

*Károly Zsolt Nagy*

## **LEAVING A MARK: THE CALVINIST LANDSCAPES OF REMEMBRANCE\***

Most religions have their sacral spaces and landscapes, that is, the well-defined territories of the physical space which the transcendent power designates for itself according to the given religion, in which it manifests itself, or in which the followers of the given religion recognize the manifestation of the transcendent. These spaces and, of course, the objects, which carry the marks of the transcendent in some way, usually play an important part in the religious practices, rituals, and sometimes even the ordinary life of the given religion. They leave their mark on the community – at the same time, the community using them leaves a mark on them as well. Thus, these spaces and objects considered sacred denote a special relationship between the transcendent and the community and its members. Calvinist theology – as opposed to Roman Catholics for example – denies the possibility of such spaces and objects being the media of the continuous manifestation of the transcendent, except for the Sacred Tent, or Tabernacle, of the Old Testament, and the Temple of Jerusalem. However, it is true in this field as well that the practice does not correspond to the theory. Namely, there are more territorial elements to the Calvinist denominational identity, to which the individual communities relate like the constant carriers of the transcendent's manifestation. At the same time, these spaces and objects are closely related to the history and identity of the given community as well: they are identity symbols that condense the historical experience, and thus function as a place for the community's remembrance.<sup>1</sup> One of the most famous of these objects is the

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<sup>1</sup> Here I discuss remembrance and its places in the sense Assmann (Jan ASSMANN: *A kulturális emlékezet: Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*, Budapest, Atlantisz, 1999.)

Chair of Lajos Kossuth in the Calvinist Great Church of Debrecen, which was set up in a central position within the church, next to the Lord's table, for decades, and which was regarded by the homepage of the congregation for a long time as one of the most important relics of the church.<sup>2</sup> Through its placement – the Lord's table is the liturgical center of the Calvinist church, in this case also separated by a bar, which accentuates the sacral nature of the space – and, via its associations, the terms used for referencing it, it is clearly indicated that this object is in some way the location of the transcendent's manifestation. On the other hand, the method of the manifestation is revealed by the common remembrance; after all, this is the chair, in which Kossuth, “the Moses of the Hungarians” leading the Hungarian nations towards the “promised land” of freedom and independence, was sitting at the time of announcing the dethronement of the House of Habsburg. I have already discussed the Calvinist church as a sacral place of remembrance<sup>3</sup> elsewhere; now I strive to shortly present how, according to my hypothesis, some peculiarities of the utilization of space in the Calvinist church may be fit into such an interpretative framework.

“Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?” (Acts 7:44–50)<sup>4</sup>

This quoted text is in the Bible, more specifically in the book of the New Testament written on the Acts of the Apostles. Its narrower context is that it is the final speech of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, which he presented to the so called Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious (and political) leaders, in his own defense. Stephen was put to trial for blasphemy. The (false) witnesses said “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. [...] against this holy place and

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and Nora (Pierre NORA: Emlékezet és történelem között: A helyek problematikája, *Múlt és jövő*, 2003/4, 2–16.) use it.

<sup>2</sup> At the moment the armchair is located in one of the exhibition spaces set up within the church, and the new version of the website avoids this wording.

<sup>3</sup> Károly Zsolt NAGY: „Mely igen szerelmetesek a te hajlékaid...”, A református templom, mint a felekezeti azonosságtudat reprezentációja, *Ethno-Lore: a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Néprajzi Kutatóintézetének Évkönyve* 32, 2015, 293–330.

<sup>4</sup> *Resource for the translation of Bible quotations: New International Version*. Biblica, 2011. BibleGateway.com, [www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/#booklist](http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/#booklist).

against the law: For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” (Acts 6:11–14) In his reply, Stephen attested that what Jesus had said was essentially already there in what Moses and the prophets had said; that is, he did not deny the literal truth of the quoted words of Jesus. Actually, Stephen quotes here the book of one of the greatest prophets, Isaiah, where God himself reprehends Israel: “This is what the Lord says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?’ declares the Lord. These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.” (Isaiah 66:1–2) This biblical thought is one of the most important constituents of the knowledge related to the Protestant concept of sacrament, and the related manifestation of the transcendent.

