



The Descendants of Former Aristocratic Families in Hungary at the Turn of the 21st Century

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Abstract. Historical and social historical researches have extensively explored the social role and history of the Hungarian nobility and aristocracy, but the present situation of the descendants of the former traditional élite has been overlooked by contemporary sociological studies. The aim of this paper is to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive picture concerning the young descendants of the Hungarian aristocratic families living in Hungary at the turn of the 21st century. The results confirm that the examined group has a very good chance of reaching a higher status within the society despite all the disadvantages their parents and grandparents suffered during the communist era. In other words, they possess all socio-demographic factors which make a higher position likely. This advantageous socio-demographic position is interacting with the values and goals transmitted in family upbringing, namely acquiring a diploma and the knowledge of foreign languages. The religious, Christian, and family-centric values also played a considerable role in their education. Among the young descendants of the former aristocratic families, we can distinguish a group which creates a strong informal network and has preserved its special aristocratic identity and filled it with a renewed content.

Keywords: aristocracy, nobility, élite reproduction, values, Hungary

Introduction

There are various perspectives and opinions about the nobility's existence and its social role in the Hungarian society. The palette is wide: from romantic ideas of sustaining the nation through their assessment as the only representatives of moral superiority within society to attributing them the main responsibility for the wars and policies devastating the nation (Losonczi 1977). During the communist era, the nobility was considered as one of the main enemies of the "new" system. They were mocked and made ridiculous in political statements as well as in various branches of art (especially in cinematography). Although social sciences have studied their history up to the end of the Second World War from a

socio-historical perspective, the aristocracy's individual persistence in Hungary from the 1950s has been ignored and treated as a taboo.

Following the fall of the communist regime, the past and recent fate of the Hungarian nobility and aristocracy have become the subject of several books as well as media coverage, but the topic has received very little academic attention. The former nobility or aristocracy was sporadically mentioned in a few studies, for example, in the study about the possibilities and strategies of status reproduction under a dictatorship (Utasi et al. 1996) or studies about the deportations in the 1950s (e.g. Dessewffy–Szántó 1989).

Research on the elite descent, including the aristocracy, was initiated by the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, featuring the works of János Gudenus and László Szentirmay in the 1980s. The results of their work, based on a large-scale research, which included among other elements interviews with a great number of members of aristocratic families living in Hungary and abroad, were published in the book *Összetört címerek* [Broken Coats of Arms] (Gudenus–Szentirmay 1989).

Besides the above-mentioned study, there is no other all-embracing sociological work of scientific claim, wherefore the goal of this research is to fill this gap by delivering a comprehensive empirical work on the descendants of Hungary's aristocratic families.

At this point, the reader may wonder whether the lack of academic interest may be merely due to the fact that this operational group, often superficially characterized only by their descent, has no social relevance whatsoever in a post-communist society. As a response, the sociological relevance of the current research can be summarized as follows:

Some social scientists have misunderstandings and preconceptions about the descendants of the formal elites, which calls for an empirical research exploring their current social position.

The study can bring some insights into the status reproduction of the former élite as well as into the topic of elite continuity by exploring how this group could cope with and survive the persecution during the communist era.

The network analysis method can be efficiently used in the research concerning the aristocracy since the aristocracy in Europe tends to form network systems.

To summarize, the aim of this study is to locate this operational group in the structure of today's Hungarian society and to explore how this group was able to attain its present social status in spite of all what their families went through during the communist era. I am going to describe the strategies of status reproduction, their political attitudes and activity, their networks and the matrimonial strategies as well as their possible collective identity and their identity-building practices. I would also like to highlight the observed differences between the Hungarian and Polish aristocracy.

A Short Historical Introduction

First of all, we need to point out an important remark regarding conceptualization: in Hungary, throughout the Middle Ages, we can speak about a nobility of equal rights (about 1% of the population) (Fügedi 1984), but already in this era we can differentiate among them a couple of dozens of families which possessed higher political influence and wealth (Péter 1994). The beginning of the formation of the hereditary peerage can be put in the 16th century: the top members of the society won from the king – as a royal grace – the title of baron, count, prince, and duke or archduke for life. This title is related to the family name, hereditary in the patrimonial lineage but also extends to the female members of the family (Vajay 1987). So, we can clearly distinguish aristocracy from nobility.

