

## DR. GYÖRGY VERSÉNYI: DISCOVERING THE STORY BEHIND THREE OF HIS POEMS

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**Abstract** At the beginning of the 20th century, György Versényi published three poems which capture the unbroken link to his roots and native places. These became increasingly important as life had pulled him away from this setting, which he would revisit just after reaching his maturity. Each of these three poems concentrates on a specific theme: his idilic memory of the native village as opposed to the real situation, the perpetual fostering of the ancestors, and the decayed and desacralised image of the house he was born in. The article analyses these aspects, focusing on the stories behind each of them.

**Keywords** Suceagu (Szucság), Fileki, Kabos, Korda, family history, architectural heritage

### The Lyrical I of György Versényi and His Shattered Dreams

Dr. György Versényi (Fig. 1), a famous figure of the cultural life of Cluj (Kolozsvár), left behind many works, proof of his wide-ranging preoccupations. Among these, he wrote numerous poems, which let us glimpse into the romantic personality of the poet, mounting up to a valuable literary oeuvre, which nowadays has been almost completely forgotten. Several of his volumes of poems focus on his personal thoughts and life experiences. Of all of these, three stand out particularly as they portray his connection to the native places, set in the rural landscape around Cluj. Thus, he is recollecting, piece by piece, the idyllic landscape of the Land of Călata (Kalotaszeg). This exercise of the mind was all the more important to the author, as he ended up spending most of his adulthood far, far away from this setting.

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Published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these three poems,<sup>1</sup> on the one hand, nostalgically evoke the old charm of his family home and village, while, on the other, mourn their fate with sadness, that is their decay, as the house was partly demolished and transformed into an alehouse, the village and its life had changed. The only tie that was left between the poet and these lands is a metaphorical one, the one established through his roots – most of his ancestors were laid to rest there.

Thus, in the poem “Szülőfalum” (“My Native Village”, 1903), he evokes in an idyllic atmosphere the image of the village where he was born and spent his childhood, Szucsák / Szucság, today Suceagu (Cluj County). However, none of it – neither the symphony of visual images, nor the picturesqueness and the patriarchal charm – actually belonged to him, he owned them only symbolically, as memories. As the poet mentions, at that time, he did not own anything there anymore, not even a single piece of land:

“Nincs már nekem benne talpalatnyi földem  
Csak őseim csontja fenn a temetőben  
De szívem a világ hogyha megsebezte  
Itt találok írt csak sajgó szívemre.”

[“I have not as much as a foothold of soil to my name,  
But my ancestors’ bones yonder in the graveyard  
And should the world inflict a wound upon my heart  
T’is here she finds balm to its mordant pain.”

Translation by Márta Sebestyén]

Nonetheless, the tombs of the ancestors, located in the village cemetery, represented a much stronger connection for the alienated author: they wrote significant parts of the local history, bringing together, in the person of the poet, the names of three important families that became extinct, each in its turn – Füleki / Fileki, Kabos, and Korda. Accordingly, in the poem “Füleki Sándor” (1904), Versényi emphasises this connection between the living and the departed – the family cemetery being situated right on the hill behind the house:

“Ahogy a tornáczon  
Magamban mélézok  
Családi temetőnk  
Hantjaira látok.

Ott a hegytetőn fenn

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<sup>1</sup> György Versényi, “Szülőfalum,” poem published in *Ország-világ*, no. 3 (1903); “Szülőházam,” poem published in *Ország-világ*, no. 16 (1904), and “Füleki Sándor,” poem published in *Nemzeti Hírlap*, no. 6 (April 9, 1904).

Kék ég borul rája  
 Messzire kilátszik  
 Szépapám kriptája.”

[“As on my porch, in my solitude,  
 Daydreaming catches up with me,  
 I can cast my eyes over  
 My family’s tombs.

Up yonder on the hilltop  
 The blue skies form its canopy  
 And my great-grandfather’s vault  
 Stands out from a distance.” translation by Márta Sebestyén]

However, as he mentions in the poem “Szülőházam” (“The House I Was Born In”, 1904), his home, where generations and generations of these families had lived, was still there, only that it was mutilated, both physically (parts of it had been demolished) as well as spiritually (as it had been transformed into an alehouse). This desecration of the ancestral home, symbolically witnessed by the ancestors, from their graves located nearby, accentuates the sadness, the pain, and the feeling of alienation – an alienation felt by someone who ended up being moulded and living far away from home, as life ran its course. The sitting room, the dining room, the library disappeared; everything became unfamiliar and gloomy. The garden disappeared alongside the scent of its flowers; the orchard and all the landscaping disappeared, as well. As a testimony to the charm of the old days, only the stone table was left behind. Through its hardened silence, it accentuated the desolate decay of the ancestral house. Nothing was left: neither the yard, nor the shade of the trees, not even the buzzing of the bees. This literary “revisitation” only urges the lyrical I to contemplate his shattered dreams and evanescent life:

“Itt az ősi házban, újra csak itt járok...  
 Ezek a szobák, de nem ismerek rájuk  
 Kedélyes ebédlőnk piszkos korcsmaszoba,  
 Pálinkát nyakalni botorkálnak oda.

A nyugalmas háló, édes álmok fészke,  
 Valami gabonás zszszik örömére.  
 Nappali, könyvesház, mind olyan idegen  
 Akárhová száll is borús tekintetem.

.....  
 Elmerengve a sok szertefoszlott álmon.”

["I' m here again in the ancestral home...  
 These are the rooms, but I don't recognise them  
 Our pleasant dining room is now a dirty saloon  
 For they stumble in-and-out for a drink.

The peaceful bedroom, once nest to sweet dreams,  
 Serves delight to some to the weevils eating grain.  
 Sitting room, library, every place so strange to me  
 Wherever I cast my gloomy regard.

