusztította. Ez a rettentő jégeső délután kezdődött. A veszedelmes felhő napnyugat felől jött borzalmas szélviharral. Amerre a zivatar átvonult, tönkrevverte a vetést, szőlőket, agyonsújtotta a kint ért aprójószágot, bárányokat, malacokat. Számos embernek a fejét is beverte a tyúktojás és ökölnyi nagyságú jégdarabok sokasága s még a következő napon is lapáttal lehetett hányni a szőlőkben a jeget. A rettentő jégeső után segélyakciót indítottak. A tönkrement 212 gazda vetőmag és élelem segélyben, adóelengedésben részesült*]. Plus, I realized that birth order was crucial: the importance of the first-born son was not just sentimental but economical as well. He (and possibly the second-born brother) would inherit the land and the livestock, while the later born would become laborers. Even though my father’s grandfather, László Aradi, was the first-born in his family, his own father was third among the sons and inherited nothing. That is how their deep poverty came about.

Court documents from the first half of the nineteenth century provided hair-raising and inglorious stories of the ancestors. The earliest is a reference from 1805 in the alphabetical index of documents, while more documentation on the hearings is no longer to be found today. The person it refers to, a József Fenyvesi, cannot be identified because no József Fenyvesi lived in Szentes in 1805 (historic records in Szentes sometimes contain errors, and *József*, *István*, and *János* were very common names). According to the index, a “József Fenyvesi is punished for

swearing" [*Fenyvesi József káromkodás végett megbüntették*] but we know no more than that one sentence about what happened. It would be interesting to know what it took to be cited in court for swearing in 1805 — under what circumstances, what the perpetrator said, and what punishment was imposed on him for it. Even though the word used in the record is *káromkodás* ['swearing' in today's Hungarian], it has to have been blasphemy, which was a punishable offence even several decades later as court documents from 1840s cases of other family members show.

In 1844, the twenty-two-year-old younger brother of István "remarried fast" Fenyvesi, Fenyvesi Bálint, a shepherd by occupation, "excavated" the barn of a local farm on the night of December 23, i.e., he dug a small tunnel under the barn wall and "liberated" sixteen sheep through it. He left three of them as his own with another shepherd and drove the rest to nearby Szegvár with his wife, Rozália Czakó. They were captured there and brought before the court. Bálint Fenyvesi was sentenced to three months of confinement and twenty-five blows of the cane, and his wife was also imprisoned, albeit for an unknown duration. The following year, he stole twenty-seven sheep using the same method and was sentenced to prison again. (I had initially wondered why Bálint and Rozália started having children only in 1852, eight years after getting married – well, it looks like earlier they may not have been home much...)

In the criminal cases, however, the family is most prominently represented by the Dancsó "boys:" my great-great-great-grandfather László Dancsó, his brother Pál, their younger brother Ferenc, as well as their cousins, József and Péter. The earliest unearthed case contains some of the most adventurous twists. On October 28, 1827, Pál Dancsó and a nineteen-year-old cowherd attacked a farm hand working for a town senator in Kistelek. Brandishing a pistol, he drove away four oxen. In the late evening of October 30, on their way back to Szentes and wanting to avoid using the Böld ferry just north of the town, they planned to have the oxen swim across the Tisza River at Ányás (a few kilometers south of Szentes) but ran into a sentry, to whom they could not convincingly prove the origin of the cattle. They claimed that these were Dancsó's oxen that strayed away – hmm, strayed across the Tisza, a formidable river? anyway... –, and were held captive overnight. The next morning a highly positioned local appeared (he is referred to in the court papers as *the commissary*) and (fraudulently) confirmed that these were *bitang ökrök* ['stray oxen']. Dancsó and the cowherd were released, the commissary drove the oxen to his land and plowed several acres with them, then handed them over to Dancsó, who continued to work them, plowing more land with them, so that in the end "they were ruined at his hands" [*annak a kezén már elromolva maradtak*]. The owner of the oxen reported in Szentes on November 4 that his oxen had been stolen, and then the threads finally came together in February: the farmer came to Szentes again, identified his oxen by their ear marks and a lawsuit was filed against Dancsó. The charge against Pál Dancsó, then twenty-three years old, was the driving away of the oxen, as well as blasphemy, because when they were asked about their destination at the time of their capture by the Tisza, he said, "To Antal Bába"; he was asked which Antal Bába? And he (according to the testimony of the papers) replied that "I'm not driving them to any Antal Bába, fuck his creator" [*Nem hajtom én egyikhez sem, Baszom a' ki teremtette*]. The court papers were preserved incompletely, so we do not know what the outcome of the lawsuit was. Dancsó was, in any case, the defendant in another case in October 1829. At that time, five horses were stolen from two residents of Hódmezővásárhely, a town about twenty km south of Szentes, and a man from Szentes was suspected of stealing them. A few days later, this man and Pál Dancsó drove four of the horses as Dancsó's own to the Kunhegyes fair to sell. They were arrested in Kunhegyes because Dancsó's (otherwise valid) travel pass – issued in his father's name but also

extended to him – contained descriptions of three horses, while four were harnessed to his cart. Dancsó was accused of being an accessory after the fact, but during the proceedings he testified that he knew nothing about the theft and was just taking the horses to sell. However, the court found him guilty and imprisoned him.

