

2 X ANNA KORDA - AN INTROSPECTIVE RADIOGRAPHY OF TWO HISTORICAL PAINTINGS. THE PORTRAITS OF THE LAST TWO WOMEN OF THEIR KIN

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Abstract The article is an in depth investigation, which brings face to face two almost unknown portraits belonging to the Transylvanian heritage. They represent unique traces, two instances as an introspective glimpse into the history of an aristocratic family that became extinct more than 100 years ago. The genealogy of the Korda family is quite intricate, thus, virtually infinite connections begin to unfold, bringing together people, places, stories, houses, objects which sometimes are surprisingly scattered in space and time. The research is contextualised within the broader issue of heritage assets in contemporary Romania.

Keywords The fate of art heritage, Transylvanian aristocracy, Transylvanian cultural heritage, historic Transylvanian attire & accessories, Transylvanian genealogy.

Aspects regarding the issue of heritage assets and works of art in Romania at the beginning of the 21st century

In the context of contemporary Romanian society, as a result of the turmoil that occurred in the somewhat recent history due to the change of political regime after World War II, the cultural losses caused by the nationalisation are still felt today, while the gaps that were thus created remain irreparable. Although the post-communist society “healed” relatively quickly, the lost or destroyed heritage assets, be they public or private, are often gone forever. In this

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context, the abusive or coerced takings of movable cultural assets belonging to private collections, which were then attributed to various institutions of the Romanian State, can be seen as “fortunate” cases as, after the anti-communist Revolution of 1989, with some luck, they could be identified and claimed by the rightful heirs.¹ There are few exceptions and, unfortunately, in Romania, even the museums were unable to save or preserve a relevant amount of assets belonging to the movable national cultural heritage, as was the case, for example, in other countries that used to be behind the Iron Curtain. In several such cases, following the nationalisation, even if significant losses were recorded, the requisition of private cultural assets led to the enrichment of the collections of state museums or even to the inauguration of new museums.

Consequently, in countries neighbouring Romania, such as Hungary, the Czech Republic or Poland, many of the former private residences of noble or aristocratic families became state museums, preserving in situ a significant percentage of the heritage assets inventoried at the time the state took over, while other assets ended up in museum collections. In other cases, the assets were transferred so that local “art and history” museums could be established. After the harm done by the “revolutionary” changes, which only added to the damage that had already been done during World War II, the state and local authorities began to restore and open to the public former castles, manor houses, and palaces, which were even advertised in tourist guides addressed (mainly) to Western travellers. In Romania this strategy was rather an exception and implied a quite intricate procedure focusing mainly on the enhancement of the assets and properties that used to belong to the Royal Household and the Royal Family. Thus, “the European Art” exhibition in the Peleş Castle from Sinaia was created (it was opened to the public between 1953-1975), as well as the exhibition of the Bran Castle (which was inaugurated in 1956).² After the abolishment of the Communist Regimes, in

¹ One such case is that of the visit undertaken by King Mihai I of Romania and Queen Anne, on the 9th of April, 2003, to the MediaPro Studios, the former Film Studios of Buftea (Studiourile Cinematografice din Buftea), when “The Mediapro studios returned, as an unexpected surprise, some objects that belonged to the Royal Household. These objects, stored as props in warehouses, were part of the Studios’ heritage, and were taken over by the new owner, Mediapro, when the studios were privatized in 1998. These items were: a painting depicting Queen Elisabeta II (sic!) as a child, six miniature wooden ships, the curtains from the Throne Hall (sic! actually there was only one piece that has been preserved, our comment), the death mask of Princess Maria.” See the press release “Regele Mihai și Regina Ana au vizitat Studiourile Mediapro,” *Cinemagia* (9 April 2003): <https://www.cinemagia.ro/stiri/regele-mihai-si-regina-ana-au-vizitat-studiourile-mediapro-779/> (accessed on 5 July 2023). These heritage items are currently on display in the Elisabeta Palace (Palatul Elisabeta) in Bucharest, which is the headquarters of Her Majesty’s Household Association and also one of the residences of Her Majesty Margareta, Custodian of the Crown of Romania.

² The Royal Estate of Sinaia was retroceded to King Mihai I of Romania in 2007; however, based on an agreement with the Royal Household, Peleş and Pelișor Castles continue to be open to the public, as the Peleş National Museum (Muzeului Național Peleş), a public cultural institution managed by the Romanian State. Bran Castle was retroceded to the heirs of Princess Ileana of Romania in 2006 and has been

countries in which properties were returned in kind, there were cases of heirs that received empty, vandalised or destroyed buildings, which were mutilated due to faulty administrations, or, on the contrary, well-maintained buildings, sometimes even together with a generous movable heritage (pieces of furniture, decorative works of art, books, various household items, etc.). Buildings that housed administrative institutions, museums or even hospitals were returned to their previous owners or their heirs.

Romania made no exception and adopted reparative measures (compensations) or reconstituted property rights, while the retrocession laws produced lengthy lawsuits, some of which continue even today.

