

Izvirni znanstveni članek/Article (1.01)

*Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84 (2024) 1, 105—115

Besedilo prejeto/Received:11/2023; sprejeto/Accepted:02/2024

UDK/UDC: 272:141.82:316.47

DOI: 10.34291/BV2024/01/Joob

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## **The Transgenerational Effects of Church Collaboration under the Communist-Socialist Regime**

### *Transgeneracijski učinki sodelovanja Cerkve v komunistično-socialističnem režimu*

*Abstract:* The aim of the study is to show the impact on the descendants of some clergypersons who collaborated as secret agents with the communist-socialist regime, one of whose objectives was to eliminate or at least weaken religiosity and the internal activity and social influence of the churches. The resource material was semi-structured interviews with children and grandchildren. The study aims to show that, beyond the personal traumas and ethical dilemmas, the main concern of the descendants was to preserve and, if necessary, rebuild the parent-child relationship. The pathways to this were different for each of those involved. Their differences were often influenced by previous transgenerational family patterns and influences. The examination from the perspective of the descendants is unique in the research on church collaboration and is the focus of this study.

*Keywords:* secret agent, transgenerational patterns, coping, parent-child relationship, Central-Eastern Europe

*Povzetek:* Namen študije je prikazati vpliv nekaterih duhovnikov, ki so kot tajni agenti sodelovali s komunistično-socialističnim režimom, katerega eden od ciljev je bil odpraviti ali vsaj oslabiti religioznost ter notranjo dejavnost in družbeni vpliv cerkva, na njihove potomce. Vir gradiva so bili polstrukturirani intervjuji z otroki in vnuki. Namen študije je pokazati, da je bila poleg osebnih travm in etičnih dilem glavna skrb potomcev ohraniti in po potrebi ponovno vzpostaviti odnos med starši in otroki. Vsak od vpletenih je imel pri tem drugačne poti. Na njihove razlike so pogosto vplivali predhodni transgeneracijski družinski vzorci in vplivi. Proučevanje z vidika potomcev je edinstveno v raziskavah o cerkvenem sodelovanju in je v središču te študije.

*Ključne besede:* tajni agent, transgeneracijski vzorci, spoprijemanje, odnos med starši in otroki, Srednja in Vzhodna Evropa

## 1. Introduction

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### 1.1 The Social Context

At the beginning of the 1990s, when decisive political changes were taking place in Eastern European countries, there was a demand to disclose the secret activities of the ruling communist parties, which could be found in archival documents, and to reveal the names of those who collaborated as agents with the regime that often-served foreign powers (Ungváry 2017). The greatest interest was in the past of politicians and public figures, but soon the church officials were also targeted. First in Germany (1990, Die Behörde des Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, BStU) and then in other former socialist countries, institutions were established to allow citizens to access the state security files of repressive regimes. Exceptions were the former Soviet and Yugoslav state security files. These are still not accessible for research, and the people concerned, and the victims cannot access the documents relating to them (Cseh 2014). This paper aims to limit the discussion of the issue, i.e. the collaboration of clergy and the communist-socialist regime in Hungary, where state security documents have been dealt with since 1997 in the institutional framework established for this purpose.

To further narrow down the study, I will present the impact of the collaboration between the church and the party-state through the Hungarian Evangelical-Lutheran Church, which is currently a minority church of several nationalities (Hungarian, German, Slovak). A further reason for the aforementioned narrowing is that I myself am a pastor of this church. Among the churches in Eastern European countries, this church is the most advanced in research on this topic and can therefore help other churches in their exploratory work.

Initially, the interest of society was mainly reduced to who was involved in the secret agent activities. This primary focus of interest can be traced in all former socialist countries. The mechanisms of the system were of less public concern. There was even less interest in understanding the inner psychological processes, especially in relation to the family members of collaborators. In many cases, they have lived and continue to live with their ancestral past and its effects which are kept secret. Although the early 1990s saw a regime change in most former socialist countries and a new chapter for the state security services, this did not mean that family taboos that had been kept silent (the circumstances of recruitment, agent activity) did not live on. They are still present in most cases, and still affect interpersonal relations within the family.

Thanks to archival research in Hungary, we know more and more about the workings of the secret services, the internal apparatus and the informants who acted in different capacities (Tabajdi and Ungváry 2008; Tabajdi 2013; Horváth 2014; Kónyáné Kutrucz and Petrikné Vámos 2017; Ungváry 2017). Several important summaries of the attention of internal intelligence to churches have also been published in recent years (Soós 2010; Kiss et al. 2012). In the Hungarian Evangelical-

ical-Lutheran Church, research work with scientific rigour began with the establishment of the Fact-Finding Committee (2005). Since then, a number of volumes and studies have been published that have explored the collaboration of church persons and state power (Mirák 2010; 2014; 2020; Kertész 2014; Ittész 2014). However, the transgenerational effects of these have not been addressed so far.