According to the Roman Catholic concept, the church can be the place for the manifestation of the transcendent in several forms. On the one hand, it possesses a sacred character in itself, as it is a sanctified space; on the other hand, and closely related to this, the relics of the saints may be placed in it too. However, what is most important for us for the comparison with the Protestant/Calvinist concept, is probably the presence of Christ himself through the host placed in the *tabernacle* of the church. This presence is emphasized by the sanctuary lamp in front of the tabernacle that houses the sacrament; and when the believers bend their knees when entering the church, they salute the Christ present in the tabernacle. In the course of the Roman Catholic liturgy, when the priest repeats the words of institution<sup>5</sup>, the essence of the bread and the wine “turn into the essence of Christ’s body and blood”,<sup>6</sup> or more specifically: the elements are replaced by each other. This is in short the doctrine of the *transsubstantiatio*, which claims that Christ is actually present in the elements.

The Protestants have discarded the doctrine of the *transsubstantiatio*. Luther writes about the *consubstantiatio*; that is, he believes that the elements do not go through transubstantiation, but in some way both substances (the sign and what it signifies as well) are coexisting in the communion. The Swiss branch of Reformation discards even Luther’s doctrine, and views the communion as a symbol, and talks about a kind of “spiritual presence”; moreover, Zwingli, who had gone even further than Calvin, and who had a great influence on the Hungarian Reformation as well, does not accept any kind of presence, and holds the communion to be only a form of remembrance.<sup>7</sup> Parallel to this, Calvinist theology discarded all “location-specific”

<sup>5</sup> “This is my body... [...] this is my blood...” (Matthew 26:26–28)

<sup>6</sup> The Eucharist in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon*, <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/E/Eucharisztia.htm> (Downloaded: March 21, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> For the Lutheran perspective see Luther’s work written in 1537, the Articles of Schmalcald on the Eucharist in *The Christian Book of Concord, or Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Newmarket, Solomon D. Henkel and Brs., 1851, 299–300. For Calvin’s perspective see Book 4 of the *Institutio*, chapters 17 and 18. John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 2, John T. McNeill (ed.), Ford Lewis Battles (trans.), Philadelphia, Westminster, 1960, 1359–1448.

manifestation forms of the transcendent, while advancing an other tradition, which sees the presence of Christ in this world embodied in the church itself.

The church – according to its Calvinist interpretation – is pointedly not the hierarchy, and not the clergy, but the actual (local) community: Christ’s body,<sup>8</sup> and so the manifestation of the transcendent is tied to the community as well. Thus, anything that is sacred may only be so – that is, maintained and separated for the transcendent, as in the original meaning of the word – if the church, that is, its physical form, the community, uses it. This way not even the building of the church is sacred in itself, as on the one hand, it does not continually contain anything of sacred characteristics (pictures, the sacraments, relics, the Eucharist), but it becomes sacred when the community in which Christ manifests himself gathers inside, and in the Calvinist sense, this is when it becomes “the house of God”.<sup>9</sup> In the other way around, it results in that any place – a barn, a stable, etc. – may be sacred, should a congregation be formed inside. This logic is applied by Calvinism to the full system of sacral objects – the so called *clenodia* –, the ritual objects, and the *paramenta*, that is, the objects offered for decorating the church.

At the same time, there is “another side” to this concept. Namely, the communal nature results in that the transcendent experience is “location-specific”. Partly, this means the influence of patriotism and local traditions to the recognition of the manifestation of the transcendent; but it also means that the manifestation of the transcendent gains its meaning within the horizon of the local. Thus, the history of the local community and the embedded “individual” experiences become the media of the manifestation of the transcendent, and those places and locations, to which these experiences are tied (for example the church, the *clenodia*, or the appropriated drapery) turn into locations of remembrance.

The professional literature of ethnography and anthropology mostly focuses on the church building, its inscriptions, the memorial tablets placed inside, the *clenodia* and *paramenta*, as well as the written resources created by the church, when trying to capture that remembrance of the community. At the same time, with some generosity, we could also consider a peculiar group of remembrance reflecting the use of the church space, as written resources, which are only rarely examined by the researchers:<sup>10</sup> the scribbles found on the walls, pillars, gallery parapets, and especially the benches themselves. What are these scribbles about? How are they tied to the

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Zwingli’s teachings are summarized by Ulrich GÄBLER: *Huldrych Zwingli: Eine Einführung in sein Leben und sein Werk*, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27.

<sup>9</sup> The mutual influence of the different uses and interpretations of the word “the house of God” is rather peculiar, and not insignificant in terms of the issue at hand.