.....  
 Pondering over shattered dreams." translation by Márta Sebestyén]

Today, 170 years after the birth of György Versényi, the evoked aspects emphasise the fate of these places, making them to be even more interesting: the village with its two slopes dotted by the local households is still there, the Reformed Church and the cemetery are still there, the habitudes and the routines of the villagers are almost the same; Sándor Fileki's former manor house has disappeared, however its remains are still there, as are many of György Versényi's ancestors – dozens and dozens of graves lacking their tombstones.

### The Story Behind the Poet

György Versényi was born in Suceagu, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 1852. He studied at the Reformed Colleges in Aiud (Nagyenyed) and Cluj, and then at Budapesti Egyetem Bölcsészeti Kara (the Faculty of Arts [Humanities], University of Budapest), where he graduated as a teacher (1874) and then defended his doctoral thesis (1877). He was a high school teacher with a distinguished career; he stood out as a writer, poet, literary historian, and ethnographer.<sup>2</sup>

He started off as a teacher, in 1875-1876, at Lőcsei R.K. Gimnázium (the Royal State Gymnasium in Lőcse, today Levoča, Slovakia), then, between 1876 and 1894, he was a teacher at Körmöcbányai főreáliskola (the Main Public High School in Körmöcbánya, today Kremnica, Slovakia), and from 1894 to 1906 he worked at Kolozsvári állami felső leányiskola (the State High School for Girls in Cluj). During this last

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<sup>2</sup> Attila Paládi-Kovács, "Előszó," foreword for György Versényi, *Bányák, bányászok, hagyományok: Válogatott tanulmányok és költemények*, Zsuzsanna Márkus, Sándor Hadobás, and József Hála (eds.) (Érc- és Ásványbányászati Múzeum Alapítvány: Rudabánya, 2011 [1890]), 9-14.

period he also worked as general secretary of the Erdélyi Irodalmi Társaság (the Transylvanian Literary Society).<sup>3</sup>

As he was married twice, he had eleven children: eight with his first wife, Eszter Medgyes de Nyárádszentimre (1855-1891), and three with his second wife, Klára Medgyes de Nyárádszentimre (1861-1917, the sister of his first wife); nine of them reached adulthood. Some of them lived in Romania, while others in Hungary; their descendants are still passing on the family name, even today. After a long period during which he lived in Budapest, between 1906 and 1917, he returned to Cluj in 1917, and soon after he died, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1918, in his home on Teleki Street, no. 13-14 (sic!<sup>4</sup>, today Albert Einstein Street), being buried in the Házsongárd Cemetery, where his grave still exists.

Dr. György Versényi was appreciated especially for his volumes of poetry, as well as for his ethnographic research or folklore gathering books, which remain valuable testimonies for the field of ethnography, despite the fact that his ethnographic-folkloric work has long since been forgotten. For the urban memory of Cluj, it is also significant that, on his initiative, the memorial plaque dedicated to Petőfi was placed on the façade of the former Biasini Hotel.<sup>5</sup> However, since the 2000s, his remarkable publishing activity and ethno-folklore research have been brought back to the public's attention, through retrospective publications, as well as through numerous dictionary or encyclopaedia articles, either printed or accessible on-line. Due to his effervescent activity, he was, at that time, one of the few people who could enjoy, during their lifetime, a statue of themselves to be publicly exhibited:<sup>6</sup> a bust made by Ferenc Kolozsvári-Szeszák (1881-1919),<sup>7</sup> a sculptor from Cluj, in 1902 (he was still a student at that time).<sup>8</sup> However, this bronze bust is now considered to be lost.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Révai nagy lexikona, vol. XIX (Vár–Zsüri; kiegészítés: Aachen–Beöthy) (Budapest: Révai Testvérek Irodalmi Intézet Részvénytársaság, 1926), s.v. "Versenyi"; Pallas Nagy Lexikon, vol. XVI (Téba–Zsuzsok) (Budapest: Pallas Irodalmi és Nyomdai Rt., 1897), s.v. "Versenyi"; József Hála, "Versényi György, a magyarországi bányászfoklór kutatója," afterword for György Versényi, *Bányák, bányászok, hagyományok: Válogatott tanulmányok és költemények*, Zsuzsanna Márkus, Sándor Hadobás, and József Hála (eds.) (Érc- és Ásványbányászati Múzeum Alapítvány: Rudabánya, 2011 [1890]), 225-237.

<sup>4</sup> According to the official records of the Civil Status Office of Cluj-Napoca.

<sup>5</sup> Ildikó Antal Szép, "Szucságról – 2015-ben," *Korunk*, year XXVII, no. 1 (January, 2016): 52-68, 60.

<sup>6</sup> See the edition of the *Ellenzék*, a weekly newspaper in Cluj, year XXIII, no. 157 (12<sup>th</sup> of July 1902): "az első olyan eset, hogy valaki már életében gyönyörködhet saját szobrában" ("the first case of someone alive that can admire their own statue," our translation).

<sup>7</sup> q.v. Jenő Murádin, *A szobrász Kolozsvári-Szeszák Ferenc* (Sfântu Gheorghe: ArtPrinter Könyvkiadó, 2015). He was a well-known sculptor from Cluj; he studied in Budapest and Paris, he made the sculptures representing Miklós Wesselényi and Miklós Jósika, which decorated the façade of the National Theatre in Cluj (lost in 1919). He also made, together with three other colleagues, belonging to the workshop of Alajos Stróbl (a sculptor from Budapest), the two allegorical compositions with triumphal chariots, which

## The Story Behind the Family

Actually, Dr. György Versényi was born into a noble family at its first generation, with a name that was practically new – something rare in the contemporary era. Nonetheless, the foundation of the name “Wersényi” (which later on became “Versényi”) is based on the remarkable history of four great families – Wesselényi, after his father Károly Versényi, and Füleki / Fileki, Kabos and Korda, after his mother Anna Korda.

Pater familias Károly Versényi (1826-1887) was an individual with a very interesting life. Born in Jibou (Zsibó), educated at the Unitarian College in Cluj and then in Târgu-Mureş (Marosvásárhely), he bore a newly created family name, especially invented, as he was one of the seven children of Baron Miklós Wesselényi de Hadad junior (1796-1850),<sup>10</sup> born out of

crown the towers of the National Theatre in Cluj. The funerary sculptures, which he made for a series of personalities from Cluj, are also remarkable.

