

Matrimonial Strategies in Transylvania. Mihály Teleki's First Marriage. "Remember: embittered hearts are healed with wine"

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Abstract: The wedding and the marriage was a very important stage of early modern society life, it was not only a social event, but the boundary between childhood and adulthood. For a noble like Mihály Teleki, successful marriage helped to develop in administration and to improve economic resources. To Mihály Teleki marriage is an opportunity of upward social mobility. In this paper we discuss about these matrimonial strategies and we identify their meanings.

Keywords: Mihály Teleki, early modern society, matrimonial strategies, Transylvania

Rezumat: Nunta și căsătoria au fost o etapă foarte importantă a vieții societății moderne timpurii, nu a fost doar un eveniment social, ci granița dintre copilărie și maturitate. Pentru un nobil precum Mihály Teleki, căsătoria reușită a contribuit la dezvoltarea în administrație și la îmbunătățirea resurselor economice. Pentru Mihály Teleki o căsătorie este o oportunitate de mobilitate socială ascendentă. În această lucrare discutăm despre aceste strategii matrimoniale și identificăm semnificațiile acestora.

Cuvinte cheie: Mihály Teleki, societate modernă timpurie, strategii matrimoniale, Transilvania

Mihály Teleki is a well-known but controversial figure of pre-modern Transylvanian history. At the height of his career he was the supreme commander and vice-chancellor of Transylvania, member of the Princely Council, captain of the District of Kővár/Țara Chioarului, sheriff (comes) of the counties Maramureș/Máramaros, Crasna/Kraszna and Turda/Torda, captain of the Chairs of Ciuc/Csík, Giurgeu/Gyergyó and Cașin/Kászon. As leader of the political elite, he and his descendants acquired in 1685 the rank of count of The Holy Roman Empire as a diplomatic favour from the imperial court.¹ His contemporaries considered

¹ Zsolt Trócsányi, *Teleki Mihály* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972), pp. 6-8.

him either a true political genius, a Puritan and kind man, or on the contrary, a convinced Machiavellian and thief, lacking moral convictions, but above all, the main reason for the so-called fall of the principality, i.e. the establishment of the Austrian domination.²

Mihály Teleki was one of the most important politicians in the golden age of the Transylvanian Principality, at a time when the Austrians as well as the Ottomans exerted pressure on the Transylvanian political elite. Also at this time, major changes took place in the status of the Principality and in society. Teleki was one of the biggest supporters of the Reformed church in Transylvania and of culture, being the patron of the Reformed College/Református Kollégium from Târgu-Mureş/Marosvásárhely. In the princely historiography though, Teleki's portrait is characterized by duality, being presented on one hand as an evil political adventurer, on the other hand as a realistic politician, supporter of Transylvanian Protestantism.

In the works of Miklós Bethlen,³ Mihály Cserei⁴ and Péter Apor,⁵ written in the first decades after the establishment of the Habsburg administration, the rule of Mihály Apafi appears as an era when the old Transylvanian virtues and morals disappeared. The above-mentioned authors, as well as their works, provide the basis for studies regarding this period, being first-rate sources for outlining the political, cultural, but also everyday life of the principality. These memoirs and autobiographies, as well as the vast correspondence of Mihály Teleki will constitute the basis of this analysis.

The selected correspondence of Mihály Teleki was published by Sámuel Gergely in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁶ However, these volumes must be looked at critically, since the project of editing the letters concerning the chancellor was funded precisely by the Teleki family, thus it is highly likely that some of the documents that contain negative aspects of Mihály Teleki were intentionally omitted.

In Hungarian historiography many studies are concerned with matrimonial strategies in the early modern era. These papers usually study not only a single figure of a family, but a whole noble dynasty, thus being able

² Zsigmond Jakó, *Rettegi György Emlékezetre méltó dolgok*. [György Rettegi's Notes to remember] (Bucharest: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1970), pp 269

³ Éva Windisch, *Bethlen Miklós Önéletírása* [Miklós Bethlen Autobiography] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1951).

⁴ Gábor Kazinczy, *Nagyajtai Cserei Mihály históriája* [Chronicle of Mihály Cserei de Nagyajta] (Pest, 1852).

⁵ Gábor Kazinczy, *Péter Apor's: Metamorphosis Transylvaniae* (Pest: Monumenta Historica Hungariae Scriptorum XI, 1863).