At the same time, the issue of cultural assets, be they public (as a result of requisitions and nationalisations) or private heritage, remains in Romania a taboo subject. Recovering or even just reconstituting the history of art assets that disappeared during the years of Communism from private or even public collections becomes a real venture, not only for the legal heirs, but also for professional researchers. Such is the case of movable heritage assets – namely pieces of furniture – from the Arad County Museum (Complexul Muzeal Județean Arad), which belonged to the family of Baron Francisc Neuman and which were claimed by the rightful heirs and thus returned³ or the famous case of the almost twenty-year legal “war” fought by the heirs for the recovery of the “Dona” Collection, a former private collection that became part of the heritage of the National Art Museum of Romania (Muzeul Național de Artă al României), in several stages, between 1950 and 1980, as a result of donation documents made under pressure.⁴

On the one hand, there are heritage assets that simply disappeared from museum inventories and were never to be found. One such example is the case of the pieces of canvas painted in Rococo style by Mátyás Veress (1749-1809), dated 1771, and used as wallpaper inside the Haller Castle in Coplean, which no longer exist in the storage of the Cluj-Napoca Art

operating as a private museum since 2009. See Muzeul Național Peleş, “ISTORICUL CASTELULUI PELEȘ,” <https://peles.ro/istorice/istoricul-castelului-peles/> (accessed on 6 July 2023); Castelul Bran, “ISTORIC // 1211-2009,” <https://castelulbran.ro/istoric/> (accessed on 6 July 2023).

³ There have been several press articles regarding this retrocession. See Florin Tomuță, “Casa de la Arad a lui Ceausescu, vanduta cu 1,4 milioane euro,” *România Liberă* Transilvania Edition (2 November 2006): https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-presa_regionala_arhiva-1713698-casa-arad-lui-ceausescu-vanduta-1-4-milioane-euro.htm (accessed on 5 July 2023); Florin Tomuță, “Fiul baronului Neuman si-a recuperat mai multe imobile revendicate,” *România Liberă* (12 December 2005): <https://romanioliberal.ro/special/fiul-baronului-neuman-si-a-recuperat-mai-multe-imobile-revendicate-32103/> (accessed on 5 July 2023).

⁴ Cristian Lisandru, “Lupta pentru ‘comoara’ națională, picturi de Luchian, Petrașcu, Tonitza, Grigorescu. Avem decizia judecătorilor cu privire la faimoasa colecție ‘Dona’, evaluată la 50.000.000 € | EXCLUSIV,” *Gândul* (26 April 2021): <https://www.gandul.ro/dezvaluiri/mostenitorii-au-revendicat-o-comoara-nationala-avem-decizia-judecatorilor-cu-privire-la-faimoasa-colectie-dona-evaluata-la-50-000-000-e-exclusiv-19620350> (accessed on 5 July 2023).

Museum (Muzeul de Artă Cluj-Napoca).⁵ Another example is that of the problematic retrocession of doctor Ion Dumitrescu Popovici's art collection, which abusively entered the patrimony of the National Art Museum of Romania, in 1964.⁶

On the other hand, there are cases in which people with a sense of duty have saved various heritage items from destruction, due to pro bono donations or driven by their conscience, thanks to civic or professional devotion. Such an example is the case of Florin Gavrilescu, director of the former Cluj District Museum, who, in the 1960s, conserved two pieces of painted canvas from the Haller Castle in Coplean which were on the verge of total disappearance.⁷ Another example is the case of Vasile Novac, director of the Viticulture and Pomiculture Museum of Golești (Muzeul Viticulturii și Pomiculturii din Golești), who, in 1981, made sure that several heritage items related to the history of the monarchy, which were received by the museum in 1973, for a period of one year, remained permanently in Golești, so that they could be preserved. Among these was the Throne of the Kings of Romania from the Royal Palace in Bucharest,⁸ which was returned to the Throne Hall, on the 10th of May, 2021, the Romanian Monarchy Day. In other instances, museums have received donations for which they have offered financial rewards, however these were modest sums. Nonetheless they were accepted by the donors for pieces with special cultural value. Such is the case of the numerous acquisitions that Romanian state museums have made after 1950 and up until today, as is the example of one of the heritage items which this research focuses on. At the same time, there were also people who, despite the vicissitudes of history, strove to preserve cultural assets, regardless of their connection to their own family history, thus founding collections that either ended up in the public patrimony or were preserved, according to possibilities, in private patrimony in the country or abroad. For the first instance, the most eloquent example is the creation of the Museum of Art Collections (Muzeul Colecțiilor de Artă) in Bucharest, as a branch of the National Art Museum of Romania. The museum was inaugurated in 1978, as a result of the devastating earthquake that occurred on the 4th of March, 1977, by transferring

⁵ Dan-Ionuț Julean and Dana Julean, *Ascensiunea și decăderea domeniului Haller din Coplean. Destinul unei familii, destinul unui castel / The Rise and Fall of the Haller Estate in Coplean. The Destiny of a Family, the Destiny of a Castle* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2019), 125-128, see also note 75.

⁶ RI online, "Bătălie pe colecția de artă a medicului Dumitrescu Popovici," *România Liberă* (21 June 2007): <https://romanalibera.ro/special/batalie-pe-colectia-de-arta-a-medicului-dumitrescu-popovici-98861/> (accessed on 5 July 2023).