The aristocracy in Hungary – as almost everywhere in Europe – played the leading role in the society throughout centuries in a political, economic, and cultural or symbolic sense. Its power was based on its decisive political influence resulting from its large real estate assets, all these combined with absolute authority and exceptional prestige (Gyáni-Kövéér 1998: 193).

As it is well known, this socio-political situation radically changed in Western Europe as a result of the dual revolution (social and industrial) of the 19th century. This revolutionary wave reached Hungary as well, but due to the delayed development and belated *embourgeoisement* the nobility, and especially the aristocracy, partially kept its leading role in the society until the end of the Second World War.

At the same time, we can observe some loss of power from the 19th century for the benefit of the emerging *bourgeoisie* and the intelligentsia. The purchase of estates by the *haute bourgeoisie*, the agrarian reforms, and the torn regions as a result of the Trianon Treaty (1920) reduced the area and the percentage of the aristocracy's large estates (Erdei 1976, Scott-Hutterer-Székely 1990, Folkmayer-Török 1987). The loss of political power can also be detected. Between the two world wars, aristocrats were gradually retreating from the executive and legislative power, which can be explained also by the special legal, constitutional situation; a kingdom without a king led by a governor kept away some royalist aristocrats (Gyáni-Kövéér 1998: 199). We can also distinguish conservative aristocrats loyal to the Habsburg Dynasty from the less wealthy national aristocracy. The former had lost ground due to the dethronement of the Habsburgs in 1918. The imperial and the national aristocracy merged even less with the so-called new barons, among them Jewish and non-Jewish *haute bourgeoisie* (barons of industry) and so-called military barons who received their merit based on their acts in the First World War. Although their rank was identical in all respects with that of the historical aristocracy, they did not fit in the traditional social élite (Gudenus-Szentirmay 1989, McCagg 1972). The social hierarchy within the élite is best

exemplified by the tradition and practices in social life and marriage (B. Nagy 1986, 1987; Gyáni-Kövér 1989: 199–200).

Anyhow, the shock at the end of the Second World War affected each member of the aristocracy. Hungary was occupied by the Soviets, and the communists took over power in 1948. Every aspect of social life was transformed according to the Soviet model, also with the use of violence.

What was the impact of all these transformations on aristocratic families? In accordance with Gudenus and Szentirmay (1989), we can summarize as follows:

- They were considered as one of the main enemies of the “new system”. According to the Stalinist terminology, they were called “citizens outside of class”, i.e. all members of the former leading groups: nobility, *haute bourgeoisie*, ex-officers, independents, intellectuals, and small holders as well.

- Through the agrarian reform in 1945, they lost the main base of their economic power – the land. Large estates, bigger than 1,000 acres, were fully, the smaller ones were partially nationalized, and only 100 acres were allowed to be kept. These lands were also lost later by selling or because of debt.

- Those aristocrats who had not lost all their assets due to the agrarian reform in the 1948–49 nationalization process, which covered all other properties, were also deprived from their remaining economic strength (factory, company, real estate, etc.).

- With the introduction of the new political system, the aristocracy evidently disappeared, voluntarily or forced from local and national politics.

- A law in 1947 abolished all ranks and forbade their use. *Act IV of 1947 on the Elimination of Certain Ranks and Titles* is still in force but without any sanction.

- Between 1951 and 1953, about 12,000 people – among them hundreds of noble families – were deported to rural locations designated by the authorities. The deported persons had to leave all their properties behind, which they were left with after the nationalization. They could not recover their lost goods and were not allowed to return to their original residency even after the end of the deportation (Dessewffy–Szántó 1989, Szántó 1998, Széchenyi 2008).

- For the “citizens outside of class”, it was not allowed to get a job corresponding with their qualification, and even for their children it was impossible up until 1962 to be admitted to university (Takács 2008).

In conclusion: during the communist regime, the nobility, including the aristocracy, lost all of its political and economic power and simply the right to a life of dignity.