<sup>10</sup> These inscriptions mostly draw the attention of researchers when they are peculiar for some reason. For example, there is a considerable literature of the remembrances written in Old Hungarian script and found in the inside of churches; I will just make note of one here, that of Klára SÁNDOR’s book that was published in 2014: *A székeley írás nyomában*, Budapest, Typotex, 2014.

communal remembrance? What, if anything, do they have to say about the manifestation of the transcendent?

Of course it is possible to short-circuit the issue of these scribbles. Most people only see bored youngsters trying to amuse themselves behind these, or the manifestation of the ancient instinct of “leaving a mark” to say the most; a type of “*hic fuit*” scripts which have been around – especially in “indecent” places – since mankind mastered the art of writing. This is how Napoleon’s soldiers scribbled on the ancient works of art in Egypt, memorializing their own particular existence for eternity. And indeed, most of these scribbles contain no more than a name, sometimes just the initials, and a year. At the same time, the question may be raised: why does someone who visits the same church all his life feel the need to leave a notification on the bench to the others with whom he goes there that he was there? And why does this happen more prominently in Protestant churches, particularly in Calvinist ones, than in other ones? In order to answer these questions, it is worth-while to look at the social environment of the scribbles on the one hand, and at the actual context on the other hand.

Namely, the scribbles usually do not appear arbitrarily in the church space. One of the most important aspects of utilizing the church space in Calvinist churches used to be the regulated seating arrangement. This arrangement worked differently in town communities and in villages; moreover, the actual realization was usually location specific, although we can find more or less general characteristics. Together with the social changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this strict application of this system was attenuated, and even faded away mostly, sooner in urban settings, and later in villages as well, but there are still communities where it is in use.<sup>11</sup> The system is basically based on that the seating arrangement in the church reflects the social structure of the community. This reflection may be realized in projecting the structure of the settlement on the church (and the cemetery), but it usually follows the peculiar hierarchy of the church space. The most prestigious part of this space is center of the liturgical space, the Lord’s table and the immediate surroundings of the pulpit (the “marketplace” of the church, as they often call it). This is followed by the benches in the nave of the church (this is the part that is often called the actual “church”), and then the galleries, the spaces under the gallery, the entrances – and the atrium – followed by the entrance halls, and finally the buildings outside the church building. The men and the women usually sat in the nave, separated, on the two sides of the pulpit, facing each other; their order was determined by the position of each family in the social hierarchy, as well as their age and marital status. The youth (many times even the girls) were seated in the galleries. The children were seated variably; for

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<sup>11</sup> From the rich literature on the church seating arrangement see for example Árpád CSISZÁR: *A régi nemzetségi rend nyomai a Felső-tiszavidéki templomokban és temetőikben*, in Imre DANKÓ – Imola KÜLLÖS (szerk.): *Vallási néprajz 1.*, Budapest, ELTE Folklore Tanszéke, 1985, 157–197; István FAGGYAS: *Lakosság és templomi ülésrend*, 1–2. köt., Debrecen, Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem Néprajzi Tanszéke, 1990–1991.

example those preparing for their confirmation were seated on a separate bench, in front of the Lord's table. The peripheral, transitional spaces were used by those on the periphery on society: beggars, gypsies and strangers. Most scribbles can be found on the back benches, the gallery staircases, the galleries, on the top and the inside wall of the parapets of the gallery, and the back side of the organs; we rarely find these on the benches of the nave. This is virtually the same in urban environments as well. In Sárospatak, where students of the College and the town congregation uses the church together, scribbles are mostly in the benches set apart for students, that is, in the benches under the galleries, as well as in the assumed places of soldiers and apprentices, the galleries. In Miskolc, in the Calvinist church in Kossuth Street, we can see lots of scribbles in the last gallery benches maintained for craft-shops; and in the back benches of the second gallery we can find rather elaborate engravings. This would support the interpretation which sees more of a "disorderliness" or "defacement" in scribbles. However, there is the question of what can we add to this based on the context of the scribbles.

Under the context of the scribbles I mean the corpus of texts placed in the church space by the community, usually in a location of high visibility. This context, of course, varies from church to church. The carriers of the texts are for example the *clenodia*, the *paramenta*, the visible surfaces of benches and galleries, possibly the ceiling cassettes, the memorial tablets, epitaphs, memorial stones placed in the church (or many times outside the church on the wall or fence), and often the Scripture kept left open on the Lord's table. In the majority of the texts we see three recurring elements:

- 1) Names, many times not by themselves but in a list. Registers of pastors, deacons, confirmed members, those who died in battle, the victims of disasters, those who donated gifts, and prominent members of the community.
- 2) Inscriptions commemorating certain events, many times just a date, but usually the name of the event as well, or even a longer description.
- 3) Quotations or more rarely paraphrases from the Bible of religious songs, mostly psalms.