⁷ Julean and Julean, *Ascensiunea și decăderea domeniului Haller din Coplean / The Rise and Fall of the Haller Estate in Coplean*, 128, note 75.

⁸ Denis Grigorescu, "FOTO Istoria Tronului regilor României, 'ascuns' de zeci de ani într-un muzeu din Argeș și evaluat de comuniști la 40 de dolari," *Adevărul* (24 April 2018): https://adevarul.ro/locale/pitesti/foto-istoria-tronului-regilor-romaniei-ascuns-zeci-ani-intr-un-muzeu-arges-evaluat-comunistii-40-dolari-1_5add772edf52022f7521eeec/index.html (accessed on 6 July 2023).

over 30 private collections from their original locations.⁹ For the other instance, a conclusive case could be the very discussion about the second item that this research focuses on, as well.

Anna Korda: one name, two destinies

Consequently, this paper presents an uncommon instance: two works of art belonging to the Transylvanian cultural heritage, lost in the maelstrom of events that marked the 20th century, are de facto reunited as a family story, sharing a name which defines and, at the same time, identifies them, thus establishing their provenance and connection, while restoring their history, even though they are located in different countries, hundreds of kilometres apart. “Anna Korda de Borosjenő” is the name of two oil paintings, with anonymous authors, created about fifty years apart, representing the portraits of two women bearing the same name – two destinies which never intersected, because, when the first one was dying, the second one was not yet born. However, paradoxically, they shared not only the same patronymic name and the same first name, but also the same fate, as they were the last women of their kin and, at the same time, the last descendants of their families: the first one was Countess Anna Korda de Borosjenő (ca. 1750-1820) daughter of Count György Korda de Borosjenő (1721-1786) and the wife of Count László Toldalagi de Nagyerse (1748-1805[6?]), while the second was Anna Korda de Borosjenő (1828-1894) daughter of the nobleman György Korda de Borosjenő (1800-1853) and the wife of Károly Versényi (1826-1887) – a more distant niece of the former. To be more precise, the grandfather of the second Anna Korda, Zsigmond (deceased 1815, married to Rákhel Murányi), was a third cousin of Countess Anna Korda. Practically, in 1894, with the death of Anna Korda de Borosjenő, the wife of Károly Versényi, the Korda name became extinct.¹⁰

The portrait of Countess Anna Korda de Borosjenő

The painting (fig. 2) represents the countess as the consort of Count László Toldalagi (fig. 1), as it is one of the pair portraits commissioned to be hanged in the portrait gallery of the Reformed College in Odorheiu Secuiesc, where Count Toldalagi was Chief Curator from 1800 until his death, in 1805(!).¹¹

⁹ Muzeul Național de Artă al României, “Muzeul Colecțiilor de Artă,” <https://www.mnar.arts.ro/muzeul-colectiilor-de-arta> (accessed on 5 July 2023).

¹⁰ The patronymic name “Korda de Borosjenő” reveals a family story with rich genealogical connections, spanning over three to four centuries, and which became extinct at the end of the 19th century. Dan-Ionuț Julean and Dana Julean, *Recompunând fragmente: o (micro)istorie a familiei Korda de Borosjenő în context / Recomposing Fragments: a (micro)history of the Korda de Borosjenő family in context* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2022). See in detail the genealogy of the Korda family, 205.

¹¹ Lajos Kelemen, “A kolozsvári gróf Toldalagi- és Korda-ház,” *Művészeti Szalon*, No. 1 / 5 (1927): 5-12; 7.

The two portraits (fig. 1 and fig. 2) are now in the collection of the Haáz Rezső Museum (Muzeul Haáz Rezső) in Odorheiu Secuiesc, displayed in the Permanent Gallery (the Art Gallery). The portraits entered the Museum's patrimony as a private donation, in 1963.¹²

Given the analysis of the composition, the plasticity of the identical frames (which could be the original ones), the biographical information regarding the married life of the two spouses, and the analogies with other contemporary portraits depicting aristocrats from Transylvania, the two paintings can be placed towards the end of the 18th century, respectively the beginning of the 19th century (to be more precise, in the interval between 1786 and 1805[6]).

Since neither of the two portraits excels in craftsmanship, although they render with finesse and a good sense of detail the physical features of the two spouses, they could be attributed to a native or a traveling painter, such as the ones who used to paint portraits on request, moving from one estate to another, from one castle to another. Moreover, it is known that, in the Baroque era, having one's portrait painted was very popular among the Transylvanian aristocracy, as, following the footsteps of the Western aristocracy, there was an increasing interest in establishing family portrait galleries, especially in the reception rooms of rural residences.¹³ Their obvious role was to preserve a physical image for posterity, but they were also a statement, reflecting the rank and social status. As can be seen in late Baroque Austrian portraiture, artists emphasised posture, physical appearance, and identity features of faces.¹⁴

Thus, having too little information on the origin of Toldalagi-Korda couple's portraits, two hypotheses can be formulated based on the details relating to their personal biography and family history: the first, and the most logical one, would be that they were commissioned especially to be displayed in the portrait gallery of the Reformed College in Odorheiu Secuiesc. The second would be that these portraits were displayed in the Toldalagi Castle in Corunca, where the two spouses had lived, then moved to the Reformed College either after the death of Count László Toldalagi, or his consort's. As they had no direct heirs, this would have been a means of preserving their memory.