## 1.2 Transgenerational Perspective

By transgenerational effects we mean feelings, internal dynamics, and phenomena whose root causes go beyond personal life history. However, transgenerational experiences, whether consciously or unconsciously transmitted, are linked to the individual life history in many ways (Vikár 1994).

Although psychological research has only in recent decades paid more attention to the phenomenon, it is clear that it is contemporaneous with human history. If we think only of the world of Scripture, transgenerational experiences, and the questions they raise (“/.../ he punishes the sons for the sins of the fathers, and the sons of the sons for three or even four generations.” [Ex 34:7]; “Master, who has sinned? This or his parents that he was born blind?” [Jn 9:2]).

The scientific study of transgenerational effects has become most prominent in the international literature in the context of transgenerational trauma, particularly in research on the descendants of Holocaust survivors. It has become evident, mainly in therapeutic settings, that the descendants of the Holocaust generations showed symptoms of traumatization (e.g. depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, hyperactivity, loss of cultural identity) despite of not having been direct victims of the events themselves (Varga 2011; Hézser 2020).

Long years of silence have been of particular importance in the study of transgenerational trauma, as research has shown that silence itself is one of the most important risk factors for a trauma to become transgenerational (Bakó and Zana 2021). It can become dangerous if the experience becomes unshared within the family, between friends or in the wider community. In many cases, recruited church agents have been unable to share their previously hidden past even with their closest family members because of guilt or a sense of shame that is more difficult to grasp. To this day, the impact of the advent of freedom during the period of regime change is still felt, as churches were less able to provide support to those who needed help to free themselves from the hidden burdens of their past.

In addition to silence, the lack of a shared experience can also be a risk factor in which the traumatized person may experience that his or her environment does not feel what he or she feels. The inability to articulate one's own feelings can easily lead to an identity crisis. Bakó and Zana mention three other risk factors that can also lead to transgenerational transmission: the lack of a safe environment, the lack of narrative, i.e., the extent to which the story is told, and the damage to the grieving process. We can speak of damage to the grieving process when the events cannot be integrated and become a memory for the person concerned as the experience is fragmented (Bakó and Zana 2021).

Katalin Varga draws our attention in a study to the fact that the concept of the transgenerational effect, unlike in previous studies, does not only apply to trauma in the narrow sense. The term 'impact' allows us to look beyond trauma to the impact of other emotionally distressing events or experiences on subsequent generations (Varga 2011).

One of the most intriguing factors for the subject of our investigation is the secret that the recruited person had to keep. The secrecy concerned not only the information obtained, but also - and this could be even more burdensome - the secret working relationship itself. It is a less well-known fact in the context of our topic that meetings with the officer were classified as state secrets. Breach of this, i.e. deconspiracy could result in a prison sentence of up to 10 years. They were not allowed to talk about it, they could not answer questions from those around them, and they could only remain silent and deflect all internal and external inquiries. In most cases, this resulted in severe isolation. Reactions to such an oppressive atmosphere vary from age to age. Children are forced to look for an explanation in their fantasies (traumatic fantasies), young people become isolated, and adults often try to survive isolation by addictive means (in addition to excessive alcohol consumption, it is worth mentioning excessive work, work-alcoholism).

Another noteworthy mechanism is self-blame by the descendant which can be used to relieve excessive tension, exonerate the person concerned or protect the parental image damaged by the exposure.

Focusing on our theme, the above-mentioned reflections are primarily intended to better understand the relationship and impact of the recruited clergy and their immediate family members on each other. At the same time, the transgenerational approach also opens the door to earlier generations. Behind a particular recruitment story, there may be patterns of previous attitudes (fear of authority, lack of assertiveness) and family tragedies (persecution, liquidation) that strongly influenced the success of the recruitment. The resource material available to me supported all of these.

This transgenerational approach also calls for us to focus not only on the first generation of descendants, but also to support the coping of later generations where there is a need and demand. We all face crises and traumas in our own life histories. We cannot avoid them. It is important, however, that transmitted traumas do not impede the processing of real traumas (Kogan 1994). It is therefore necessary to increase the understanding of unconscious transgenerational effects (Harkány and Koltai 2014). The diverse literature on trauma processing is united in the view that the most important element of processing is safe and trusting communication (Böszörményi-Nagy and Krasner 2011; Járny and Török 2020).