An especially important part of the context is the *clenodia* on the one hand, and the so called *paramenta*, which are drapery offered by the community in many regions for decorating the church. Both types of objects gain their significance from that they usually contain all of the above elements at the same time; that is, the inscription captured on the object is usually tied to a – many times relatively<sup>12</sup> determined – date and an denoted event with actual names tied to it, and related to a Biblical context. We find the same about the *paramenta* as well; only, when the latter usually present their message "long-winded", and are on display on each day of the year, the former – obviously due to problems related to the creation – use fewer words and we can see them only on special occasions. It is true for both types

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<sup>12</sup> That is, not referencing a year, but the service period of X curator.

of objects, but especially for *paramenta*, that they are donated on the occasion of specific life events. The process of the donation is often almost ritualistically regulated: the donor usually makes preliminary arrangements about the event and the Biblical quotation with the pastor.<sup>13</sup> The pastor presents the fact of the donation to the congregation, and they present the drapery to the community before putting it into use. After it is put into use, especially where the community owns several such objects, the drapery, based on its nature, is either put on the wall, or it is included in the specific “order” of the table cloths and clothing used to decorate the Lord’s table. This order is organized according to days of celebration or some other kind of logic, but in many places the donated tablecloths are just placed on one another, and so ten or even fifteen table cloths may be in use at the same time. In the case of the communion vessels, the peculiar form of donation is to renew each object by the gracious donations of the consecutive generations of often the same family from time to time. For example, the first generation has a tin cup made; the next generation has it turned into a chalice; the following generation exchanges the tin *cuppa*<sup>14</sup> for a silver one, so that, again, the next generation could leave a certain amount of gold to the congregation in order to have the silver *cuppa* coated with gold. In these cases it may happen that the inscription placed on the object, commemorating the fact of the donation by the previous generation, is expanded by the descendants with their own message, many times noting that the sons did this or that for the glory of God and the memory of the fathers.

Éva Szacsavay calls these *clenodia* and *paramenta* “preaching objects”, as the inscriptions put on them interpret the personal life events through Biblical quotations, or possibly express personal confessions.<sup>15</sup> However, these objects have another function as well, besides the one of confessional or religious representation. Namely, as during a communion the sons, and their sons and daughters, to many generations (as well as the relatives, friends, and other members of the local community network) come into personal contact with them, they are especially susceptible for being the expressions and tools of the bonding with, the commitment to, and of course the representation of the community. This is similar for the draperies as well. The objects donated in connection with personal life events or crises may be interpreted as forms of confession on the one hand, while – being on display continually – they also express the religious commitment of the donating individual or family, together with the communal status, which is based on the symbolic

<sup>13</sup> As far as I know, no inquiry has been made on the circle of Biblical quotations selected by each community, with the possibly related family traditions, while I find it to be one of the most exciting questions of the whole topic.

<sup>14</sup> The upper part of the chalice, the drinking cup, where the wine is contained.

<sup>15</sup> ÉVA SZACSAVAY: „...Isten ditsőségere adta...”: Református egyházművészet – népművészet, in Attila SELMECZI KOVÁCS (szerk.): *Lélek és élet: Ünnepi kötet S. Lackovits Emőke tiszteletére*, Veszprém, Veszprém Megyei Múzeumi Igazgatóság, 2006, 73–82; idem: *Kegyves adományok: tipológia és topográfia. (A bánffyhungyadi templom térszimbolikájához)*, *Acta Ethnologica Danubiana*, IX. évf., 2007/8–9, 59–78.



capital built on worship and piety. On the other hand, the organizing into a kind of order, and layering on top of each other – similarly to the lists put on display in the church space – may carry a message of integration and continuity, as the one giving the donation (or to whom the donation is tied to) is placed in the line of previous generations and confessor ancestors.