<sup>8</sup> Csaba Miklósi-Sikes, “Kolozsvár (és Erdély) 19. századi szobrászata a sajtó tükrében,” *Ars Hungarica*, vol. (year) 29, no. 2 (2001): 281-356, 334.

<sup>9</sup> Miklósi-Sikes, “Kolozsvár (és Erdély) 19. századi szobrászata a sajtó tükrében,” 351. After almost a century since it was considered to be lost, an image of this sculpture resurfaced in Anna Versényi, *Elejtett példányok*, e-book (Budapest: Ad Librum; Könyv Guru, 2018). The author states that the sculpture is owned by the Wersényi family, in Győr, Hungary, more precisely in the patrimony of her second cousin, Dr. György Wersényi, the grandson of György Wersényi (who lived in Hungary and reintroduced the name in its initial state, written with “W” instead of “V”), who was the grandson of Dr. György Versényi. Versényi A., *Elejtett példányok*, 24 [from the pdf; no page number - e-book]. However, Anna Versényi attributes the work to the sculptor János Fadrusz (1858-1903), probably due to an involuntary error. As she herself is an artist, she metaphorically compares the sculpture with the creations of the great Rodin, a fact that confirms the plastic quality of the bust of Dr. György Versényi made by Ferenc Kolozsvári-Szeszák (black chromatics, expressiveness, the rendering of facial features, the strength of the facial expression). Following a conversation with the owner, Dr. György Wersényi (great-great-grandson of Dr. György Versényi), we deduced that it is actually the plaster model after which the bronze bust must have been cast, and which is still considered to be lost. The owners do not know any details about this sculpture.

<sup>10</sup> Miklós Wesselényi junior, the son of Baron Miklós Wesselényi nicknamed “the Aurochs from Jibou” (1750-1809), distinguished himself both as a liberal politician with progressive visions, as well as for the modern methods of farming, implemented on his estates. He inherited from his father the determined character, along with his physical strength, as he was a very good athlete. He was involved in the Revolution of 1848/1849, in its early days, and campaigned for the abolition of serfdom. Miklós Wesselényi junior is also well known for his gesture of freeing his serfs, as well as for his later guidance in the practice of agriculture according to modern principles and his support of their community life. At the same time, he distinguished himself as a hero of the Great Flood of Pest of 1838, when, as he was a very good swimmer, he saved many lives. A Memorial was dedicated to him, as a testimony of this event. It is

wedlock – of these, five were most certainly Wesselényi's children<sup>11</sup> and reached adulthood bearing the name "Wersényi", later also written "Versényi".<sup>12</sup> Concerned with the fate of these children, Miklós Wesselényi tried to provide them with an education and training worthy of their origin.<sup>13</sup> These preoccupations surfaced from his correspondence with Benjámín (Benő) Kelemen (1792-1883), the one who, starting with 1816, had served as a farm superintendent [gazdatiszt] and manager (administrator) of the estate in Jibou and with whom he had a very close relationship, even a friendship.<sup>14</sup> The creation of the name "Wersényi" is due to him, a name under which Miklós Wesselényi's children born out of wedlock were legitimised.

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located on the side façade of the Central Franciscan Church (Belvárosi Ferences templom, in Ferenciek tere). His gesture of freeing the serfs is evoked in Zäläu (Zilah), to this day, by the statuary ensemble, made by the famous sculptor János Fadrusz, inaugurated on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September, 1902. q.v. the special issue of Szilágy, a weekly newspaper in Zäläu, year XX, no. 38 (the extraordinary edition of the 18<sup>th</sup> of September, 1902) and the editions of the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 1902 and, respectively, the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, 1902.

<sup>11</sup> Rozália / Róza (1824-1887, daughter of Borbála Molnár) married to Richard Rainagel / Richard Rajnai without descendants, Károly (1826-1887, son of Borbála Molnár) married to Anna Korda with descendants, Katalin (1827- deceased after 1863, daughter of Susánna Szántó), István (1829- deceased after 1887, son of Terézia Salamon) married with descendants, László (1831-1884, son of Borbála Réti) married to Borbára Viski (1831?-1905) with descendants.

<sup>12</sup> Gábor Merényi-Metzger mentions that, according to the memoirs of Miklós Wesselényi's friend, Sándor Újfalvi (1792–1866), he would have had a total of thirteen children with different women, out of wedlock. However, it could be just an exaggeration. Gábor Merényi-Metzger "Wesselényi Miklós törvénytelen gyermekei," *Valóság*, year 59, no. 9 (September, 2016): 24-29, 24. Gábor Merényi-Metzger, "Az árvízi hajós 'természetes' gyermekei", *Művelődés (köz művelődési folyóirat – Kolozsvár)*, year LXX (January, 2017), <https://muvelodes.net/enciklopedia/az-arvizi-hajos-termeszetes-gyermekei> (accessed 30 May, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Unique aspects regarding the relationship between the father and his children emerge from the correspondence that has been preserved, as well as from various indirect sources. See in full, Attila István Kárpáti, "Wesselényi Miklós kapcsolatrendszere" (doctoral thesis, Loránd Eötvös University / Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest, 2017), 200-228, 205. However, the father wanted his sons to learn a trade of their choice – a craft useful in life and which would offer them a certain independence – thus Károly Versényi came to embrace carpentry. As Wesselényi's will of June 1838 shows, he saw their future in the practice of civilian careers and the legally appointed guardians were to purchase real estate for all three boys, at the end of their studies, in a free royal city. Miklós Wesselényi considered it to be very important that all his children spoke German. Kárpáti, "Wesselényi Miklós kapcsolatrendszere," 205-206.