How did the aristocracy react? We can observe two main strategies:

1. *Emigration*. We do not have exact figures, but estimates show that 80% of the members of aristocratic families left the country in different waves (Gudenus–Szentirmay 1989). We have to admit that among emigrants the great majority of the Hungarian nobility was in a more favorable position because due to international

networks many families had very close ties with the aristocracy and nobility from other European countries, and in many cases the integration was assisted by foreign relatives and friends.

2. The minority *stayed in Hungary and tried to integrate*. We know some examples (rather tragic and failed ones) of conformism or full adaptation to the communist system, but these were exceptional cases. The majority who stayed in Hungary tried to integrate, more precisely, to be hidden from the authorities, and simply tried to survive. But it was quite difficult – they had to restart their life and their existence from scratch, and they had to deal with the different appearances of everyday discrimination.

Political pressure had diminished in the 1970s, which allowed many people of noble origin to get a job corresponding to their qualification. Also, their children could follow the studies of their choice. However, leader or decision-making positions were exclusively reserved for the members of the Party. The members of nobility found themselves rather in the liberal professions or took intellectual careers, which were quite free from the ideology of the time (e.g. engineer, interpreter, artisan, or mechanic).

At the time of the collapse of communism, social scientists and analysts thought that the former traditional élite was coming out from their hideaway or back from abroad and would take economic or political positions and participate actively in the changes (e.g. Szalai 1994). But this was not the case. There are only a few descendants of former aristocratic families who have taken a significant political or economic role after the regime change.¹

We know that the Compensation Act in 1990 made possible to compensate only 1% of the values confiscated during the communism since the amount of the compensation was limited to a maximum of 5 million HUF (approx. EUR 16,000). One representative of the aristocracy made the point that this law definitely legalized the expropriation of the former élite.

So, the reproduction of the former élite's political or economic power did not take place. And what has remained or has been reproduced? To answer this question, I am going to present the main results of my empirical research.

1 For example: Count István Bethlen, Member of Parliament (MDF 1990–94); Baron Gábor Szalay, Member of Parliament (SzDSz 1990–2006); Count György Szapáry – Vice-President of the Hungarian National Bank (1993–1997, 1999–2007), ambassador in Washington (2010–2014); Baron László Vécsey, Member of Parliament (FIDESZ 2010 – mayor 1998–2014); Baron Miklós Bánffy (mayor 1990–2006); Count Farkas Bethlen (mayor 1998–2014); Baron Tamás Tunkel (mayor 2014–); Baron Szalay-Berzeviczy Attila, President of the Stock Exchange in Budapest (2004–2008); Archduke György Habsburg – ambassador; Count György Károlyi, ambassador in Paris (2014–); Archduke Eduard Habsburg, ambassador at the Holy See (2015–); Baron János Perényi, ambassador in Vienna (2014–).

Methodology

During the empirical research, I had to face the difficulties of the sampling because preparing a genuine list of the aristocratic families living in Hungary required cautious historical and genealogical research. The job was made harder not only because no compilation of any kind has been made in this domain since 1945 but that even in the periods preceding the Second World War there did not exist any consistent records of the nobility, unlike in some other European countries. I took as a basis the research results of the above mentioned best contemporary specialist of the Hungarian aristocratic families, genealogist János Gudenus, according to whom there were 131 families of aristocratic descent, with about 600 members altogether living in Hungary at the turn of the 21st century. (This number also includes the recently repatriated and habitually resident aristocrats in Hungary.) (Gudenus 1990; 1993; 1998a,b; 1999).

Table 1. *Distribution of members of aristocratic families living in Hungary by rank and gender*

	Number of aristocratic families	Male members	Female members	All members
Prince	1		1	1
Marquis	2	4	4	8
Count	48	119	116	235
Baron	80	189	162	351
Total	131	312	283	595

In the course of my research, I restricted this group of aristocratic descendants according to the age criteria. I carried out my research among the young descendants of aristocratic families² who lived in or returned to Hungary and were born between 1960 and 1980. With this restriction, my sample covers the second and especially the third generation after the Second World War. This means that even the parents of my respondents had lived their grown-up lives after the institutional cessation of the aristocracy, while they themselves experienced adult life only after the 1990 political change.