¹² Portrait of Count László Toldalagi, second half of the 18th century, oil on canvas, dimensions 74x100 cm, original frame, author unknown. Currently in the collection of the Haáz Rezső Museum, Odorheiu Secuiesc, inventory no. 3138/1. Portrait of Countess Anna Korda, second half of the 18th century, oil on canvas, dimensions 74x100 cm, original frame, author unknown. Currently in the collection of the Haáz Rezső Museum, Odorheiu Secuiesc, inventory no. 3138/2.

¹³ These aspects are reflected by a series of historical photographs which depict the atmosphere of upper class domestic interiors, as well as other documents and inventories preserved by the State Archives or other public institutions. Two such cases, especially well visually documented, are the Bánffy Castle from Bontida and the Pekry-Radáč Castle from Ozd. Another trustworthy source acknowledging this fact is József Biró's colourful detailed notes and commentaries in *Erdélyi kastélyok*, a masterpiece on the matter of Transylvanian Castles. See in full József Biró, *Erdélyi kastélyok* (Budapest: Singer és Wolfner, 1943), *passim*.

¹⁴ Nicolae Sabău, *Metamorfoze ale barocului transilvan: vol. 2 Pictura* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2005), 349-350 *et passim* 332, 346-352.

However, thanks to József Biró's work, *Erdélyi kastélyok*, in which the portrait of László Toldalagi is reproduced,¹⁵ it is certain that at the beginning of the 20th century the portraits were at Odorheiu Secuiesc, from where they went missing, most likely due to the context of the political changes which took place after World War II. They appeared once again, still in Odorheiu Secuiesc, when were donated to the museum in 1963.

The oil canvases, each measuring 74x100 cm, depict the three-quarter portraits of the two spouses, almost life-size, in solemn poses. They are dressed in *díszmagyar* court attire, typical for the Hungarian nobility during the second half of the 18th century, reflecting a dignity specific to their social rank. The portrait of Count Toldalagi is completely devoid of embellishments (the only items displayed being a ceremonial sword and a minimum of accessories), while that of Countess Korda reveals several prop items. However, both figures are painted against a dark background, in a cone of ambient light, which not only highlights the expressiveness of the face, but also gives the two spouses a certain warmth, that makes them appear full of life. Both paintings, in the upper left corner, display the extended version of each one's personal coat of arms. Under these a text presents their rank, name, and position, as follows:

"N.Ertsei Grof Toldalagi László
A Ts.K. Felség Arany Kutsos Hive,
a Sz.Udvarhelyi Ref. Collegium, és a
Küküllő-vári Tractus Inspector Fő
Curátora."

"Boros-Jenői Grof Korda Anna
N.Ertsei Grof Toldalagi Lász-
ló Hitvesse."

Correlating all these clues, and also taking into account the text accompanying the portrait of Count Toldalagi, one can place the two canvases, more accurately, between the years 1800 and 1805, even though the technique and the style of the portraits would be rather more characteristic of the second half of the 18th century. Thus, another hypothesis can be put forward, namely that these portraits could actually be early 19th century copies of older canvases belonging to the family, from the castle in Corunca. On the other hand, there would be a clear justification for the emphasis placed on this "obsolete" preciousness of the representation, which stems from exhibiting the superiority of the caste, the resignation in the absence of direct heirs translated into a calmness of reason specific of the age they had at that time, the dignity of their rank, and status within the Transylvanian aristocracy.

In accordance with the warm light of each portrait, the frames were made of a hard wood, with slightly profiled mouldings with gilded edges and the field left plain, each ending up

¹⁵ Biró, *Erdélyi kastélyok*, fig. 93/LX, see notes on images [Jegyzetek a képekhez].

into a cartouche-like shape topped by raised corner block rosettes. It is a restrained composition, with details specific to the Zopf style¹⁶. Although the frames show signs of wear and appear to be original, there is, however, a slight possibility that they could have been replaced towards the end of the 19th century, as the canvases show signs of damage along their outlines.

On each of the two frames a brass plate was mounted, later on, on the lower mouldings, engraved with the identity of the portrayed character. These were nailed onto the frame using small round-headed nails, placed in the corners. Based on the type of the fonts and the manner in which they were etched, they appear to date from the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century.

Consequently, the portrait of Countess Anna Korda is one of maturity, full of solemnity. The painting depicts a woman with a serene gaze (symbolising her intelligence and education), calm attitude (reflecting upon her reason, balance, life experience), yet penetrating expression (evoking her social as well as spiritual superiority). The gala gown obviously contributes to this overall image. It is made of fine brocades, of a lead grey colour, that highlights the gracefully applied golden threaded embroidery and, at the same time, the fine lace that decorates the upper part of the bodice and the puffy, strongly flared, three quarter sleeves, which are accessorised with large scarlet silk bows. At the base of the tight bodice, the waist is highlighted by the rich folds of the apron made of lace or organza, specific to the *díszmagyar* costume.¹⁷ The Countess appears to be wearing a discreet bonnet on top of her

¹⁶ It is the Austrian version of the Louis XVI style, during the reign of Joseph II.