⁶ *Teleki Mihály levelezése I-VII (1656-1679)* [Correspondences of Mihály Teleki I-VII] ed. Gergely Sámuel (Budapest: Atheneum Kiadó, 1905-1926).

to reflect on strategies stretching across multiple generations. Among these are to be mentioned the studies of Judith Balogh and Ildikó Horn on the Kornis family in Sânpaul/Szentpál;⁷ Veronika T. Orgona's dissertation on the Kornis family of Gönczruszka,⁸ and András Koltai's studies on the Batthányi family.⁹ Unlike the aforementioned authors and publications, the present study attempts to identify also the dilemmas behind such a personal decision which was meant to last, ideally, for an entire life.

The first step was to identify a number of historiographic landmarks, especially the way in which marriage is presented in studies of the history of mentalities. This approach can be found in András Péter Szabó's work, which based on wedding invitations from Bistrița/Beszterce, conducted an ample analysis regarding early modern matrimonial customs in Transylvania. According to the conclusions of Szabó's research, the lay ceremony is much more important than the ecclesiastical one. Practically the wedding itself bore a very important symbolism, starting with rigorous customs from the engagement until the first morning after the wedding night.¹⁰ All these have a social, economic, but also psychological function. In early modern Transylvanian a noble wedding also had the role of representation, displaying important messages for the guests as well as for the families of the groom and the bride.

Two concepts occurred in early modern mentality regarding marriage. One concept of a successful marriage refers to love. The letter of Teleki's mother, Anna Bornemissza, highlights this aspect: "*but I ask you not to look at the ones with estates, but at the gentle ones, but consider the things carefully, and be as you wish, I do not oppose her, be as you consider it better.*"¹¹ Another supporter of marriages based on love was Teleki's friend, Ferenc Bónis: "*If you are a Christian and faithful man, report it to me, if there, on a tree full of leaves, exists someone who may wish to build a nest, for it is impossible that*

⁷ Judit Balogh-Ildikó Horn, *A hatalomépítés útjai: a homoródszentpáli Kornis család története* [Ways to rise to the power. The history of family Kornis de Gönczruszka], *Századok* 142/4 (2008), pp. 841-895.

⁸ Angelika T. Orgona, *A Gönczruszkai Kornisok. Két generáció túlélési stratégiái az erdélyi elitben (1546kb-1648)*. [The family Kornis de Gönczruszka. [The strategy to survive of two generation in the early modern Transylvanian elite (aprox. 1546-1648)]. Phd dissertation, Manuscript, ELTE BTK, Budapest, 2007.

⁹ András Koltai, *Batthány Ádám. Egy magyar főúr udvara a XVII. század közepén*. [Ádám Batthyány. The court of a Hungarian aristocrat in the middle of the 17th century] (Győr: Győri Egyházmegyei Levéltár, 2012).

¹⁰ András Péter Szabó, *Menyegzőtől mennyezőig* [From the engagement to a wedding] *Századok*, 144/5 (2010), pp. 1027-1084.

¹¹ *Teleki Mihály levelezése I (1656-1660)* [The correspondences of Mihály Teleki I] ed. Sámuel Gergely (Budapest: Athenaeum Kiadó, 1905) p. 55.

no one would be trying to do so, let me judge if they are worthy of it or not, for my heart is pining over the fact that my eyes have not seen and my mind has not found many that would be suitable for that.”¹²

Another component of what determined the right choice was identified by the historian Gábor Várkonyi. He analyzed a letter written by Friedrich Tauffenbach to one of his vassals in the Kingdom of Hungary. This source groups the importance of marriage into 10 points: “1. *the girl should be pretty, 2. she should inherit from her mother, 3. she should come from an old and noble family, 4. should have important people as relatives, 5. should bring many friends, 6. she should be obedient, to have her as I wish, 7. thus I should be able to take revenge on my enemy, 8. my income would grow, 9. I would have a higher credibility, 10. I would have access to a higher rank.*”¹³

Teleki’s correspondence denotes a similar vision to that of Tauffenbach. This paper will not discuss all 10 above-mentioned points, only some relevant ones, presenting firstly Teleki’s and his future wife’s, Zsófia Pekry’s economic and social situation, which will be followed by the outlining of Teleki’s decisions from before and after the wedding.