<sup>14</sup> After 1850, Benjámín Kelemen continued to take care of Miklós Wesselényi's children and even to administer the properties of his two (legitimate) sons, for another 25 years. He had an estate in Suceaga, where he retired in 1875 and lived together with his wife, Katalin Bod, until his death. For more details on the life and work of Benjámín Kelemen, see Elek Jakab, "Nagy-ernyei Kelemen Benő élete," *Keresztény Magyarok*, year XXII, no. 3 (May-June, 1887): 145-188.

Wesselényi officially married Anna Lux (1827-1865) only in 1845.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he took care of the fate of these children; he even included them in his testamentary provisions – his last will was written in Jibou, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1848.<sup>16</sup> However, due to some misunderstandings, Károly Versényi no longer appears in the Baron's correspondence after August 1846. At the same time, although his name together with that of his mother, Borbála Molnár, appear in Wesselényi's will of 1838 (the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June)<sup>17</sup>, among the other Wersényi children, he is no longer among them in the will written in 1848, as he later renounced him (due to some unfortunate events that occurred in Târgu-Mureş and, after 1845, also due to the conviction that he was not his son after all).<sup>18</sup> Károly Versényi's actions from his youth (forgery of a letter, debts, petty theft, etc., rather acts of bravery of a young man who needed a parent by his side), together with the strict attitude of his father, paved his way towards a military career.<sup>19</sup>

At the age of 22, Károly Versényi joined the Hungarian Armed Forces, being active in the Revolution of 1848/1849. He was assigned to the 15<sup>th</sup> ("Matia / Mátyás") Hussar Regiment. General Bem awarded him a medal for his military merits, 3<sup>rd</sup> class. He was appointed lieutenant and then commanding officer. After 1867, he remained a member of the Kolozs megyei Honvéd egyesület (Military Association of Cluj County). Initially he was a notary in Suceagu, and then, later on, in Secăşel (formerly Beşineu or Beşinău, Besenyő / Székásbesenyő), Alba County, where he owned a large house and an estate (no other information about these could be identified).<sup>20</sup> During the last years of his life he worked as a

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<sup>15</sup> Kárpáti, "Wesselényi Miklós kapcsolatrendszere," 204. Jakab, "Nagy-ernyei Kelemen Benő," 157-158.

<sup>16</sup> Kárpáti, "Wesselényi Miklós kapcsolatrendszere," 228. q.v. Samu Kardos, Báró Wesselényi Miklós élete és munkái, vol. II (Budapest: Légrády Testvérek Könyvnyomdája, 1905), 498-500 (reproduction of the will), mainly 498 (provisions for the Wersényi children). Merényi-Metzger, "Wesselényi Miklós törvénytelen gyermekei," 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> Kárpáti, "Wesselényi Miklós kapcsolatrendszere," 202, 228.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 219. It seems that Baron Miklós Wesselényi sought various solutions to legitimise his children born out of wedlock, among which there was even the option of a marriage of convenience with the mother of one of them, in order to secure his descendants and legal heirs. *Ibid.*, 202-203. Moreover, it seems that later on, towards the end of Wesselényi's life, there was a harmonious connection between the Wersényi children and the Baron's legal family (founded at a later stage of his life).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 216. In order to understand in full the relationship between father and son and for other details on Károly Versényi's youth, see in full, *Ibid.*, 210-219.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Versényi notes a funny family story about her great-great-great-grandfather, Károly Versényi: "Később közjegyző lett, Besenyőn. Hozzá jártak nyaralni a rokonok, nagy háza, birtoka volt. Hízott a birtok, s ő maga is. Nem tudjuk, valóban sokat evett, vagy betegség okozta. A gyerekek főként attól voltak lenyűgözve, hogy az ebédlőasztalt félkörben kifűrészelték neki, hogy a hasa odaférjen." ("He later became a notary in Besenyő. Relatives came to visit him on vacation, as he had an estate and a big house. The estate kept getting larger and larger, and so did he. It is not certain whether he really ate a lot or if he was just sick. The children were fascinated by the fact that out of the dining table a semicircular hole was cut,



clerk for the Court of Justice of Zaláu.<sup>21</sup> He died on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1887, in his home in Zaláu, being buried in the Reformed Cemetery of the city.

Anna Korda de Borosjenő (nicknamed Nina, 1828-1894, Fig. 2) belongs to a family of lower nobility residing in the area of Cluj. She is the one who, on one hand, completed the three-century long history of the Korda family, while, on the other, represented the connection with two old families from Suceagu: Füleki / Fileki and Kabos de Magyargyerőmonostor. She was the eldest daughter of György Korda de Borosjenő (1800-1853, Fig. 3) and Károlina Kabos (1805-1875, Fig. 4). She married Károly Versényi, in 1851, in Suceagu. Anna Korda, died on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1894, in their home in Secășel, being buried there, in the local cemetery.<sup>22</sup>

The Korda de Borosjenő family contributed to the writing of important chapters of the history of Transylvania, having a great influence in the lands which today belong to the Sălaj and Satu Mare Counties, in the surroundings of Cluj and in the Land of Călata, as well as in the Szeklerland – especially in Odorheiu Secuiesc (Székelyudvarhely) and Târgu-Mureș. As the family itself did not leave a proper history behind, due to the premature extinction of all its branches, few pieces of information have survived to this day. György Korda (1800-1853) belonged to the lower nobility branch of the family, that survived up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the other branch, which received the countship, became extinct at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Following their marriage, which took place on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1825 in Suceagu, György Korda and Károlina Kabos settled initially in Hida (Hídalmás). The spouses, together with their children, were often present at the house of the Kabos family in Suceagu, until they settled here at the beginning of the fourth decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Suceagu, György Korda became *közirtokos* (owner of an estate within a compossesorate – joint ownership of an undivided property).

Károlina Kabos was the daughter of Mihály Kabos (1772-1831/4?) and Eszter Füleki / Fileki (1780-1840). Her brother Dániel Kabos was married to Baroness Katalin Kemény. Their cousin Miklós Kabos, son of Sándor Kabos, was married to Baroness Eszter Kemény. The closeness, kinship, and friendship between these families was beneficial for the next generation (second-to-last) of the Korda family (the lower nobility branch), as well as for the first generation of the Versényi-Korda family – who lived in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Suceagu, as well, and then, in the second half, in Hida, Zaláu, and, respectively, in Secășel.