¹⁷ For a better understanding of the *díszmagyar* court dress, typical of the Hungarian aristocrats and nobles during the second half of the 18th century, see, as a reference, two museum exhibits, which show obvious similarities with the costume depicted in the portrait of Countess Anna Korda:

- a dress from the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts [Iparművészeti Múzeum] in Budapest, dating from the mid-18th century – “Női ruha - szoknya és vallfűző / Dress - skirt and bodice”, in Textile and Costume Collection, Inv. No. 14954.a-b, Iparművészeti Múzeum / Museum of Applied Arts Budapest, https://collections.imm.hu/gyujtemeny/noi-ruha-szoknya-es-vallfuzo/1432?_gl=1*619wdh*_ga*NDQyNTQ3NDEzLjE2NTk4Nzc5NjQ*_ga_D0224DRTWT*MTY2MDIyOTc2OS41LjEuMTY2MDIzMDA5MS4w (accessed on 11 July 2023) and Emőke László, *Historic Hungarian Costume From Budapest* [Catalogue of the exhibition held, 2nd June to 11th August, 1979, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester] (Manchester, England: Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, 1979), see front cover and Cat. No. 36 [no page number].
- a dress of Hungarian cut, worn by a woman belonging to the Majthényi family, from the collections of the Hungarian National Museum [Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum] in Budapest, dating from the middle of the 18th century – Tibor Kovács, *A Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum történeti kiállításának vezetője 3. - A török háborúk végétől a Millenniumig XVIII-XIX. század* (Budapest: Helikon, 2001), 29, 31, fig. 18 / 31 [Női díszruha a Majthényi család tulajdonából, XVIII. század közepe] and Mária Undi, “Üri- és népviselet a barokk korban” in *Barokk és felvilágosodás*, Vol. IV of *Magyar művelődéstörténet*, ed. Sándor Domanovszky (Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1939–1942), fig. entitled “Magyaros szabású női ruha. A Majthényi-család egyik tagja viselte a XVIII. század közepén. (Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum.)” [no page number], digitized

head, also specific to the *díszmagyar* costume, while her hairstyle is in accordance with the Austrian fashion of the second half of the 18th century (most likely a wig) and is styled with rather rigid curls, of a whitish-grey shade, strongly tight together. Precious pieces of jewellery complete the elegant outfit: a five-strand white pearl parure consisting of a choker, bracelets for both arms, and a bodice necklace. Further on, a filigree ring decorates the little finger of the left hand, and a large gold brooch is applied to the upper left part of the bodice (it is decorated with pearls and semi-precious stones mounted in a delicate composition with volutes, while, the lower rim, is underlined by three pendants).

A large ivory fan with golden vegetal motif decorations catches the eye; a rather feminine accessory which the Countess holds in her slightly flexed right hand.

In addition, there is a particularly special item hanging from a golden chain on the left side of the waist. It seems to be a large golden disk-like accessory, abundantly decorated, which, unfortunately, is partially concealed.

The props are minimal. The countess gracefully rests her left hand, displaying her beautiful fingers, on a heavily puffed up cushion, in scarlet velvet, with rich trimmings (consisting of gold embroidery and tassels, arranged around its edges and, respectively, in the corners), which is placed on what seems to be the grey-green painted table top of a late Baroque table. It is a hue in accordance with the ambience created by the dimly perceived background drapery.

Considering the late marriage to Count László Toldalagi,¹⁸ as well as the biographical details of the two spouses, one can better understand the serious, yet proud posture, emanating emphasis characteristic of a woman in her fifties. Moreover, she would remain, until her death, approximately twenty years later, the last living representative of the family into which she had been born and whose glory she had lived, practically, to its dusk, throughout her lifespan. Consequently, this could be the motivation behind this conventional representation, specific to the late Baroque period and to the fashion of the second half of the 18th century: the Toldalagi-Korda couple belonged to a world that was coming to an end; theirs was a marriage made out of love, assumed to remain without descendants and which proved to be *finis lineae* for both families.¹⁹ Thus, the fact that the period when the portrait was

version, Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár, <https://mek.oszk.hu/09100/09175/html/66.html> (accessed on 11 July 2023).

¹⁸ Anna Korda married Count László Toldalagi after her divorce in 1785 from Baron Elek Bánffy de Losoncz. Julean and Julean, *Recompunând fragmente / Recomposing Fragments*, 57-58.

¹⁹ With Count László Toldalagi, the branch of the family of László Toldalagi, his father (deceased 1779), became extinct. This branch was founded by his grandfather Mihály (deceased 1746; the one who received the countship in 1744), who owned the property in Corunca, as early as the 17th century, when the first castle was built. Thus, this possession of the Toldalagi family was passed on to the descendants of another son of Mihály, Ferenc; during this time, the castle in Corunca will receive its Neoclassical appearance, preserved until today and its extensive park that became famous in the era, of which unfortunately nothing survived. The Toldalagi family lived in Corunca until the nationalization. For the

painted is rather precise also brings a psychological clarification, as Countess Korda was aware, at the time that the painting was being made, that she, along with her sisters, who were still alive at that time, were the last ones in their genealogical line. Their only grandson, the child Count György Korda, had died in agony at only 13 years old, in 1795, leaving the family in mourning forever – the disappearance of this boy, as the only hope of procreation, meant, symbolically, a mourning for the entire Transylvanian aristocracy.²⁰