Numerous documents are available in connection with the case of Péter Dancsó in 1845, a story dotted with colorful elements and surprising grim twists. He was prosecuted for assault and blasphemy. At the dawn of June 13, 1844, he was returning home from the three-day wedding of one of his friends, and his horses carried his cart all around town at high speed after he fell asleep behind the reins. Eventually, the horses found their way home, but the gate was locked, Dancsó still asleep. Then, under unclear circumstances, he drove a Jewish merchant, Izsák Mózes, in his cart to Csongrád at the latter's request – or rather, in the end Mózes drove the cart because Dancsó fell asleep again behind the reins in his drunken state. Dancsó woke up at the Böld ferry and, not knowing how to explain the stranger's presence in the driver's seat, ordered him down and asked for a fare. Mózes offered two small coins, but Dancsó demanded more. Mózes refused to give more and instead ran away, returning to the cart only when Dancsó started to reload the merchant's container of ink back on his cart. They tussled, then Dancsó grabbed his pitchfork from the cart, hit Mózes in the head with it, then continued to deal more blows to the man, already lying on the ground, while shouting "I fuck your Jewish god, Jesus, two coins is not enough, pay more!" [*Baszom a zsidó istenedet, jézusodat, engem két garas nem csinált, fizess többet!*]. In the brawl, the merchant's trousers were removed under unclear circumstances and were later found by a peasant boy on the embankment and taken to the town hall. Mózes also accused Dancsó of stealing ten forints from his pants. Dancsó was found guilty of causing "major bloodshed" and blasphemy by the court, acquitted of the theft of the ten forints, but required to pay the victim's medical expenses and attorney's fees as well as to serve a month in prison *katona vason* ['with soldier iron on,' i.e., with a long chain connecting his left leg with his right hand], doing public works and fasting two days a week.

Why my great-great-grandfather, the otherwise hard-fated László Dancsó, was brought to court with his aforementioned brother Pál and their younger brother Ferenc in 1844 is not known. Although several documents were preserved in the case, the subject of the lawsuit cannot be ascertained, only that it had something to do with stolen horses. The case continued for some years, into 1847 when László's first wife and last son died at the end of the year. László Dancsó emerged unscathed, as the documents of the last lawsuit show. The last lawsuit which has traces in the Szentes archives is dated 1848: László Dancsó and his brother Ferenc were involved again, and the focus of litigation was the theft of a horse. Unfortunately, we do not know the outcome of the lawsuit here either, due to the incompleteness of the documents.

A serious consequence can, however, be inferred from the name use in the court documents and the registry entries. While in the court documents László Dancsó is consistently, at each occurrence of his name, referred to with the *Ns.* marking nobility before his name, in the registry data following the criminal cases of the 1840s, the *Ns.* is missing. It is not there in his 1850 marriage record or in any subsequent entries: e.g., his daughter Rozália's 1851 birth and 1865 marriage entry, or László's own death registry entry in 1872. Moreover, in his marriage record, the title appears before his father's name but not before his, just as his name does not appear in the nobles' census of 1847/48 (and nor do those of his brothers who went to court). He and his brothers were most likely stripped of their nobility. According to the historical sources I found, one could lose one's nobility in one of two ways in Hungary at the time: for treason or for perjury. The former does not seem very likely in the case of small-town nobles prosecuted for

theft of horses. Perjury, however, is not at all unlikely. It is not very glorious to lose a noble title, and the event was clearly omitted from family lore. Perhaps that is why the descendants of László Dancsó – his grandson, László Aradi, and a century later the latter's grandson, my father – did not know that the family had a nobleman among its forebears.

At Christmas 2019, after completing half a year of research and two months of intensive writing, my family members were presented with the family history: a hundred-page manuscript, a four-hundred-page appendix with my photos of documents, and a sixty-page family tree appendix. It was a bright occasion: almost four years after my father's death, we came to share so much new information about our family's past, much beyond the times of the oral history he had inherited.