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so that it would fit his belly,” our translation) Versényi A., *Elejtett példányok*, p. 202 [from the pdf; no page number – e-book].

<sup>21</sup> Gábor Bona, *Hadnagyok és főhadnagyok az 1848/49. évi szabadságharcban*, part 3 of *Az 1848/49-es szabadságharc tisztikara, s.v. “Versényi Károly,”*

<https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Bona-bona-tabornokok-torzstisztek-1/hadnagyok-es-fohadnagyok-az-184849-evi-szabadsagharcban-2/v-20D5/versenyi-karoly-21E3/> (accessed 28 May, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, these family tombs have not yet been identified.

All of the children of the György Korda and Károlina Kabos couple were born in the former Fileki manor, and, of all of them, Anna was the one to live there, together with her husband, Károly Versényi, until the seventh decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All of their children were born and raised in the same house, as well. As Anna Korda had two younger brothers who died in the Revolution of 1848/1849, the untimely death of György Korda junior, in 1865, her only surviving male sibling, radically changed the situation of the Versényi-Korda family, who settled in Hida, on the Korda family's old property. Thus, both Károlina Kabos, the widow of György Korda,<sup>23</sup> and her son-in-law, Károly Versényi,<sup>24</sup> sold to Benjámín Kelemen their properties in Suceagu – a village that the family would leave forever after 1867.

Anna's eldest brother, György junior (1830-1865), was the last man to bear the Korda de Borosjenő name. He actively participated in the Revolution of 1848/1849: in September 1848, when he was only 18 years old, he joined the 12<sup>th</sup> ("Marosvásárhely") Battalion, and in 1849, he was appointed sergeant and then lieutenant. He was not injured. Later on, in 1850, he was part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, and in 1857 he was transferred to the reserve. He did not want to be part of the Austrian army in which he had been enlisted. He died in 1865, being only 35 years old, in Hida, having the position of trainee lawyer.<sup>25</sup> He was married and had a son, László, who died aged 14, in 1878 – thus the family became extinct on the male line. It seems that during his time, the family underwent its financial decline.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Béla Berde, *A Kolozs megyei Szucság község története* (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1914) [the full text of the article was provided by Ildikó Antal Szép, yet without page numbers].

<sup>24</sup> According to the pieces of information provided by Ildikó Antal Szép, following her research in the National Archives of Romania, Cluj County Branch. Cluj County Branch of the National Archives: "Kelemen Benjámín Family Fund," inventory no. 1472, chapter III, folder no. 17, page 191. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, 1867, the sale of Károly Versényi's property in favour of Benjámín Kelemen is recorded. Most likely, it was Kelemen himself who initially facilitated this acquisition for Versényi.

<sup>25</sup> Gábor Bona, *Hadnagyok és főhadnagyok az 1848/49. évi szabadságharcban*, part 3 of *Az 1848/49-es szabadságharc tisztikara*, s.v. „hidalmási Korda György,” <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Bona-bona-tabornokok-torzstisztek-1/hadnagyok-es-fohadnagyok-az-184849-evi-szabadsagharcban-2/k-D7B/hidalmasi-korda-gyorgy-FBE/?list=eyJxdWVyeSI6ICJlb3JkYSAifQ> (accessed 28 May, 2021). The Korda de Borosjenő family also used the appellation "de Hida" / "hidalmási" unofficially, due to their prolonged ownership of estates in the village bearing the same name. Sometimes, some members of the lower nobility branch of the family used this appellation in order to set themselves apart from the other branch of the family.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Versényi notes that György Korda junior was married to his primary cousin Eszter Kabos, the daughter of Dániel Kabos (the brother of his mother, Károlina Kabos) and Baroness Katalin Kemény de Magyargyerőmonostor. However, there is no proof in this regard, while other sources mention him as being unmarried. q.v. Versényi A., *Elejttett példányok*, p. 90 [from the pdf; no page numbers – e-book], see. Bona, *Hadnagyok és főhadnagyok az 1848/49. évi szabadságharcban*.

Anna's younger sister, Károlina (nicknamed Linka, who was born in 1835 and died before 1894) was married to Sándor Majthényi de Kis-Majthény, with whom she had three children. The Majthényi-Korda family and their descendants lived in Hida.

Anna's other two brothers, László and Dezső, had a dramatic destiny, as they fought in the 1848/1849 Revolution. 17-year-old László joined the 15<sup>th</sup> ("Matia / Mátyás") Hussar Regiment and died heroically on the front, due to a major head injury caused by a cannon ball. Dezső, only 15 years old, enlisted in the 11<sup>th</sup> ("Kolozsvár") Battalion and was wounded on the front in July 1849. He died at home, in Suceagu, being buried on the day he would have turned 16.<sup>27</sup> Anna's sixth sibling was Eszter, who was born in 1840 and died when she was just two years old.

Anna Korda and Károly Versényi had six children: three girls and three boys. Among them, György and Gabor stood out. Gábor Versényi (1853-?) studied at the Reformed Colleges in Aiud (Nagyenyed) and Cluj, and received a scholarship in Budapest (between 1871-1875), where he studied to become a drawing teacher. He was a talented painter, well known at that time.<sup>28</sup> Beginning with 1875, he worked as a drawing teacher at the former "Wesselényi" Reformed College, in Zalău (today the National "Silvania" College).<sup>29</sup> He married Laura (Lóri) Hamp (1864-1927). The couple had no children, their heirs stemmed from the feminine line of his wife. Starting with 1892 he worked in Cluj, at the Magyar királyi állami tanítóképző intézet (Royal Hungarian State Pedagogical Institute, which later became the Pedagogical High School). He died in the interwar period, being most likely buried in Zalău, where he lived during the last years of his life. His wife, Laura Versényi, is buried in Cluj, in the Házsongárd Cemetery. The oldest of their daughters, Anna-Károlina (Linka) (1854-?), was married to Ferenc Fosztó de Maros-Koppánd (1832-1902). Eszter (1857-1888) never married and died young, while Iloná (1855-1859) died as a child.