Widowed, belonging to the “old world”, the countess was nevertheless a lively character, in touch with everything that was going on, although she chose to live quite isolated until her death:

“The entire Consilium were invited to dinner by Countess László Toldalaghy, née Baroness Anna Korda, and I went along as well. The widowed, elderly, fragile Countess likes to entertain people, but she never honours them with her presence. On this occasion, two gentlemen, Secretaries of the Government, [Mr.] Gyárfás and [Mr.] Sebes, would feast here with many young people, as the Countess was very gracious to anybody, even to those coming on their own initiative, and she would listen to their conversations while she was having her meal in an adjacent room. The two gentlemen have collected immense knowledge in the fields of local and world history and, together with the loquacious Counsellor, they have made my time there instructive and diverting.”²¹

Being of a pragmatic, determined nature, Anna Korda continued on her own the work that she had started alongside her much-beloved husband, supporting financially the completion of the palace in Cluj – a building she chose not to live in during her widowhood. This palace would mark an important turning point in the history of architecture in Cluj and Transylvania, as stylistically it was designed in an unusual architectural language, marking the

genealogy of the Toldalagi family see also Iván Nagy, *Magyarország családai: czimerekkel és nemzékrendi táblákkal*, Vol. 11 (Budapest: Ráth Mór, 1865), s.v. “Tholdalagi család (Nagy-Ercsei gróf és n.-iklódi +)”; Béla Kempelen, *Magyar Nemes Családok*, Vol. 10 (Budapest: Grill Károly Könyvkiadóvállalata, 1931), s.v. “Toldalagi (nagyercsei), gróf.”

²⁰ Julean and Julean, *Recompunând fragmente / Recomposing Fragments*, 42, 46, 49; Anna Keszeg, “Betsesbb értz az arany rozsdá-fészek vasnál: A rendiség retorikája Gyöngyössi János Korda György felett mondott halottbúcsúztatójában,” *Sic Itur Ad Astra*, No. 59 (2009): 99-116, 106.

²¹ “A consiliárius egész házával gróf Toldalaghy Lászlóné szül. báró Korda Anna asszonyhoz vala ebédre meghíva s engem magával vitt. Az Özvegy, éltés, beteges grófné szeret vendéglenni, de maga vendégeihez soha ki nem jó. Ekkor Gyárfás és Sebes kormányiszéki titoknak urak ettek itt, sok ifjakkal; mert a grófné mindent szívesen fogad, aki önkényt jó s a beszélgetést a szomszéd szobában éve hallgatja. A két secretárius urak nagy ismereteket gyűjtöttek a világ és a hon történeteiben s a beszélni tudó s beszélni szerető consiliáriussal oktatóvá s mulattatóvá tevék óráimat,” Ferenc Kazinczy, “XXIII. LEVÉL” in *Erdélyi levelek. I-II*, ed. György Kristóf (series Erdélyi ritkaságok, No. 16-17) (Kolozsvár [Cluj]: Minerva, 1944), Vol. II, 99-106, 104.

transition from late Baroque to Neoclassicism.²² The Toldalagi-Korda Palace bears, up to this day, the commitment of the two spouses, in the form of two commemorative stone plaques, that are inserted in the wall of the main façade, above the entrance portal. In addition, in memory of her husband, as well as in memory of her own family, especially of her father, the Countess carried out charity work for the Reformed communities in Transylvania by donating money and objects for church use, providing financial support for the construction of churches and parish houses, subsidising the salaries of Reformed priests, initiating restoration works or furnishings (with new pulpits) of some older churches. To put it differently, when Anna Korda's life, the last Korda Countess, came to an end, around 1820, it also meant the end of the glory of the branch of counts of the Korda family. Moreover, fate made it so that her portrait fulfilled its purpose, as, regardless of the vicissitudes of history, it remained both the only preserved family portrait, and one of the few physical traces left behind that still evokes the almost ephemeral history of this great family.

The portrait of Noblewoman Anna Korda de Borosjenő

The painting (fig. 5) represents the young Anna Korda (nicknamed Nina by the family), a descendant of the lower nobility branch of the Korda de Borosjenő family, who owned estates in the Lands of Cluj and Sălaj. This painting is one of the family portraits that were displayed in the manor house in Suceagu, and preserved to this day, together with her parents', György Korda (1800-1853, fig. 3) and Károlina Kabos (1805-1875, fig. 4), and her brother's, György Korda (1830-1865, fig. 6). These paintings representing members of the Korda family and others of the Versényi family, together with various decorative objects, pieces of furniture, and personal belongings were then moved to Cluj, to the home of Dr. György Versényi (1852-1918).²³ Further on, after World War I, a part of these valuables (personal objects, paintings, art objects, pieces of furniture, documents, letters, photographs, books, etc.), left Cluj, with the family of György Versényi (1887-1956), namely with one of Dr. György Versényi's sons, who moved to Hungary. Currently, they are to be found in Debrecen, in the collection of Mrs. Anna Versényi, the great-great-granddaughter of Dr. György Versényi.²⁴

