

ASSESSING THE SPIRIT OF THE FORTIFIED CHURCHES

Laura Hoge, UAUIM

The Soul of the Village

Kid, put your palms on my knees.
I believe that eternity was born in the village.
Here, each thought is more quiet,
and your heart beats less,
as if it doesn't beat in your chest,
but somewhere else deep in the ground.
Here the thirst of salvation is healed
and if you bled your own legs
put yourself on a clay mound.

Look, it's evening.
The soul of the village is fluttering beside us,
like a shady smell of cut grass,
like a fall of smoke from straw eaves,
like the play of goats on high graves.

by Lucian Blaga



The land beyond the forests or *Terra Ultrasilvana*, the homeland of the so-called *Siebenbürger Sachsen* or the Transylvanian Saxons, has kept its own unique enchantment that evokes legends from over eight hundred years ago, ever since King Geza II of Hungary assigned more than 2,500 German colonists to protect and develop the southeastern part of Transylvania, a fertile plateau surrounded by the Carpathians.

A significant development of the Saxons' villages took part right after King Andrew II has endowed the Saxons with special rights and privileges through „*the golden letter of freedom*“. Consequently, the Saxon settlements became vulnerable in the presence of the Ottoman invasions that took place in the late 14th century. Needless to say that was the moment when the Saxons desperately needed a defensive solution that could not only protect themselves from the invaders' attacks but also their belongings. The answer to the defensive question reflected, as a result, the religious creed and a biblical reference that was resumed by Martin Luther later on:

“The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;

my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,

my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”(Psalm 18:2)

As a result, the Saxons began to fortify their churches in order to obtain defensive ensembles that were standing at the very centre of the village. The church represented therefore a refuge that could easily be reached in a short amount of time by the entire population of the settlement, that was big enough to give shelter to the community.

Each fortified ensemble is unique, as the generations were constantly improving preserving them in order to maintain the identity of the settlement alive. This is one of the reasons why the fortified ensembles became the result of a merging between several styles such as romanesque, gothic, baroque, neoclassical or even

times of the *Siebenbürger Sachsen* were struggling to keep alive the vivid community that settled back then—a community that was strong enough to confront in the name of their own destiny in order to keep their new homeland safe—you can still recall the untamed and fiery tales.

As a passing generation their own



response to the times, each came up with contributions to

the church and its fortification, even after the attacks ceased. The fortified churches represented the embodiment of the Saxons' spirit, reflecting their universe as decades passed. The history became a fluid of their identity that rooted on those lands.

The churches reflect the image of a middle-class society that invested primary in durability and stability. Moreover, the austerity can be explained on a religious plane, because some of the former Catholic churches became Lutheran and the paintings were either neglected or banned.





THE ENSEMBLE OF THE LUTHERAN
FORTIFIED CHURCH IN DAIA/THALHEIM



ENTRANCE DETAIL, FORTIFIED
ENSEMBLE OF DAIA/THALHEIM

The sacred enclosure was tangibly bounded by the massive wall which implied the force to resist the impenetrable obstacle, the attacker being intimidated, not only by the hardness of the tectonic resistance of the stone, but also by the natural height at which the church was located. Here, we can find a double significance of locating the ensemble on a high spot, that folds on the duality of the new architecture program. At a first glance, the natural height evokes both the sense of intimidation and the idea of defence.

Furthermore, it involves the sacredness of the ensemble which gives it the right to be located at a higher level than the secular universe of the village.



So, you keep wondering along the stairs that lead you to the holy enclosure that keeps the stories alive inside like an impassive nest in the silence of time. Every now and then, you keep reminding yourself that imposing imagine you saw right before you started climbing the stairs and you become more and more fascinated as the number of stairs starts to decrease...



find yourself glancing around as the time collapsed for even a capsule. You can still smell the wet wood and almost feel the cold walls of the entrance tower until a ray of sunshine guides you among the paved way to the main entrance of the church.

This path of the opposition between light and shadow is resumed once you enter the church and feel attracted by the veil of light that envelops the nave.

The following extract resumes the significance of what a powerful connection can be made between the human being and the sense of place, based on the alternation between light and darkness:

“The development of the mythical feeling of space always starts from the opposition of day and night, light and darkness. The dominant power which this antithesis exerts on the mythical consciousness can be followed down to the most highly developed religions[...]. The Egyptian story of the creation has also been interpreted as an imitation of the daily sunrise. The first act of creation begins with the formation of an egg which rises out of the primal water; from the egg issues Ra, the god of light, whose genesis is described in the most diverse versions, all of which however go back to the one original phenomenon—the bursting forth of light out of darkness.[...]