The youngest of the children was Károly (1863-?), who studied agriculture and was a farm superintendent [gazdatiszt]. He never married and had no children. Examining several death notices of various members of the family, it becomes obvious that he was still alive in 1902, yet he died before 1918. He probably lived in Hida and Zalău, as well as in Blaj

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<sup>27</sup> Versényi A., *Elejtett példányok*, pp. 88-89 [from the pdf; no page numbers – e-book]. György Versényi, "Egy érdekes eltűnés. (Kabós Ferencről)," *Egyetértés*, no. 11 (1905) [the full text of the article was provided by Ildikó Antal Szép, yet without page numbers].

<sup>28</sup> \*\*\*, "Képzőművészeti kiállításunk." [an art chronicle], *Magyar Polgár (Kolozsvár [Cluj])*, year XXVI, no. 197 (2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 1903): p. 1. q.v. *Ellenzék (Kolozsvár)*, no. 68 (24<sup>th</sup> of March, 1906), *Ellenzék (Kolozsvár)*, no. 131 (11<sup>th</sup> of June, 1906).

<sup>29</sup> Attila Szabó, "Zilahi képzőművészek kiállítása Debrecenben. ETNO ART. Expoziția artiștilor din Zalău la Debrecen, 5-29 august 2014," brochure (Zalău: Debreceni Művelődési Központ, Szilágy Megyei Művelődési és Művészeti Központ, Szilágy Megyei Történelmi és Szépművészeti Múzeum (Zalău County Museum of History and Art, 2014), 2 [without page numbering],

[https://www.culturalaj.ro/userfiles/pliant\\_etno\\_art.pdf](https://www.culturalaj.ro/userfiles/pliant_etno_art.pdf) (accessed June 9, 2021).

(Balázsfalva) and, respectively, Secășel. During the first part of his life he was the farm superintendent for the estate of Count Ödön Bethlen in Dragu (Drág), today in Sălaj County, a neighbouring village of Hida.<sup>30</sup> Later on, he was mentioned to be active in the Blaj area, where he managed the family estate in Secășel, which he probably inherited.

### The Story Behind the House

The residence of the Korda family in Suceagu (the property was located at no. 1, on the main street) later became the residence of the Versényi-Korda family and two generations of these families were born there. Unfortunately, this house no longer exists in its original state, as it was completely altered at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in the years of Communism – it was then that the cemetery of the noble families disappeared as well (the tombstones of the Kabos, Korda, and Versényi families did not survive).

In fact, the house in which György Korda and Károlina Kabos lived in Suceagu, was part of the former Fileki manor house ensemble (dating from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Fig. 5). Fortunately, “fragments” of this ensemble have been preserved to this day, even though completely transformed and totally unintelligible. Actually, the original property of the Fileki family was divided up among the descendants and then, gradually, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, alienated. The large Baroque gate (the part that became the property of the Biró family, a family of wealthy farmers from Suceagu), parts of the old house (two Baroque stone frames, part of the cellar and segments of the thick walls are now masked by a façade reflecting major transformations that occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century), fragments of the stone precinct wall, as well as traces of other older buildings, respectively, of household annexes are still visible (Fig. 6).

The most accurate information about the fate of the Fileki property in Suceagu was portrayed by Béla Berde, in 1914.<sup>31</sup> It allows us today to reconstruct the exact situation of the past. Thus, Sándor Fileki married Anna Détsei de Nagydoba et Marosdécse in 1731. A year later after the wedding they built a new manor house in the central part of the village. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this ensemble was already divided up into three parts, consequently, from the West to the East it became: the property of Ferenc Biró (the large Baroque gate with sections of the old stone precinct wall, the barn and the former stables that were transformed into a dwelling – today in ruins, in a state of pre-collapse or partially demolished), the buildings and the land lot of the public school (on the site of the public school and of the teachers’ lodgings were the dwellings of the farm manager and other workers, a building situated close to the Baroque gate), and the property of József Papp (József Papp’s house was part of the original L-shaped Fileki house – the other part had already been

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<sup>30</sup> Versényi A., *Elejtett példányok*, 202 [from the pdf; no page number – e-book].

<sup>31</sup> Berde, *A Kolozs megyei Szucság*.

demolished as it protuberated onto the street; this house is now a private residence, owned by R. S.,<sup>32</sup> Fig. 7 and Fig. 8).

Sándor Fileki had two children: Krisztina married to János Szarvadi de Botház and Sándor junior married to Julia Geréb de Árapatak. The two split the old Fileki estate into two. Sándor junior inherited the outer part, the family mill, the manor house, as well as the garden on the opposite side (where, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Berde manor house was located). Sándor junior had two daughters, as well; consequently, the Fileki family became extinct: Polixenia married Sándor Kabos de Magyargyerőmonostor and Eszter married Mihály Kabos de Magyargyerőmonostor (Sándor and Mihály were first cousins). The Kabos heirs divided the estate among themselves. However, later on, after 1830, Benjámín Kelemen would gradually acquire many of these subdivisions, including some belonging to the Szarvadi heirs, thus establishing a new estate and, at the same time, implementing a modern, exemplary agricultural practice.<sup>33</sup> The property of Miklós Kabós and part of that of his brother János Kabós – the sons of Sándor Kabos and Polixenia Fileki – were sold to small owners from the village; most of it was purchased by the Papp family. The property of Dániel Kabos – son of Mihály Kabos and Eszter Fileki –, brother of Károlina Kabos (married to György Korda), was bought by the important local farmers Ferenc Biró and István Csiszér – the Biró family also came into possession of the household annexes of the former Fileki manor house. It is not known where Sándor Kabos and Polixenia Fileki lived; most likely, there were two houses in the village. However, it is known that Mihály Kabos and Eszter Fileki inhabited Sándor Fileki's old manor house.