The group under examination consisted of 143 persons representing 51 former aristocratic families. Due to the small number of the population and in order to avoid the sampling error concerning the representativity, I intended to reach each member of the above specified target group. Finally, 92 of them (63.4%) volunteered to take part in the survey, among them 45 men and 47 women. We

2 Descending on paternal line from a family considered as aristocrat on the basis of the respective rules as well as the customary law of the period preceding the end of the Second World War (archduke, duke, marquis, count, or baron).

must add that the female members of the group showed greater response rates. The main reason for the failure of a more encompassing data collection was mostly the unavailability of the requested persons.

Table 2. *Distribution of members of aristocratic families living in Hungary, born between 1960 and 1980, by rank and gender and willingness of participation in the research*

Rank	Men		Women		All	
	All	Participating in the research	All	Participating in the research	All	Participating in the research
Marquis			2	2	2	2
Count	22	10	20	14	42	24
Baron	59	35	40	31	99	66
Total	81	45	62	47	143	92

Table 3 below shows that two-thirds of the Hungarian young aristocrats live in Budapest, and the failure of the data collection was more likely among those who do not reside in the capital.

Table 3. *Residential distribution of young members of aristocracy*

	Sample	Permanent residence of those currently residing abroad	Not available	Refusing the participation for other reasons	All
Budapest	63	2	6	11	82
Not Budapest	29	2	15	6	52
No data		1	7	1	9
Total	92	5	28	18	143

Due to the sampling criterion, the age of the members of the examined group at the time of the survey was between 18 and 38 years, and the average age was 26 years with a standard deviation of 5.06.

My research is based on a full-scale survey with nearly 200 items, which polls took one and a half to two hours each. The questions of the survey touched upon the general sociological data (gender, age, birth date and place, domicile, the parents' qualification, working place, descent, their own qualification, profession, housing, material dimensions of their circumstances of life, etc.) mainly with closed-ended questions. To map general as well as political and religious attitudes and the attitudes towards the workplace and job – beyond closed-ended questions –, I applied five-point Likert-type scales, where respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with several statements. In order to

disclose deeper connections and to better understand certain phenomena (e.g. educational principles, identity, social connections, marriage strategies, and belief), I included some open-ended questions as well, where respondents had the opportunity to express their opinions in a few sentences.

A part of the survey contained the questions needed for the network analysis of the group. I used closed- and open-ended questions related to the respondent's social and family relationship, marriage strategies and questions about the associations of people of noble descent. In addition, the members of the examined group were provided a list with all the members of the group, where they had to mark who they knew.

I carried out eight semi-structured interviews focusing on the network and identity of young aristocrats, with a duration of 60–90 minutes each. The interviewees were chosen with purposive sampling method, taken into consideration the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics.

As background material, I used articles, memoirs, interviews, and publications of nobility associations and my experiences gained at informal and formal events held in the noble milieu.

The statistical software SPSS was used to analyze survey data. Due to the small number of the cases, mostly descriptive statistics were applied as frequencies and crosstabs. The open-ended questions in the survey and the transcribed interview texts were analyzed by quantitative and qualitative content analysis.

Analysis

At first glance, the descendants of aristocratic families do not show any relevance in the Hungarian society at the turn of the 21st century neither from social nor from economic, political point of view. The sole criteria of their classing into one group is their descent. One of the main questions of my research was to disclose further possible sociological aspects, others than descent, according to which most of the young aristocrats show similar characteristics.

Socio-Demographics

One of my main conclusions is that despite all earlier mentioned disadvantages suffered by their parents and grandparents, the examined group has a very good chance to reach a higher status within the society. In other words, they possess all socio-demographic factors which make a higher position likely. Two-thirds of them live in Budapest, mostly in the most prestigious districts, 86% has a university degree, 90% speaks at least one foreign language, and they are in a favorable position on the labor market (and they are conscious of

that),³ which means that unemployment is unknown in this circle. Their prosperity is visible also once considering the material dimensions of their living conditions (car, dimension of domicile, weekend house, jewelry, family valuables representing the past).

Those results are especially remarkable because the analyzed group's parents and grandparents were not allowed to study at university and to get a corresponding job or position until the 1960s. And we know that the parents' and children's education is highly correlated in general: "a young person whose parents did not go to university is much less likely to pursue this option than one whose parents did" (*Education at a Glance* 1998: 28). In our case, while only 60% of the fathers and 44% of the mothers completed tertiary education, 86% of the young aristocrats have a university degree.