²² Kelemen, "A kolozsvári gróf Toldalagi- és Korda-ház"; Lajos Kelemen, "A Toldalagi-Korda palota," in Vol. II of *Művészettörténeti tanulmányok* (Bucharest: Kriterion, 1982), 80-90; Mircea Țoca, *Clujul baroc* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1983), 85-90; József Biró, "Két kolozsvári főúri barokk palota," *Archaeológiai Értesítő*, No. XLVII (1934, the new series): 115-132; Dan-Ionuț Julean, "Mutilarea palatului Toldalagi-Korda din Cluj-Napoca (In memoria, pro memoria, nobilis familiae Korda de Borosjenő)" [The Disfigurement of the Toldalagi-Korda Palace from Cluj-Napoca], *LogiA*, No. 11 (2009): 27-34.

²³ Dan-Ionuț Julean and Dana Julean, "Dr. György Versényi: Discovering the Story Behind Three of His Poems," *Philobiblon. Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2 (2022): 235-260.

²⁴ The authors thank Anna Versényi, who had the kindness to allow us to consult them and to provide us with photos of them and the right to reproduce these. Some of these private heritage items were made public by their owner, as illustrations, part of a memoir and family chronicle book, written in a quite

Unfortunately, the successive moves that the painting went through led to the damage of the canvas as well as to the loss of the original frame. Nonetheless, it represents a unique item, belonging to private patrimony, as it evokes physiognomic details and visually completes the biography of a woman with a remarkable personality. Her life can be described as ordinary for a representative of the lower nobility and bourgeois society of the 19th century, having grown up in a cultured, romantic environment. During the second half of her life, she came to experience the decline and financial decay of her paternal family, after the death of her older brother, György, at only 35 years old.

Following the custom of those times, the Korda-Kabos manor house from Suceagu had a small gallery of family portraits.²⁵ While the pair portraits of the parents (fig. 3 and fig. 4), typical of the Biedermeier era, were made in a profoundly mannerist technique, around 1840, the portrait representing Anna (Nina) Korda (fig. 5), painted around 1850, renders a much more evolved delicacy of details. At the same time, the painting representing the young György Korda wearing an officer's uniform (fig. 6), made ca. 1850-1857, is executed in a naïve manner. Due to the variety of techniques employed for these paintings, the canvases can be attributed to native or traveling painters, who worked on request, mirroring the tradition established in aristocratic residences. This fact could also be supported by a family story according to which the portrait of Anna (Nina) Korda was made by an Italian painter.²⁶

The painting is a clear example of the portraits specific to Transylvania, dating from the mid-19th century, rendered in a provincial manner that detaches itself from the skill of the great Western masters, trying, nonetheless, to reach the atmosphere of the works created around Miklós Barabás.²⁷ Thus, the portrait, although lacking in stylistic refinement, depicts with warmth and finesse the harmony of the genetically inherited physiognomic features. In this regard, one can only note the features Anna (Nina) Korda and both of her parents have in common, despite the fact that the portraits were made by different painters, at distant moments in time.

The oil painting, measuring 80x100 cm, presents the almost life-size three-quarter portrait of a young woman around the age of 20, in a solemn pose, elegantly clothed, in the typical Western fashion from the mid-19th century. From a compositional point of view, the focus lays on the posture, while technically the focus is on the physiognomic identity of the character. The silhouette is outlined against a dark draped background, supported by minimal props: Anna (Nina) Korda's right hand rests on a rectangular-topped table covered by a light-coloured embroidered tablecloth with a frilled border. She is depicted sitting on a chair whose back, typical of the Biedermeier style, is partially visible in the background.

unique manner and which was published relatively recent. See in full, Anna Versényi, *Elejtett példányok*, e-book (Budapest: Ad Librum; Könyv Guru, 2018).

²⁵ Julean and Julean, "Dr. György Versényi," 249-250.

²⁶ A fact evoked by Anna Versényi. Anna Versényi, e-mail to authors, 26 August 2022.

²⁷ Edith Hoffmann, *Barabás Miklós* (Budapest: Pantheon Irodalmi Intézet R.-T., 1923); Júlia Szabó, *Markó, Barabás, Munkácsy (Az én múzeumom)* (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Alap Kiadóvállalata, 1965).

The light brings out her figure, the main focus of the composition, Anna (Nina) Korda's face, appears as expressive, full of life and candour. It is peculiar that her left hand's fingers do not appear in the portrait. This could be explained either by a compositional clumsiness, or by a possible later alteration of the original dimensions of the canvas – which is nonetheless unlikely. Overall, the painting's state of preservation is good, although the canvas itself presents significant damage as a result of the vicissitudes of history and the manner of transportation.

The painting depicts Anna (Nina) Korda in a relaxed posture, dressed in a precious ivory dress. The cut of her dress highlights the waist, further accentuated by the elegant folds on the lower part of the dress. The top of the richly embroidered bodice is covered with ruffles, revealing the shoulders that remain unveiled, while the arms are partly covered by tight sleeves. The hairstyle, specific to that period, with the hair combed smoothly with a centre parting, collected at the back of the head, covering her ears, then probably fastened with hairpins, compliments the round face. This hairstyle also highlights the rather discreet pendant earrings.