The death of Mihály Kabos, in 1831, and the inexplicable disappearance of his son Ferenc in Vienna, in 1834, will produce great changes in the family structure, especially with regard to the issue of dividing the land assets. Following exchanges of property between brothers and a financial agreement, the Suceagu estate and the old Fileki manor house would remain, in the end, in the possession of Károlina Kabos, married to György Korda, in accordance with their mother's wish that Ferenc should continue his medical studies.<sup>34</sup> Later on, the Kabos brothers, Dániel and Mihály, alienated their lands.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ildikó Antal Szép intermediated the access to this house so that a link between the past and the present could be (re)established. Thus, the remains of the former Fileki Baroque manor, which was considered to be lost, could be brought back to the attention of scholars and researchers. The present owners have no knowledge about the past of this house. Further research on this topic is necessary, including archaeological investigations.

<sup>33</sup> Ildikó Antal Szép and Mária Bán, *Szucság hét évszázada* (Cluj-Napoca: Gloria, 2007), 215-220.

<sup>34</sup> The explanations are reconstituted based on the information recorded in the diary of Ferenc Kabos. See Ildikó Antal Szép, *Az elfeledett. A szucsági református kollégista, Kabós Ferenc naplója a reformkori Kolozsvárról* (Cluj-Napoca: Exit, 2017), 82-83 (Lotti is Károlina!), 91, 122. From these pages of the diary it transpires that, between 1825 and 1834, Károlina Kabos, as she missed her birthplaces and her parental home, she spent a lot of time in Suceagu (Szucság), yet György Korda, her husband, "on a whim" (p. 83), did not accept to leave Hida (Hídalmás) (for none of Ferenc's proposals). In both houses Károlina felt like

The only descendants of those who owned and used to live in this house are the ones belonging to Dr. György Versényi's branch. Nonetheless, practically, they had nothing to do with the history of the place.

Dr. György Versényi had several retrospective endeavours. Some were lyrical, as illustrated by the poems on which this study focuses on, while others are sporadic, more or less detailed, mentions, which still need to be uncovered. Of these, a significant insight into his family's private life is provided by a passage from a literary retrospective about the writer Lajos Bodor de Lécfalva (1813-1848). Bodor was a former landowner in Suceagu, who, although originated from a rich family, died in poverty. Thus, Dr. György Versényi describes<sup>36</sup> several vivid life scenes from Suceagu. In these chronicle-like recalls, he captures most of the family members belonging to the Kabos, Korda, and Kemény families, in settings as if detached from Jane Austen's novels, emanating a romantic atmosphere and evoking the charm specific to the provincial life of nobility, during the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among these, there is a

a guest, nowhere did she feel at home. The change will occur suddenly, in 1834, when an equitable solution of splitting the properties was found. Consequently, each sibling received their share, both in Suceagu and in the neighbouring villages. Hence, Károlina moved permanently in Suceagu, together with her husband, in her parental house, as György finally agreed to lease the property that was allotted to Ferenc in Nadășu (Kalotanádas, Nádos in the journal) and in Suceagu (the entire parental household, including the house, the farm animals, and the land). The other two Kabos brothers, Dániel and Mihály, would also lease Ferenc's other shares, thus, from the resulting money, Ferenc would pursue his studies in Vienna – "oh happy, dear future!" "my heart aches only for Liná. No. I shall not marry." (p. 122). In the end, the joy of the mother, that Ferenc would be able to build his future without having to make the sacrifice of staying in the countryside together with her ("goodbye city life," "I have to walk in my grandparents' footsteps," p. 91) and the joy of Károlina, that she would be able to settle in the parental home ("there is much trust between them," "their thoughts are alike," "[Lotti] has a positive influence on mother," p. 82; "the love of the daughter to her mother would be expressed without sacrifice," p. 83), were overshadowed by the inexplicable disappearance of Ferenc, during that same year [our translation for the journal excerpts].

<sup>35</sup> The sons of Dániel Kabos and Baroness Katalin Kemény died at an early age. Three daughters survived: Eszter (married to György Korda junior issuing a son named László, who died as a child), Wilhelmina (nicknamed Minka, married to Izidor Cserény), and Gizella (nicknamed Giza). Dániel Kabos retired in his old age in Suceagu (he died in 1881), however he alienated his part of the inheritance, which became the property of the Biró and Csiszér families. The other brother, Mihály Kabos, lived in Suceagu (he died in 1878) and practiced agriculture; he had four children from two marriages with women who were not of noble origin; he alienated his part of the inheritance which was bought by Benjámín Kelemen. Ferenc Kabos mysteriously disappeared without a trace in Vienna, in 1834 – he was presumed to have committed suicide, yet no evidence was ever found in this respect. See in full, Versényi G., "Egy érdekes eltűnés"; Berde, A Kolozs megyei Szucság, passim.

<sup>36</sup> György Versényi, "Bodor Lajos", *Erdélyi Múzeum*, vol. XX, no. VII (1894): pp. 479-487, 481-482.

particular moment related to the theatrical activity initiated by Ferenc Kabos (†1834). Thus, around 1830, with the consent of his mother, in a building made of stone, an annex of the main house, Ferenc Kabos improvised a proper theatre. It even had a stage, and the curtain together with the settings were painted by Bodor and Ferenc Török. “The small theatre-loving company” inaugurated the theatre, through a “special ceremony”, in which Anna (Nina) Korda, who was at that time just a little girl, 3-4 years old, dressed as a genius, had to recite the following prologue:

“Ime itten Tháliának Templomcskát emelünk”  
 (“here we shall raise a Temple for Thalia”, our translation)

Initially, the plan was that she would say her line while floating in the air; however, as this could not be technically achieved, Anna finally uttered the words while standing, with a memorable *lapsus linguae*:

“templommacskát emelünk...”  
 (“we shall raise a cat-church”, our translation – practically, in Hungarian, it is a funny combination of words, which resulted involuntarily, due to a pronunciation mistake: “templommacskát” instead of “Templomocskát”)

Within this “small company”, the roles were distributed between Károlina Kabos (the primadonna), Eszter Kemény (the naive), Dániel Kabós (the intriguer / the conspirator), Ferenc Kabós (the hero in love), Lajos Bodor (the father), Miklós Kabós and Ferenc Török (the comedians / the circus performers). However, as Károlina Kabos could not sing, Rózsi Korda (György’s sister), who sang beautifully and did not want to play, performed behind the scenes. In addition, the “company” had other “alternative” members – depending on the circumstances they were acquaintances, friends, neighbours – who performed various secondary roles.