I have to stress another important factor: the advantages of socio-demographic position is interacting with the values transmitted in family. The questioned persons mentioned how important the following values and goals in their education were: acquiring a diploma and knowing foreign languages (73 of 92 agreed with the statement "My parents thought it was important to get a diploma."), and the parents (72 of 92) tried to assure the conditions for them too.

Life Strategies

The status reproduction and life strategies are quite different from the ones of their ancestors. Young aristocrats characteristically do not follow the tradition according to which they would try to influence the fate of the country acting as e.g. public administration officers. Young aristocrats try to succeed in first line in the private sector (three-quarters of the employed respondents work in the private sector). I also asked them about their attitudes and motivation towards work through a multi-select multiple choice question, where they could mark five items which motivated them in job selection. In this respect, they are not at all motivated by the family tradition (2 marks of 182) or the purpose of serving the country (6 marks of 182).

Political Attitudes

We can observe that the political attitudes of the young aristocrats also differ from their grandparents': breaking with the age-long aristocratic tradition, they do not take part directly or actively in public life, although nearly half of them (44%) rather agreed with the statement formulated in the survey that "My family name obliges me to actively take responsibility for the fate of the country's governance."

3 Three-quarters of the full-time employees are satisfied with their jobs and the students are confident that they would find an appropriate job.

At the same time, about 90% considers as important the participation in the elections (be it parliamentary or local or referendum), and they indeed participate. This percentage is significantly higher than the average willingness in Hungary. (Since 1990, the participation rate in parliamentary elections in Hungary ranged between 56% and 70% – NVI <http://www.valasztas.hu/>, Fábíán et al. 2010: 495).

The majority of the analyzed group agreed with the affirmative statements of parliamentary democracy and with those referring to political awareness.⁴ Furthermore, political disillusionment is not typical of them, although they expressed some critical opinions about politicians. This can partially explain that despite being aware of the duty derived from the family tradition, they do not assume a political role.

Nevertheless, it must be added that the influence of the family tradition on their political preferences is obvious from the text analysis⁵ in the survey. I could distinguish three types of respondents: the first one's preferred party was characterized on the basis of the party's political line (52 respondents). The second one characterized the preferred party rather by the exercise of power and the style of party leaders (20 respondents). 8 further respondents indicated a specific party. To summarize the results, they sympathize in the first line with Christian-conservative political parties and political directions of the right (42 respondents of 52) and are attached to patriotic (most mentioned – 20), democratic ideologies (15 mentions), free from any extremism (most mentioned negative statement – 13).

From the responses to questions about the political attitudes, it was clear that the descendants of former aristocratic families do not support the constitutional or parliamentary monarchy against the existing parliamentary republic; they are not royalists – apart from one or two exceptions.

Religion and Beliefs

The examined young people grew up in those two-three decades which are characterized in the sociological research of religion as the strongest period of religious decay in Hungary (Tomka 1990, 1991, 1996). In several cases, respondents also said that their ancestors were discriminated not only due to their descent but also due to their religious beliefs and their studies and graduation in faith-based high schools. Besides, another research has shown that for some declassed strata – beyond studying and language skills – even religion assisted surviving and a limited level of status reproduction in these decades (Utasi et al. 1996: 38–40).

4 For example, 64.2% agreed with the statement that “Democracy is the best form of all political systems that exist.”, and 79.1% agreed with the statement that “A responsible Hungarian citizen should participate in the parliamentary elections.”

5 The analyzed questions were: “Which party would you like to vote for?” and “Which party would you not vote for?”

Thus, religion and belief in transcendence as a survival strategy helps to interpret personal fate in a wider context and gives strength to endure the crisis (Kapitány 2007: 16–17).

I assumed that the so-called “citizens outside of class” preserved their faith with greater chance because they had nothing more left to lose, and for them practicing religion was not the main discriminating factor. For this reason, they courageously raised their children in a spirit of faith, transmitted their religious beliefs and practices. This assumption is supported by my research results, namely, the religious, Christian, and family-centric basic values played a considerable role in the upbringing of the examined group (83.7% mentioned that they received religious education at home).