The only accessories used in the painting are the pair of earrings, a black silk and organza neckerchief, knotted elegantly around the neck in the form of a large bow that hangs down to the base of the bodice. This complements the outfit, while from a compositional point of view, the play of contrasts directs the attention to the main focal point: Anna (Nina) Korda's face and hands.

Regarding the earrings present in this painting, Anna Versényi reports a family story stating that these jewels had been sold for financial support during the Revolution of 1848/1849.²⁸ Should this story be true, the painting may be dated prior to the year 1848. On the other hand, analysing the sober outfit, the black neckerchief could be a symbol of her mourning for her younger brothers, László and Dezső, both deceased in 1849 during the Revolution.²⁹ Consequently, the painting could be dated around 1850. A later date is unlikely, given that the portrait was hanged in her parental home, and that Anna (Nina) Korda married Károly Wersényi³⁰ in 1851.

The detached gaze and the serenity of the face, displaying a retained smile, evoke her erudition and social status, the prestige given by the noble origin of her centuries-old family. Hence, the daughter of Dr. György Versynyi, Klára, recorded in the work she dedicated to her father's life and oeuvre that "Anna Korda was a noble lady. She was delighted to study

²⁸ A fact recounted by Anna Versényi. Anna Versényi, e-mail to authors, 26 August 2022.

²⁹ Julean and Julean, *Recompunând fragmente / Recomposing Fragments*, 146; Versényi A., *Elejtett példányok*, 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]; Ildikó Antalné Szép, *Szucság szülöttje, Versényi György költő, néprajzkutató* (Cluj-Napoca: Művelődés, 2022), 16, 19-20.

³⁰ The natural son of Baron Miklós Wesselényi de Hadad Jnr. (1796-1850). Later on, the name was changed into Versényi, due to personal reasons. Julean and Julean, *Recompunând fragmente / Recomposing Fragments*, 148-157.

historical works. Along with all the other members of the family she was enthusiastic about progressive theories.”³¹ Following the same frame of mind, Dezső Felszeghy wrote “[...] The outstandingly well-educated Anna Korda bore poetical skills as well.”³²

Decades later, before she became a widow in 1887, Anna (Nina) Korda, after witnessing the death of her only surviving brother, György, looked powerless at the premature disappearance of his only son, László (1864-1878), the last male offspring of the whole family. Thus, most likely aware of this, she remained the last descendant of the Korda de Borosjenő family to be alive; through her, the family’s only two lines ceased to exist.

In the end

These two portraits, as parts of the scarce and widely scattered Transylvanian cultural mosaic, are, beyond their intrinsic artistic value, sensitive traces that recompose the image of individuals, families and eras that are intertwined under a common sign: the lineage, the perpetuation and the preservation of values, continuity, and inheritance. However, fate made it so that out of the entire history and legacy of the Korda de Borosjenő family, which died out completely, these two portraits survived. They represent two women with the same first name, who ended up in the same situations: to be the last representative in a centuries-old genealogy. During their lives, both became aware of this and assumed their role as such. On the one hand, Countess Anna Korda, through her occupations and the way she chose to live the second part of her life, tried to make sure that the name of the Counts Korda, even if it would disappear forever, it would actually remain imprinted for posterity, according to the rank and social status of this branch of the family. On the other hand, Anna (Nina) Korda, although she lived an absolutely ordinary life, specific to families belonging to the lower nobility, and died in anonymity, with discretion, her sons, bearing the name Versényi, made sure that on the obituary, the noble origin and her maiden name were mentioned. This was a last reverence for the history of the other branch of the Korda de Borosjenő family.

³¹ “Korda Anna előkelő nő volt. Nagy gyönyörűséggel tanulmányozta a történelmi műveket. Az ő családja is szívvel-lélekkel a szabad eszmék szolgálatában állott,” Klára Versényi, “Dr. Versényi György élete és munkássága” (dissertation, University of Budapest, 1921) *apud* Antalné Szép, *Szucság szülöttje, Versényi György*, 34.

³² “[...] Korda Anna; a kiválóan művelt nő, költői hajlamokkal bírt,” Dezső Felszeghy, “Versényi György,” *Erdélyi Lapok: Az Erdélyi Irodalmi Társaság Folyóirata*, Year IV, No. 15 (1911, August 1): 445-447, 445.

Images



Fig. 1 Portrait of Count László Toldalagi, second half of the 18th century, oil on canvas, (probably) original frame, author unknown. The collection of the Haáz Rezső Museum, Odorheiu Secuiesc, inventory no. 3138/1.

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Fig. 2 Portrait of Countess Anna Korda, second half of the 18th century, oil on canvas, (probably) original frame, author unknown. The collection of the Haáz Rezső Museum, Odorheiu Secuiesc, inventory no. 3138/2.

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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.

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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.

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Fig. 5 Portrait of Anna (Nina) Korda, ca. 1850, oil on canvas, without frame, author unknown. Currently in the collection of Mrs. Anna Versényi, Debrecen, Hungary.

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Fig. 6 Portrait of György Korda, ca. 1850-1857, oil on canvas, original frame, author unknown. Currently in the collection of Mrs. Anna Versényi, Debrecen, Hungary.

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