In this context, Dr. György Versényi, within the same work, also makes written portraits of his maternal grandparents, György Korda and Károlina Kabos, which are reproduced in the following:<sup>37</sup>

“Korda György szép[,] zenei tehetséggel bíró[,] kedves, okos ember volt, de kevésbé vett részt a fiatalabbak mulatságaiban, bár a harminczas évek kezdetén levő férfi volt e tájban.”  
 (“György Korda was a handsome man, with musical talent, kind, smart, yet less involved in the entertainment of young people, even though he was in his thirties.” our translation).

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<sup>37</sup> Versényi G., “Bodor Lajos,” 481.

“Ám neje nemcsak nagyon eszes, szellemes, ritka műveltségű, ha nem eleven, társaság kedvelő nő volt, telve nemes lelkesedéssel.”

(“However, his wife was not only very intelligent, funny, highly erudite, yet also lively, loving good company, full of a noble enthusiasm.” our translation)

Their portraits, made by an anonymous Transylvanian artist, around 1840,<sup>38</sup> visually complete this overall perspective on the life of the family.<sup>39</sup>

This manor house, which has seen the history of so many generations of these four families and of which only fragments are preserved, although impossible to reconstitute from an architectural point of view, is, through the wealth of information and biographical data of those who had dwelled there, a true chronicle in stone of the way one would have lived in a manor house for over a century – more precisely between 1731 and 1867. During this period, this family home underwent at least three major transformations – one in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and one in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The on-site preserved sections, together with the family stories and the testimonies of those times, which indirectly depict it, make up an architectural context. This context, or how people dwelled, is superimposed, from a historical point of view, with the destiny of its inhabitants, evoking, at the same time, the glory, the material decay, and the disappearance of the name by extinction. Fate has made it so that, in a rather short period, when compared to the greater history, all the names of the notable proprietors – Fileki, Kabos, Korda, and Versényi – were forgotten, i.e. erased from the history of this house. Dr. György Versényi left this house as a teenager. Nonetheless, he carried with him the memory of his birthplace, which he always cherished throughout his life and work: the picturesque image of the village of the old days, the charm of the old house, and the graves of his ancestors are lost... Only his poems remain as evidence. They are the sole link between the remains of the stone table (Fig. 9), which stood in the manor’s former garden (it still sits next to the mutilated walls that are now empty of any meaning), and the tombstone of Sándor Fileki junior (Fig. 10).

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<sup>38</sup> Versényi A., *Elejtett példányok*, 179 [from the pdf; no page numbers – e-book].

<sup>39</sup> These portraits, along with other portraits, photographs, documents and relics of the past of the Versényi-Korda family belong to the collection of Anna Versényi, in Debrecen, Hungary, as they were safely preserved by her paternal grandfather. With her kind consent, these portraits are presented in this article.





**Fig. 1** Portrait of Dr. György Versényi, ca. 1900-1910, oil on canvas, original frame, author unknown. Currently in the collection of Dr. György Wersényi, Győr, Hungary.  
[The authors thank Dr. György Wersényi for his kindness in providing and allowing the reproduction of this photograph]



**Fig. 2** Portrait of Anna (Nina) Korda, ca. 1850, oil on canvas, author unknown. Currently in the collection of Mrs. Anna Versényi, Debrecen, Hungary.

[The authors thank Mrs. Anna Versényi for her kindness in providing and allowing the reproduction of this photograph]



**Fig. 3** Portrait of György Korda, ca. 1840, oil on canvas, original frame, author unknown. Currently in the collection of Mrs. Anna Versényi, Debrecen, Hungary. [The authors thank Mrs. Anna Versényi for her kindness in providing and allowing the reproduction of this photograph]



**Fig. 4** Portrait of Károlina Kabos, ca. 1840, oil on canvas, original frame, author unknown. Currently in the collection of Mrs. Anna Versényi, Debrecen, Hungary. [the authors thank Mrs. Anna Versényi for her kindness in providing and allowing the reproduction of this photograph]



**Fig. 5** Present view of Sándor Fileki's former manor house and estate in Suceagu at the bottom of the hill where the family graves were located.  
[The authors' archive, 2021]



**Fig. 6** Fragments of the precinct wall, including the Baroque gate, belonging to Sándor Fileki's former manor house in Suceagu. The last alterations are relatively recent.  
[The authors' archive, 2021]



**Fig. 7** Today's situation with what is left of the former Fileki manor house in Suceagu, later the residence of the Korda and Versényi families.  
[The authors' archive, 2021]



**Fig. 8** Details of the former Fileki manor house in Suceagu:  
a - reused Baroque frame, the current upper entrance to the cellar;  
b - one of the still preserved rooms of the cellar;  
c - door preserved in situ, dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, early 19<sup>th</sup> century;  
d - Baroque frame preserved in situ, the current lower entrance to the cellar.  
[The authors' archive, 2021]





**Fig. 9** The top of the decorative stone table that was placed in the garden of the former Fileki manor house, which Dr. György Versényi nostalgically mentions in the poem “Szülőházam”. [The authors’ archive, 2021]



**Fig. 10** The tombstone of Sándor Fileki junior (1735-1810, the great-great-grandfather of Dr. György Versényi) from the cemetery in Suceagu. The crypt of the Fileki family, which is mentioned by Dr. György Versényi in his poem “Füleki Sándor”, probably used to be in this place.  
[The authors’ archive, 2021]