Religiosity is a very complex, multi-dimensional concept, which is measured by several methods (Tomka 1996: 593, Hegedűs 2000: 40–46). In my survey, I operationalized religiosity by self-classification, frequency of religious service attendance, personal ritual activities (baptism, confirmation, wedding), and family upbringing practices. I can say that 99% of the young descendants of former aristocratic families in Hungary are Christians, mainly Catholic, 86% declared themselves believers, and further 55% go to church regularly (at least once a month). These proportions are significantly above the Hungarian average, where in the examined era less than 50% declared themselves believers (Tomka 1996: 604, Hegedűs 2000: 48), and only 16–26% went to church regularly (Hegedűs 2000: 66).

Based on the content analysis of the answers to the open question “If you are a believer, please briefly summarize the role of faith in your life”, it can be stated that they owe their belief to individual orientations, directed by religious education and upbringing. Religion plays a basic role and occupies a central place in the life of 39 respondents – typically those who attend religious services –, while for 19 others it helps to form their moral value system. Nobody mentioned any advantage or disadvantage in everyday life because of religious beliefs, so religion represents in their life neither a discriminative nor a status reproductive factor as was the case in the parents’ and grandparents’ generation and can be observed in other discriminated groups during the communist era (Utasi et al. 1996).

Network

In the period preceding the Second World War, aristocracy was separated from the gentry class, mostly based on wealth, social and political influence, social conventions, and prestige. At the same time, the passage between the traditional aristocrats and, for example, a person originating from an ancient noble but not aristocratic family was easier in some cases than for a so-called new aristocrat (Gyáni–Kövér 1998: 194) (who received his title recently for recognition of some economic, military, or scientific merits).

These social differences between aristocracy and the wider nobility disappeared following the Second World War and did not reappear after the 1989 changes. This is due to the unifying force of shared destiny, the friendships made during the deportation, the studies completed at the same schools, etc. The members of aristocratic and gentry families socialized more intensively – at first, in secret, later, in an increasingly open way, at tea and bridge parties, etc. Some of them tried to secure for their children the so-called good company – they organized parties, dance schools, etc. (Gudenus–Szentirmay 1989: 163–164).

After the political changes in 1990, some associations were formed in order to collect and represent members with noble descent, but according to my research these are not popular among the young aristocrats.⁶ According to interviewees, they cannot identify themselves with the aims of these associations out of which many lacks the charitable activities.

Nevertheless, we can observe existing networks in the first line within informal frameworks. Young aristocrats know about and keep track of each other and gather not only during family events. However, the research clearly showed that only a part of young aristocrats belongs to these informal companies. The connection is stronger and more vivid among that small part of the young people descending from aristocratic families who have been living in the capital and had socialized with families of similar descent already in their childhood. The parents' intention to secure the so-called good company for their children can be detected here. This attitude was more significant in families where both parents were of noble descent. This informal network of friends is not exclusive; everyone could enter this network by way of marriage or close friendship.

In this respect, there are some similarities and differences with the contemporary Polish aristocratic milieu. In Poland, the members of informal aristocratic networks, described by sociologists as “extended families”, call themselves simply a “family” and employ “a social distance strategy towards different categories of social groups” (Smoczyński 2015: 1–2, 2016). In Hungary, the usage of the expressions “a person of descent” or “*unser einer*” or “good family” has become commonplace among these families to describe the informal “group membership”, thereby distinguishing themselves from others.

An important disparity is the matrimonial homogamy observed among nobles in Poland (Smoczyński 2015, 2016) in contrast to the Hungarian case. In Hungary, following the Second Word War, the advantages of matrimonial homogamy disappeared, and as a consequence of emigration marital choices narrowed as well. According to genealogical research, until the seventies, there were still some marriages between aristocrats. Before 1989, the last one was contracted in 1974 (Gudenus–Szentirmay 1989, 158).

6 “Do you know any association of people of noble descent?” “If yes, which one?” “Do you attend the events of these associations?” “How often?” “Why?”