*We start from the assumption, that sense of place and receptivity to impressions of light are the two most fundamental and deep-seated manifestations of the human intelligence. It is by these two roads that the individual and the race achieve their most essential spiritual development. It is from this perspective that the great questions have been answered with which existence itself confronts each one of us: Who are you? What are you? What should you do? ... For each inhabitant of the earth, this sphere which is itself not luminous, the interchange of light and darkness, day and night, is the earliest impulse and the ultimate end of his faculty of thought. Not only our earth but ourselves, our own spiritual I, from our first blinking at the light to our highest religious and moral feelings, are born and nurtured of the sun The progressive view of the difference between day and night, light and darkness, is the innermost nerve of all human cultural development.” (Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*)*

Light represents the primordial symbol of creation, as the church symbolised the core of the Saxon life. Light is an encompassing veil that holds the spiritual life within. It truly has a very special meaning within the ensembles, because I believe that its main role was not necessarily to bring that universal significance to the foreground, the one which has been present throughout the history of religions, but to strengthen and root the essence of the Saxon community in the entity of the fortified churches. The church was the presence that was holding the life and the identity of the Saxons both together during wartime, and it continues to do so nowadays, when its original inhabitants and creators come back home from time to time.

At the same time, the decorative elements of the church and the furniture, found at windows, pulpits, altars, portals, organs, epitaphs and frescoes endows the ensemble with the status of centre of the artistic activity. The sensitivity with which all these elements have been manufactured, painted or carved, denotes a profound understanding and perception of the world than can be found as well in the interior of their homes, an aspect that symbolizes a universal attachment to the entity of the church as the place of sheltering their essence in the first place, not a religious connection, which is most often seen as the primordial role of the church in other religions. The religion evolves visually in parallel with art without inducing a certain concept or truth, because it allows alternations and differences of vision on the world.



Chest from the Evangelical church in Sighișoara/Schäßburg

Chest from a Saxon house, used to store gifts for the family's daughter. The chest was meant to be given as a wedding present.





DIFFERENT TYPES OF GOTHIC WINDOWS
- "CHURCH ON THE HILL", SIGHISOARA/SCHÄPFBUR
- LUTHERAN CATHEDRAL OF SAINT MARY,
SIBIU/HERMANNSTADT

Another similarity between the church and the Saxon home is represented by the inscriptions found on the interior walls, the bell, the walls of the tower, on the ceiling of the church or sewn on pieces of material. These inscriptions gave an insight of the character of the Saxons' perception about faith, war, important moments of the community's life and religion. They are written in German or Latin and recall important dates in the history of the edifice, such as the craftsmen that worked for the building of the church, date of construction, repairs or improvements. Other inscriptions reflect historic events, prayers for peace addressed to divinity, faith in God, questions about existence or statements related to their own identity.



All of these have a particular impact on the viewer. They keep the living past as part of the present. This is the proof of a merge, that of the past with the present, of the life itself that took place during the war within the fortification that acted as a protective core, as an invisible shield.

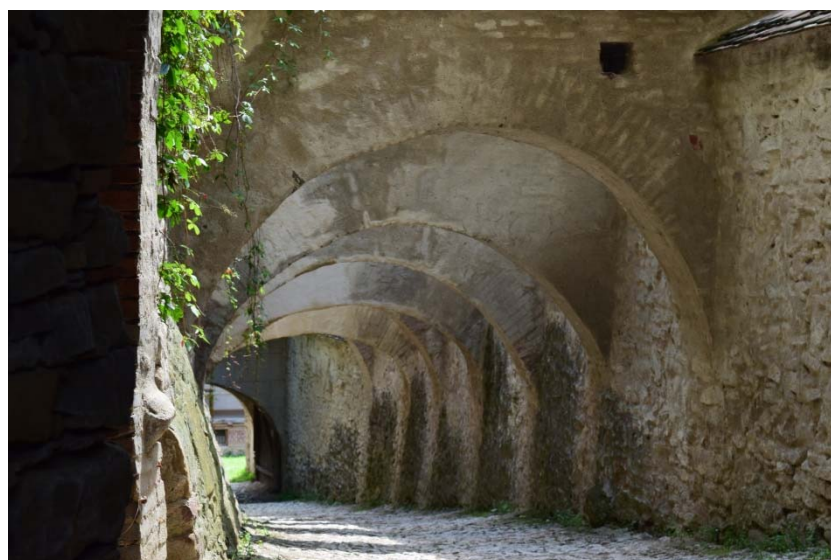
Maybe this is one of the reasons why the ensemble has such a powerful effect. Its identity is so strong that it can revive or even reinterpret its own story that never fades away.

This is a feeling that I got while entering the apparently abandoned church from Vărd/Werd. It had an extraordinary force of attraction, so abandoned as it was. Nothing seemed definitively irrevocable.



This is actually the aspect that still maintains the timeless figure of the fortified churches, their well-defined identity, an identity that continues to reinvent itself. This can be easily noticed through the filter of new communities that seem to emerge in many of the villages, in which the present identity is grafted on the basis of the original essence.

Perhaps this cycle of life, the eternity that has never disappeared from the village, requires reinventing and re-adaptation, but without forgetting the "core", the feeling of the place that cannot be renegaded, for there is love for the origin, for the history that precedes all what is there now. This sense of the place awakens in ourselves the force to continue the past and the desire to inherit that with a part of eternity, exactly by endowing it with feelings and memories, aspects that make it meaningful and strengthen it.



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Sketches and photographs-Laura Hoge