In the spring of 2020, already under lockdown, I made a truly unexpected and remarkable discovery, seemingly out of the blue. As is often the case, I figured something out that had been right in front of my nose for a year. At the beginning of my research, the year before, I had looked up internet sources, including the Hungarian Arcanum repository: I searched for the most important family names. I found a János Dancsó in János Reizner's famous four-volume history of Szeged from 1900, in connection with the events of 1728 — but I thought this Dancsó was merely a namesake, since my understanding was that everyone on the paternal side was from Szentes. Now, a year later, I came across a piece of paper that I pedantically included and realized that this Dancsó was one of "my Dancsós"! First accused and later a victim of the infamous Szeged witch trial of 1728, this János Dancsó died at the stake at the age of seventy on July 23, 1728, together with the other defendants (including his wife, Borbála Hisen). He was no other than the brother of one of my earliest ancestors in Szentes, György Dancsó. How do I know this for sure? Well, Reizner mentions that the accused János Dancsó was seventy years old in 1728 (this presupposes the birth year of 1658), came from Ipolykeszi, and had lived in Szeged since 1720. The documents from the Csongrád County assembly of nobles mention that the Dancsó family came from Ipolykeszi, and when they were scattered in the Great Plain, (N.B. :) "János went to live in Szeged" [*János Szegedre ment lakni!*] I looked up the family tree to see how old my ancestor György Dancsó's brother János could be then: well, he was certainly old, since György, who went to live in Szentes, died at the age of ninety in 1760, so he was born in 1670, and János by definition was born earlier. Well, that is how I discovered that my earliest family connection in Szeged was accused of being a witch in the 1728 trial... a relative of mine. From my apartment in the lower town of Szeged, if you want to go out for a brief nature walk, you can practically go in one direction only: to the floodplain forest called *Boszorkánysziget*, or Witches' Island (it used to be a peninsula in the river) on the other side of the Tisza Dyke, a ten-minute walk away. The street leading there is called *Máglya sor*, or Pyre Lane.... My walks towards the end of the lockdown of the spring of 2020 after the witch trial discovery took me into the past amid the heat of the early summer days.

Growing up in Szeged, one hears references to witches from an early age, from the famous early twentieth-century pseudo-folksong, *Még azt mondják nincs Szegeden boszorkány*, ['They say there are no witches in Szeged'] to the several decades-old *Boszorkánykonyha* ['Witch's Kitchen'] food bar downtown, renamed as *Tündérményha* ['Fairy's Kitchen'] just a few years ago. These sites had become part of the landscape, you stop even noticing them. Frankly, this was the first time in my life that I stopped to think how excruciatingly serious and terribly real a historical fact this witch trial was, with its three stakes erected about one kilometer south of the center of the town then, with four victims tied to each one, most of whom eventually died of smoke poisoning before they could burn alive.

Then in the fall of 2020, at the beginning of the second wave of Covid, when we just started living inward again, I found two clues I could not place anywhere. One was from a historical source related to the Hungarian nobility at the beginning of the eighteenth century, from the summaries of the minutes of the general assembly of Pest-Pilis-Solt County, and the other is from a 1984 conference volume in Salgótarján. Both state that the original Balázs Dancsós's brother János died without descendants. But how can that be? The Szentes Dancsós derived themselves from precisely him! Then I remembered that in a summary of the Latin part of the nobility documents found in the Szentes archives, the judge in charge of the nobility proceedings noted at some point in the tangle caused by conflicting testimonies that "someone is not telling the truth here." I did not know exactly what was said because I only had a summary, I did not get a full translation in the end. These are already three clues from different times and places, which point in the same direction: that my Dancsós in Csongrád County had claimed their nobility falsely, although quite successfully.... Now I will really have to get a complete translation of the 1760s Latin documents from a charitable colleague in Classics.... The sleuthing goes on, down ever newer and unforeseen paths.

A lot of new information, stories, and details have filled out the branches of the family tree beyond living memory and well into the eighteenth century. The family tree has become my domain. Oh, how I so want to tell my father about it all....

\* \* \*

Although I am running out of obvious documents to investigate in the Szentes archives, my research continues. The sociohistorical contextualization of my findings and uncovering all the layers of meaning also continues. Contrasting greatly with today's world so full of mobility and migrations, one obvious insight it provides is that of what a stable world is like, with all the family stories played out in one place. On a personal level, all this genealogical knowledge provides a certain sense of rootedness in a geographical, historical, and social context in which at least some of the characters have names and life stories. On a scholarly level, I have traced a family, that of my earliest known Aradi ancestors, in their migration from Zsadány (Heves County) to Kiskunfélegyháza (Pest County) to Szentes in the course of twenty years before they settled in the latter, contributing a microhistory of significance to the eighteenth-century settlement history of the town. My plans of further research include providing a similar account about the Dancsós as well.

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