It seems to be inconsistent (but for the same reason, also adequate) to call these objects *clenodia* and *paramenta* in the Calvinist context, given that the original meanings of these words are “relics” and “objects of worship”, as they connect their users with the transcendent the same way the relics of the saints do. While the latter do this directly, because the relic, as part of the saint, inherently carries the transcendent, the Calvinist *clenodia* and *paramenta* gain their sacral characteristics through the remembrance. As locations of remembrance, the accumulating experience of generations regarding the manifestations of the transcendent can be recalled through them, as the events captured on them give an account of these as obvious signs of God’s grace and providence.

Not denying the rather great variability of the motives behind the scribbles, and emphasizing that the circle of Biblical quotations displayed on the *paramenta* can be very different in each community, so that the scribbles may be interpreted in different ways depending on the local context, I still think that we can expand the range of interpretations related to scribbles when putting them into these social and textual contexts. Let me raise now three of these, focusing on the communal existence.

The first is the one of the symbolic seizure of space. Napoleon’s soldiers putting the date and their signatures on the Egyptian ancient works of art was part of the conquest, the occupation, and most probably the humiliation of the enemy. The changing of the doorplates signifying the change in ownership of an area, the attempt to delete the memories of events and persons related to the area via removing the objects of remembrance – or putting it into a different light, rebuilding the remembrance of the place, associating it with events and names, and by putting out signs signifying these –, that is, symbolically occupying the space, is part of the ordinary toolset of conquerors. In this context, putting up names and associated years in a given location may be signifying the fact of ownership as well. And in cases, when the historical consciousness of a community has it recorded that their church had already been taken away from them one or more times (or attempts have been made to do so), this may be viewed as a highly reasonable strategy for them.

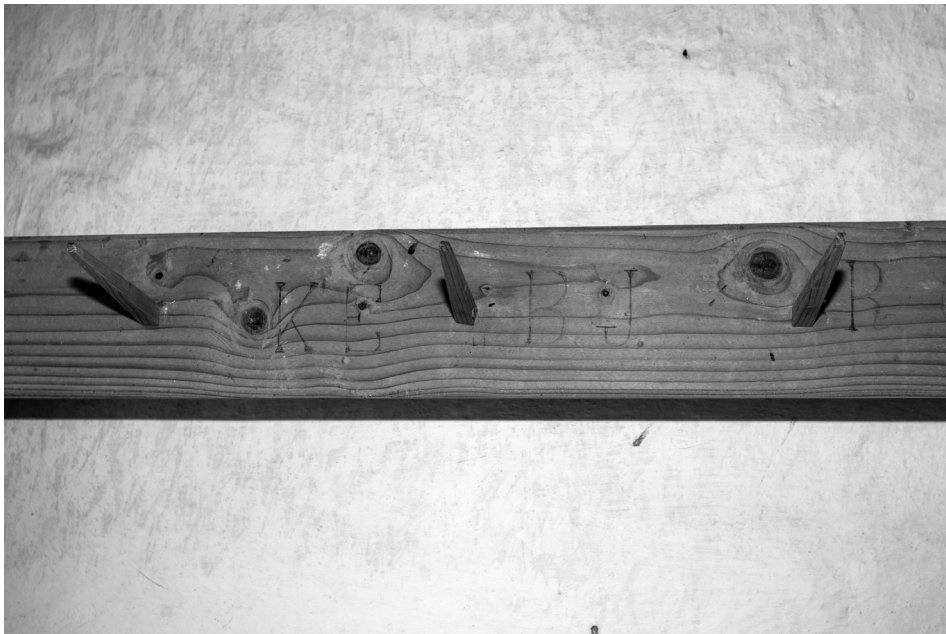
The second one is integration. Looking over the names and initials intertwining on the benches and backs of gallery parapets, together with the associated dates – possibly overarching several centuries –, they often seem to assemble into images of clouds. What does it mean to include our name with a date into such a cloud? For example, it can mean the integration into a status group, for example into the group of youth sitting on the gallery, or into the community of college students. On the other hand, this is also an integration into the chain of generations. Engraving my name onto the same board where my father engraved it thirty years before, or marking my



name on the back of the bench among the names of other students of the College, to a place where students put their own names hundreds of years ago, provides a peculiar experience of time and continuity – the continuity of communal life.