Not a lot is known about the origins of the Telekis, since the family archive has not preserved documents that would denote a very high origin. His ancestors probably lived in the area of Lipova/Lippa or Arad.¹⁴ Teleki’s grandfather managed to find a richer wife, and through this marriage acquired lands around Ineu/Borosjenő.¹⁵ Teleki’s father pursued a successful military career, reached Oradea/Nagyvárad around 1640, where he became lieutenant of cavalry under the command of the future prince,¹⁶ then captain of the city and sheriff (comes) of Bihar/Bihar.¹⁷ Probably around that time, the young Teleki arrived at the court of prince Rákóczi, where he may have served as a page.¹⁸

After 1648, György Rákóczi II became Prince of Transylvania, and Teleki also gained in importance: he acted as chamberlain, and around 1656 became master of the princely post office.¹⁹ His main duties included overseeing the couriers and assuring the well-functioning of the post.²⁰ This

¹² Ibid., pp. 20-22.

¹³ Gábor Várkonyi, II. Rákóczy György esküvője [The wedding of György Rákóczy II nd] (Budapest: ELTE Középkori és Korajkori Magyar Történeti Tanszék, 1990), p. 89.

¹⁴ Trócsányi, *Teleki Mihály*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Béla Iványi, *A római szent birodalmi gróf Teleki család gyömrői levéltára* [The archive of Teleki family in Gyömrő] (Szeged, 1931) Nr. 696.

¹⁶ Trócsányi, *Teleki Mihály*, p. 18

¹⁷ Ibid., Nr. 616.

¹⁸ Ibid., Nr. 772-773.

¹⁹ Trócsányi, *Teleki Mihály*, pp. 18.

²⁰ *Teleki Mihály levelezése* vol I, pp. 18.

position also allowed him to be informed about all the correspondence that went through the court, and here we refer not only to the letters of the ruler, but also to those of the aristocrats.²¹ Teleki was probably one of the most well-informed people at court, but his loyalty towards the prince was incontestable as well as the ruler's trust in him.

Teleki was at Rákóczi's side also at the disaster in Poland, and after the prince's abdication too. But he also played an important part in the diet assembly where György Rákóczi II was re-elected. On a social level he lost a lot, especially after the Turks occupied Ineu in 1658. Practically the majority of his estates, together with Békés opidium became part of the Ottoman Empire, where without the support of the citadel's garrison he had no chance of recovering his taxes from the serfs.²²

These losses were partly compensated by the ruler, Teleki becoming lieutenant of the cavalry of the most important fortresses in the principality. He was a key figure in 1659, when Rákóczi's supporters managed to remove Gábor Haller from office, the captain appointed by Ákos Barcsay.²³

Although in 1658 Teleki lost the majority of his fortune, due to the external conflict, he could hope for donations from the ruler. He acquired a military rank that could earn him an income and he was probably also given a house in Oradea.

A great advantage for Teleki was the kinship from his mother's, Anna Bornemissza's side. The Bornemissza family was one of the richest in the Partium area, but due to the lack of male offspring they disappeared. The last men of the Bornemisszas had five daughters in total. Among these the eldest was Anna Bornemissza, who became János Teleki's wife. László Bornemissza's daughters ended up as members of the most important families of the time, Kata becoming the wife of Mihály Bethlen, Zsuzsanna of Boldizsár Kemény, and Anna of the future prince, Mihály Apafi.²⁴ Thus these relations created through extremely advantageous marriages contributed largely to the advancement on the social ladder of Teleki.

This extremely elaborate genealogical tree was equally advantageous for all the members of the family, i.e. also for the Bornemissza sisters, two of them being already widows in the analysed time frame. They received information from their nephew and also the necessary support in the court's judiciary cases, where it is well-known that, without her relatives'

²¹ Zsolt Trócsányi, *Erdély Központi Kormányzata 1540-1690*. [The central administration of Transylvania 1540 -1690] (Budapest: Akadémiai Könyvkiadó, 1980), pp. 250-253.

²² Iványi, *A római szent birodalmi gróf Teleki család gyömöri levéltára*, Nr. 68.

²³ János Bethlen, *Erdély Története 1629-1673* [The history of Transylvania 1629-1673] (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1993), pp. 50-52.

²⁴ Trócsányi: *Teleki Mihály*. pp.16.

help, a widow could rarely succeed.²⁵ But there is also data regarding certain favours like the acquisition of some goods, especially condiments and rare textiles. In turn, Teleki received material and non-material support from the Bornemissza sisters.²⁶

It is worthy of being noted that Teleki was initially engaged to another woman, Borbála Torma, who was raised in Kata Bornemissza's court while Teleki was in Poland.²⁷ Borbála Torma died probably of chickenpox at the beginning of 1658.²⁸ The engagement was not met with enthusiasm by the whole family, for example Teleki's mother contested this arrangement vehemently.²⁹ Most likely it was the inferior rank of the fiancée that bothered her, and the way in which this marriage plan was executed.