Analyzing the parents' marriages of the examined group, one can state that marital homogamy is quite rare: about 10% of the fathers have a spouse of aristocratic descent and further 20% of noble descent. In the case of the examined group, the similar social background nowadays does not lead, however, to marriages between aristocrats and people of lower nobility. Only three of the married respondents (27 cases) have a spouse of noble descent and not one of aristocratic. The examined people choose their spouse not by descent any more but rather by a similar way of thinking or system of values. They have not felt any pressure on the parents' side to marry someone "unser einer".

Staying with the topic of the network, I have to underline another significant feature: almost every interviewed person has relatives abroad, they keep in touch, and some of them also reported about packages, money, etc. received from them or visited them with the intention of learning languages. At the same time – according to the respondents' opinion –, these grants have only slightly improved their living conditions, and so their role regarding status reproduction is negligible. Only 16% of the respondents mentioned that they had any advantage due to a wide network of relatives. Similarly, the majority considers the impact of the domestic extended family on job search or other existential aspects as a normal solidarity typical of any other family.

Furthermore, only a few reported on advantages (30%) or disadvantages (25%) resulting from their descent. Among advantages, they underlined the importance of friendships arising from this specific social circle and the values transmitted in the family. The experienced disadvantages were related to education and were typically reported in the countryside.

On the other hand, it is sure that a mutual influencing relation can be proven between the intensity of connections with people of the same descent and the existence of an aristocratic identity. And this statement leads us to the next topic to be covered: the common identity of today's aristocracy.

Common Identity

First of all, it should be made clear that wearing the name of an aristocratic ancestor is not enough in itself to have an aristocratic identity. In the development of this identity, several individual and social factors play a role. However, at the beginning of the data collection at the first contact, no one of the examined population was surprised by being selected into this research sample, i.e. every person concerned was aware of his or her aristocratic descent.

Secondly, the aristocratic identity has in no way a negative content. Nobody answered "Sometimes I feel ashamed because of my aristocratic descent." to the multiple choice question "Is your aristocratic descent important to you?".

Additionally, nobody has changed his or her “revealing” family name.⁷ This could refer to the fact that they openly stand up for their ancestry.

Based on the above-mentioned question and the question concerning the awareness of otherness,⁸ I could distinguish two groups of roughly the same size among the people under survey:

The first one (N = 43) I consider as not having an aristocratic identity; in other words, they do not feel different from others, or they just take note of it as a fact. (Interestingly, one of the main causes of refusing to take part in the survey was the perceived lack of noble identity).

The second group (N = 49) includes those among whom an aristocratic identity can be observed.

Two questions arise:

- Which are the main factors of reconstructing or keeping one’s identity?
- Which are the main elements of this aristocratic identity?

Analyzing the possible explanatory variables for identity-building practices, I compared the group of those with perceived aristocratic identity and those without perceived aristocratic identity. Eventually, I arrived at the following conclusions:

In the collective identity-building strategies, the main role is played by socialization (more important than the demographic determinants, e.g. gender, education). The aristocratic identity is more likely possessed by those whose parents both come from a noble family (43% of those with and 13% of those without aristocratic identity originate from both noble parents’ marriage). Furthermore, it can be also observed that the perception of aristocratic identity slightly develops with the ageing of the given respondent. I found significant differences between the two groups with regard to upbringing principles and practices. Those young aristocrats keep or reactivate the aristocratic identity more likely whose families fostered more the knowledge about family history and tradition (by being exposed to stories about the family or visits to family places) or had a stronger relationship with the extended family or insisted on ensuring “good company” for their children.

It can be stated that those respondents with the greater perceived aristocratic identity had not only regular contacts with peers of the same descent in their childhood but also at present their participation is more likely at events where they can meet people from noble families. We do not know whether the time spent together, the conversations, and the shared experiences strengthen the identity, or young aristocrats with identity are more likely to look for opportunities to come together with similar people.

7 In the older generation, there have been examples of name changes.

8 “Do you feel yourself different from other members of society because of your aristocratic origin?” “If yes, how?”