### 1.3 Research Method

In my research, I sought to answer how the descendants of the recruited clerics felt about the disclosure of their immediate ancestors' hitherto mostly hidden

past, how they tried to come to terms with the events, and what coping strategies they used to ensure that the unexpected legacy of the past was carried forward.

The sensitivity of the subject was evident from the outset. It was not only the insiders who struggled with the constriction of silence-revelation-disclosure. This tension was also passed on to the relatives. I had to choose a method that would both respect and try to ease this tension.

I conducted 15 interviews for this research. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, I conducted the interviews myself and did the coding myself. In all cases, the subjects are either children or grandchildren of the church persons recruited. Twelve are children, eight of whom are male and four females. Of the grandchildren, all three are men. All but one of my interviewees - who lives abroad - are members of the Hungarian Evangelical-Lutheran Church, some of them also paid employees (e.g. pastors).

To unpack the research questions, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, which I then processed by using the grounded theory. The processing was carried out by using the text analysis software Atlas.ti 9 (A-7F9-53E).

In my research, I did not aim to explore objective reality, but to better understand the personal, individually experienced, subjective aspect of the events and how the perspectives of the recollected past and present appear simultaneously in the interviews (Kovács 2007). My chosen research method follows an inductive logic, which does not work with prior hypotheses. It is a method for exploring internal processes and emotional and content-related relationships (Brown, Elkonin and Naicker 2013; Blair 2015). The main features of grounded theory include the simultaneous nature of data collection and data analysis, the construction of analytical codes and categories, and the method of continuous comparison that accompanies the whole research process, laying the groundwork for the exciting task of theory building (Charmaz 2006).

## **2. Results**

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### **2.1 The Family as an Indispensable Factor**

The interviews made it clear that the transgenerational family context is of great importance for a deeper understanding of the topic. If we want to better understand the driving forces behind seemingly individual events, it is essential to understand transgenerational family influences, whether or not they are conscious to the individuals concerned. This systemic approach was emphasised by the interviewees themselves when they presented an increasingly sharp outline of past family tensions, inherited fears, or even inherited traits behind a successful recruitment story. As one interviewee reported, "I understood the moral superiority my father had to grow up with, and my father did not inherit the Swabian or German mentality of his grandfather, but rather that of his mother. He's

much smoother, much gentler. Not weak, that's different. So he inherited a different type." (Interview 15, 5:14). We know from the recruitment stories that this approach was not far from the minds of the officers who exploited not only the weaknesses of individuals to cooperate (individual blackmail) but often also the tensions and fears within the family system (family blackmail). To find out about these, the intelligence officers would conduct reconnaissance activities for a long period of time before recruitment.

In most cases, interviewees looked back on their childhood as a time when they had to live by example because they were a pastor's kid. They were expected to do more than the average child. "The walls of a pastor's home are made of glass, you have to act like one; to say that as a child was a trigger that would stay with you throughout your life." (Interview 11, 2:19) In the light of this expectation it was immensely difficult to encounter information that somewhat rewrote the past in the fact-finding process that the parent concerned had himself failed to live in an exemplary, higher values way (He failed when tempted.) One grandchild reported in the interviews the exonerating effect of his recruited grandfather's slip-up in relation to his own adolescent slip-ups. Here, the first-generation descendants' experience of disappointment was replaced by the exonerating effect of what happened: "When I found out, I was more like, I don't know how to put it, but then obviously you start to grow up, do a bit more dangerous things, you don't want to miss out on anything. Because of that I may have done things when I shouldn't have. /... / I had a kind of, well, if grandpa did things like that, then I can do anything." (Interview 14, 6:80)

One of the most grievous areas of recollection is that of the impact of secret agent activity on the functioning of the whole family. Of course, all this was only reconstructed in the descendants afterwards, as they knew nothing about their ancestors' activities, but only perceived its impact, even in the everyday family dynamics. "The other thing that is very important is that I never knew that my father was or would have been a recruiter or a contact or a networker in this sense. He never talked about that. But I felt constantly, it's in my gut to this day, that he and through him the whole family was being watched, and that this created a very particular way of life." (Interview 2, 3:5) Another interviewee describes the change that she later attributes to her father's secret task: "That also alienated my father from his brothers. And I think from acquaintances in general, so in my early childhood it was often the case that somebody would come up to our flat /... /, there were people who would just turn up, sit in, sit in the kitchen for a while, like other people, and I liked it later on that people would come, that stopped, for example." (Interview 12, 11:39) The same interviewee also gave the purpose of this isolation: "Whoever you don't talk to, you don't have to report about, you don't have to write anything." (Interview 12, 12:40) This defensive explanation was later used in the context of silence.