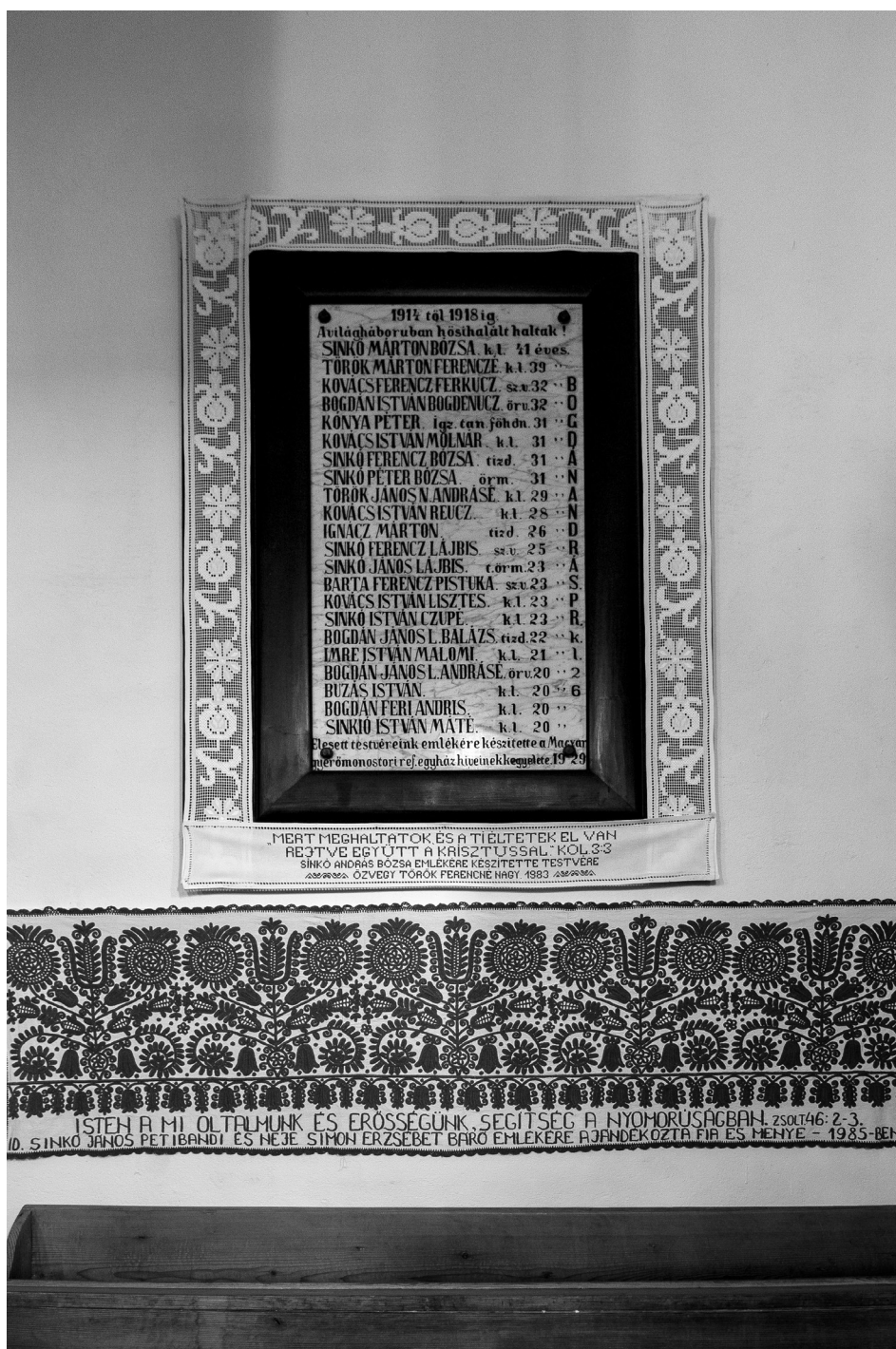
Finally, every such cloud, or list, has a secret message reflecting on the transcendent; after all, behind all of them, there is the sense of Providence, of the “Ebenezer”,<sup>16</sup> and the hope that the list will continue to grow. Maybe my son will also engrave his name decades from now to where I have engraved mine.

**Images** (*Photo credit: the author*)



*Hat-rack with initials on the gallery of the Calvinist church of Magyarvalkó*

<sup>16</sup> 1 Samuel 7:12. “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’” The literal meaning of the expression is: “the stone of help”.



*Mutually interpretative texts in the Calvinist church of Magyaryerőmonostor*





*Layered engravings and scribbles on the benches of the Calvinist church of  
Sárospatak – 1*



*Layered engravings and scribbles on the benches of the Calvinist church of  
Sárospatak – 2*