Interestingly, there is a correlation between the realized advantages and disadvantages attributed to descent and the existing aristocratic identity, but it is uncertain if the experiences strengthen the identity or is the other way around. While 77.5% of the group having an aristocratic identity mentioned any advantages or disadvantages attributed to their origin, only 30% of the group without an aristocratic identity did so. In order to explore which are the main elements of this aristocratic identity, I interviewed the respondents with the perceived aristocratic identity about their self-identification. The answers gave a very colorful result. Some of them reflected quite a confusing identity: “It’s difficult to preserve values while having nothing”, said one of the interviewed persons. Another one keeps his identity only by complaining about lost goods. For others, specifically the difficulties suffered by their ancestors give a good and respectable example to follow in their own lives.

Now, I am going to highlight the most frequently mentioned items of the aristocratic identity. I assumed that aristocratic identity is rooted in the past; it was therefore not surprising that respondents with self-reported aristocratic identity characterized themselves by a deep knowledge of the family – and wider – past and history.⁹

They possess different, extended interpretations of the concept of family: it includes not only contemporaries but also all previous members conserved in the historical memory of the family and not only the nuclear family but multiple-degree cousins, aunts, and uncles as well. While pride over the ancestors is an important element of their identity, it is not accompanied by arrogance. “I don’t think I am better than other people”, formulated one interviewee. This pride generates rather a sense of duty. One interviewee put it this way: “I cannot bring shame on my family!” Or “I can’t behave in any way”, said another one.

An important component of an aristocratic identity is the affiliation of the group members. The respondents with the self-reported aristocratic identity feel simply at home among people of the same origin. The often-used German expression “*unser einer*” refers to this phenomenon. Beyond similar historical experiences, shared values, a special mode of behavior or courtesy was reflected with special emphasis as the criterion of belonging to this group (e.g. elegance in dressing, communication).

Christianity also plays a very important role in the self-identification of the young aristocrats, which also strengthens group integration. “If we travel with this company for a few days, it is natural that we attend a mass together.”

Summarizing, the basic components of the aristocratic identity are a kind of a special education,¹⁰ behavior, and a system of values determined by Christianity,

9 According to a representative study on the historical culture of Hungarian youth, only 30% of respondents are interested in history (Vásárhelyi 2013: 4).

10 The principles of education in the aristocratic families were studied with the help of semi-

the past of the family, a conservative way of thinking, patriotism, and the duties derived from all that. There is a conviction behind all this: one owes responsibility through all of his or her acts to the ancestors and the history of the family and the country. With all this, I do not wish to say that there could not be any other groups or people in the Hungarian society with a similar self-identification attitude. These are simply the values, principles, and characteristics which are shared by young Hungarian aristocrats with the self-reported aristocratic identity and with which they differentiate themselves from others.

Conclusions

As described above, the descendants of the former Hungarian aristocratic families have not returned into economic or political elite positions of the Hungarian society; so, in this sense, the elite reproduction has not taken place, but they possess a good chance to reach a higher status within the social hierarchy. This advantageous socio-demographic position is also due to the traditional values transmitted in the family. The importance of these values is reflected in the self-identification declarations of the young Hungarian aristocrats, especially among those who belong to the informal network of the people of noble descent.

Ergo, I think we can find the aristocracy's role and impact on the formation of the post-communist contemporary Hungarian society at the same place as C.I.L.A.N.E.¹¹ formulated in one of its basic documents, namely, the Code of Ethics of the European Nobility. This Code adopted by the representatives of the European nobility proposes for its members to promote widely the enforcement of family and religious values, the spirit of service with a sense of duty and human dignity as well as honesty. In the Code, the importance of the education for leaders' vocations and developing the quality of social relationships are also emphasized (Code éthique de la noblesse en Europe 1999: 111–116).

Finally, I would like to quote Baron Bernard Snoy, who gave a very concise summary of the mission of today's nobility in a changing world: "I do not want to create the impression that these values would constitute some kind of monopoly of nobility; these are such universal values which are supported and promoted by a lot of noble families in the consciousness that these families represent a numerically small and declining but influential part of the European élite" (Snoy 1994: 30 – translated by the author).

structured interviewing as well as open questions in the survey and a Likert-type scale containing 19 items. (E.g. "I spend a lot of time with my family." "I know my family history well." "Religious belief played an important role in my education.", etc.)

11 Commission d'Information et de Liaison des Associations Nobles d'Europe – The European Commission of the Nobility (<http://www.cilane.eu>).

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