Since the beginning of the fact-finding process, simplistic categorisations (beneficiaries-sufferers) have often been used. The interviews provide a more nuanced picture. Health problems and interpersonal tensions within the family were almost

invariably associated by the interviewees with the part of the head of the family's work that was related to relations with official and secret secular leaders and church officials. As one interviewee wrote: "So it must have been full of such tension. /.../ His health took a beating." (Interview 11, 4:45) This did not change in the period around the discovery or revelation. The process of fact-finding perpetuated or exacerbated many family tensions and illnesses: "In the family's relations, my wife was completely worn out, then the whole family in fact." (Interview 5, 16:141)

Particular emphasis was placed on the recollections of the roles in which family members saw their parents. In the interviews, the roles of the father, pastor and, in some cases, teacher were identified in relation to the individuals concerned. The father-son and grandfather-grandchild relationship, i.e. the role of the father or grandfather of the person concerned, seems to be of particular importance for the processing of the hidden past. If positive, this can be an important support in processing unexpected facts and information. This is particularly true for the grandfather-grandson relationship which has less of the well-known elements of the parent-child relationship, but it is also tense because of proximity. It is therefore the grandchildren whose relationship with the persons concerned is less strained, who can play an important role in revealing and processing taboos or silences about family events. They are the ones who can ask about old stories with greater patience, keep a distance from more difficult events, listen in a healing way and even give a new perspective to reconciliation within the family.

## 2.2 Facing the Provocative Event

Contrary to what we had previously expected, we got a much more colourful picture of how close family members felt about the recruitment. Shock, anger or even regret were as much a part of the interviews as shame. It can be concluded that, just as the clerics who were recruited looked back on their clandestine activities in different ways, i.e. not exclusively with a sense of remorse, but they did their relatives receive the previously unknown facts about their family member with different feelings, as well. Somewhat surprising were the accounts in which interviewees reported the experience of learning about their family member's previously secret activities as a relevant, relieving experience: "When I found out, I actually found out a missing link that I was looking for, how it could have come to be like this. It was actually a positive experience to find out, so I'm not ashamed of that, oh my God, my dad is too." (Interview 3, 11:63) In fact, however, at the family level, disclosure was difficult for most people. Almost all interviews expressed the negative impact of disclosure on the family system. As one interviewee wrote: "This has deeply wounded family honesty. And I think that in any case, in a social life, the family is the smallest cell where things have to fit, where you have to be able to talk to each other, and that didn't exist here at all. That's a sad part of it, that this has actually indirectly destroyed our family." (Interview 12, 18:92)

One of the most exciting questions of the inquiry is the question of withholding the truth. Why, after the regime change, did the people involved not share their

secret agent activities, in most cases under duress? One reason for silence is the threat of imprisonment. Up until 1987, undercover agents who deconspired were punishable by up to ten years in prison. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that collaboration or the very circumstances of recruitment could have aroused a strong sense of shame in those involved. The relatives, on the other hand, interpreted the silence of their ancestors as a way of protecting them. It was safer for the family if they did not know about the covert agent activity. "On the other side, of course, I had a lot of questions about why he didn't tell us a lot of things. I speculated a lot about it and I always came to the conclusion that he wanted to protect us from a lot of things so that we wouldn't know." (Interview 2, 14:24)

We also read that in some families it was simply not customary to share things beyond the mundane, practical events. The family's basic function was to share only the most basic information: "In our family, there is no tradition of talking, never has been. We never had a tradition of sitting down and discussing a topic, something, and talking it through. It was usually settled in one sentence or not dealt with. Many times we felt we were left to our own devices and had to grow up and solve problems on our own." (Interview 15, 3:10) We also read in one of the recollections that the person concerned had simply learned over the years to live with the silence and that it had become natural for him. By the time he had the opportunity to share after the change of regime, silence had become natural: "He kept it bottled up for a long time, he just couldn't find a way to let it out, so he didn't share it with my mother either, unlike his communicative nature, that he shared everything, really with us and my mother, and by being a burden for decades, he couldn't find a way to talk about it." (Interview 1, 27:49) It seems that the silence of those concerned has also made the situation for family members much more difficult. There was a lack of a model for finding appropriate ways to process and talk about what had happened. As one of the immediate family members involved wrote: "I think the family has to be involved, the whole family has to be involved in what happens to the family, otherwise it just happens to you and you have nothing to do with it or you are at the mercy of it. I think that, yes, a child, it's okay if his parents tell him something different than what is expected in school, in fact. I definitely think it's a shame that we didn't talk about these things." (Interview 7, 16:127)