However, the Pekry girl fulfilled all the genealogic conditions, i.e. her roots went back to the founding of the country, her family originating from the tribe of Tétény. The members of the family reached the Hungarian royal court only in the fifteenth century, but their estates in the south of the kingdom and in Slavonia (especially those in Kőrös County) were devastated by the Turks. After the disaster of Mohács, the Pekry family became the supporter of the Habsburgs, a choice they profited from, being given some villages in Abaúj and Borsod counties as donations. Around 1560 the family changed its political orientation and started supporting John Sigismund Zápolya/Ioan Sigismund/János Zsigmond. As a result, they lost their estates donated by Ferdinand, but in exchange received some villages in Bihar and Tárnava counties as a reward from the Transylvanian prince.³⁰ The family did not pride itself with influential members in the principality's administration, but their origins, their incontestable ancestry offered them a special status, a prestige that a newly ennobled family like the Teleki was in great need of. Zsófia Pekry's father, Ferenc appears in sources as Pekry of Cuci/Kutyfalva.³¹

Thus, from a financial viewpoint and in matters of prestige, Teleki's wife was far superior to her husband. On the other hand, the members of the Pekry family did not manage to get into court, did not have a close

²⁵ *Teleki Mihály levelezése* vol. I. pp. 381-382.

²⁶ Zsuzsánna Balogh, *Egy 17. századi özvegyasszony-Bornemissza Kata* [An 17th century widow-Bornemissza Kata] IN: Tötös Áron ed. *Fejezetek Erdély történetéből*. [Capitols from history of Transylvania] (EME-RODOSZ Bihar, Nagyvárad, 2018), pp. 191-206.

²⁷ *Teleki Mihály levelezése* vol. I, pp. 75-76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.181-182.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.129-130.

³⁰ Tamás Pálosfalvi, *The noble elite in the county of Kőrös 1400-1526*. (Budapest: MTA BTK TI, 2014), pp. 232-242.

³¹ János Szalárdi, *Siralmas Krónika* [Miserable Chronica of János Szalárdi] (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1980) pp. 480.

relationship with the Transylvanian prince, thus in turn they benefited fully from Teleki's relations.

From his correspondence we know that Teleki wished to marry Zsófia Pekry already in 1656, but as he wrote in a letter to his mother: "*she is destined to be with a high-ranking man.*"³² This bitterness that reflects Teleki's lack of confidence, as well as a slight sense of shame regarding his origins, were feelings that would accompany him his entire life.³³

Teleki would get engaged even before the failed campaign in Poland, probably with the help of the Bornemissza sisters, to Borbála Torma. The failure in Poland in the middle of 1658 found Teleki without a fiancée and without estates. But his personality, together with the pressure exerted by both his friends in court and his family helped him earn back his prestige – as is shown in this letter fragment, sent by an old friend who was now in Zsuzsanna Lorántffy's court, István Dalmady: "*I myself would regret if I would have to dress into German or other foreign nation's garments (I write this as a joke); it's true, you having Hungarian blood, we should rather find you a Hungarian so that the Teleki family does not die out.*"³⁴

Teleki settled down in Oradea, where he benefited from a sufficient income. He probably visited the Pekry family a few times towards the end of 1658, but there are no records of this. On 5th March 1659 he received good news from György and Sigmond Veér: "*We discussed the matter you entrusted us with both our aunt and our niece, but we did not manage to get anything good out of it for this niece of ours is so fussy, she said she would not marry such an ugly and bearded man like yourself. Nevertheless we tried seventy-seven tricks, told her that even if you were ugly, you are merciful and dutiful, and the kinship likes you. Thus, dear friend, we strived so hard for your cause that eventually we enabled you to come visit with your hopes high.*"³⁵

The news of the engagement surprised the noblemen in Rákóczi's court. But the happiness was about to be shadowed by the restless political situation, since the threat of a Turkish attack was still big, and the fight for the throne of Transylvania became more and more intense. In this tense political situation Teleki's engagement did not come at the right time. He was being criticized by people at court. Attempting to correct his mistakes, Teleki asked the advice of two important governors, Dalmady and Gábor Köver.³⁶ The problem with Teleki's engagement seemed to be a diplomatic one, i.e. he did not ask for György Rákóczi's approval, which was disrespectful towards the

³² *Teleki Mihály levelezése* vol. I, pp. 55.