It is legitimate to ask what role the religious community and personal faith played in the process of exploration for the family members and the family as a whole. Somewhat surprisingly, the religious community, and most notably the local church community to which the interviewees belonged, was not mentioned in any form in the interviews. Personal faith was a support in processing what happened: "I still feel that I don't know a fraction of the reality, either from my father's side or from the fact-finders' side, and that doesn't leave me with a sense of incompleteness. What you need to know and what you are confronted with, you know. I want to take seriously for myself now what Paul says about himself, that I don't care how others judge me, nor is it really important how I judge myself, but how God judges me." (Interview 2, 23:41)



It seems that the relatives cannot avoid the question of what is most difficult for them to process in their family member's agent activity: the fact of recruitment which was either obtained by blackmail or voluntarily by the family member; the agent activity itself, the fact of cooperation with a political power that sought to disrupt churches even in the mildest terms; the silence that persisted in the post-change period. It was the reports written about others that were considered by the individuals concerned to be the most unacceptable. This is why it was so often raised in their defenses. But what do family members think? It seems that an important criterion for successful coping is that relatives can give a satisfactory answer to this question.

### 2.3 Stay in Touch

As I mentioned earlier, the interviews gave us a very colourful picture of how close family members felt about the recruitment. If we try to define the complex experience of disclosure, we can best describe it as a provocative event causing a crisis of indefinite duration. Family members were asked to respond in three areas to the question of how they were trying to cope with the unexpected event. Firstly, at a personal level, secondly at a family level and, last but not least, at a community level, mainly in the context of the church. It is worthwhile to become aware of our most typical personal coping strategies (e.g. confrontation, distancing, seeking social support, escape or planned problem solving). What are our practised ways of coping with the unexpected? The interviews revealed a wide range of ways of coping on a personal level, from deflection to immediate contact with the person concerned. A notable feature was the desire from family members to get a model from the people concerned on how to cope with this difficult situation. The lack of this made their own work very difficult. As one relative put it, "It would have helped me if he had found a way to publish it in his own natural way, and I tried to get him to do that." (Interview 1, 24:49) If they had seen a model of how to deal with such a provocative crisis event, they might have been more successful in their own coping process. Parenting patterns also seem to play an important role in the failure to process, or even to process at all. It is worth mentioning here the risk factors of transgenerational transmission, such as silence and lack of an adequate narrative (Bakó-Zana 2021).

For me, the most important message of the fifteen interviews was that children and grandchildren wanted to stay in touch with the pastors recruited, who were primarily fathers and grandfathers to them. In most cases, it was not easy to face the fact that there was a hidden part of their loved one's past that made them feel shocked, resentful, and regretful. They had to struggle within themselves, sometimes perhaps with themselves and their human relationships. They did this in order not to lose their close family ties or to reconnect with their ancestors. Even if expressed in negative terms, the following quote captures the importance of the parent-child relationship: "And then also, I'm sure I was always so close to my father that /.../ Yes, it affects children so deeply, I think, that the parent just falls away at some point. Falling down is falling down in adolescence, but to fall

even lower than that, I don't think you can afford to." (Interview 15, 10:28) The same was said in positive terms by one of the interviewees: "My father is still my father. Whatever bad things are said about him." (Interview 10, 14:166)

### 3. Conclusion

In the study, I have shown the impact on the descendants of some churchmen of their ancestors' collaboration with the communist-socialist regime as secret agents. I have identified the transgenerational effect as a red thread at the heart of the study. I have shown that the notion of transgenerational effect is already worth considering in the recruitment histories of churchmen who were agents at some point in time. And from the descendants' recollections we learned that even if the agency activity remained secret from the family, in most cases it had serious consequences for family life. It also affected interpersonal relationships within the family and in several cases, somatic illnesses were associated with the concealed, difficult-to-carry activity and its unexpected exposure.

The importance of setting an example in the parent-child relationship is well known. In many cases, the interviewees, i.e. the descendants of the agents experienced the lack of help from their ancestors in the difficult process of disclosure and processing as a difficulty, that is, from someone with whom they perceived their relationship as important and worth preserving, despite all the disappointments.

One might legitimately ask whether there is any justification for the process of coming to terms with the past if the people concerned and their relatives have to live with such serious consequences. It is precisely the concept of transgenerational impact that highlights the fact that if we do not consciously deal with the issue, the hidden and often concealed experiences themselves have an impact on family and, more broadly, church communities.

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