³³ Trócsányi, *Teleki Mihály*, pp. 6-10.

³⁴ *Teleki Mihály levelezése*. vol. I, pp. 348.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 356.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 372-374.

prince, who given the uncertain political situation might have interpreted Teleki's gesture as a sign of disloyalty. From Köver's commentary we find out that some had already suspected Teleki of treason, thinking he had sided with Barcsay. This gossip also appears in one of the letters from Teleki's mother, who affirms that "*even without the principality Rákóczi is still Rákóczi*".³⁷ The objection did not address the chosen girl, but the way in which she was chosen, i.e. without previously consulting with the prince and the courtiers.

However, Teleki's family was thrilled, especially the Bornemissza sisters, they considered that through the estates acquired as dowry, the Teleki family would move its centre of interest and influence to Transylvania.³⁸ Rákóczi's grace towards Teleki returned in the spring of 1659 when the latter was sent on a mission to Transylvania with letters addressed to the aristocracy, an ideal opportunity for starting the necessary preparations for the wedding, i.e. stacking provisions such as food, cutlery, jewellery and accessories for the representation.³⁹

There is no precise data concerning the actual unfolding of the wedding ceremony. The event probably took place between 20th and 22nd July. However, we know that from the most important relatives only Zsuzsanna Bornemissza was unable to attend, since the festivity overlapped with the return to the country of János Kemény and his personnel.⁴⁰

Teleki's first move after the wedding was to get in possession of the dowry. In the administration of the Transylvanian estates he was helped by Kata Bornemissza.⁴¹ Some parts of the dowry were kept at Baia Mare/Nagybánya.⁴² In Oradea he tried to build a residence, ordering 10 thousand shingles from the local serfs.⁴³ Teleki wanted to settle down in Oradea, in his own independent household. This is also suggested by the fact that he did not live with his mother. These manoeuvres however caused discontent amongst some of the members of the family.

Teleki's political career seemed to return to its normal course. In the autumn of the same year, he was assigned tasks outside Oradea. He was sent to verify the county troops in Bihar.⁴⁴ In November he got an order from Rákóczi to support the troops of the citadel and of the county in the attack against Barcsay.⁴⁵ Teleki would leave his household, start towards Sibiu,

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 375-377.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 381-382.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 389-390.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 426.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 433-434.

⁴² Ibid., p. 432.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 445.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 450-452.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 462-463.

during which time, according to the letters to his wife, she became the leader of the household. The majority of their correspondence comprised thus economic information, but also expressed their desire to see each other as soon as possible.⁴⁶

The siege of Sibiu was long and unsuccessful, and above all the political and military failure overlapped with a personal one. Unfortunately, the correspondence between husband and wife from this period does not exist anymore. The last letter, dated 6th January, reflects on the husband's quick return,⁴⁷ while the prince's letter from 4th February relates of Teleki's widowhood,⁴⁸ more specifically of the inconveniences caused by the lack of a will from Zsófia Pekry, who most likely died in the second half of January 1660.

It is not the aim of this paper to detail Mihály Teleki's grief. However, it must be underlined that death and the loss of a beloved one was looked upon a little differently in this period than today. Sources that would describe young Teleki's pain are few, and the letters reflecting on his widowhood cover a relatively short period of time. It is true that the events of 1660 did not leave a lot of time for grief. In the fall of 1660 Teleki was already in the same situation as in the fall of 1658, i.e. without a wife, a house and fortune. But he had a considerable advantage over many people: he was alive.

In conclusion, taking into consideration Tauffenbach's 10 points, the recipe for a happy early modern marriage, we can easily identify Teleki's strategy too. In the first years of his career he probably tried to find a stable place in the prince's court. This much desired stability could be achieved only through a successful matrimonial alliance which would guarantee the ascension of the individual on the social ladder, would facilitate the creation of new relations and would ensure an income that was independent from court. This income could guarantee Teleki's independence from the prince but also from his relatives. Teleki's original plan was to strengthen his position amongst the nobility. Due to the century's political conjunction, he managed to achieve much more than that. The losses suffered by the old Transylvanian families as well as his marriages propelled him directly among the princely elite.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 454-456; pp. 462-463; pp. 472-479; pp. 486-488; pp. 490-492.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 490-492.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 493-494.

