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**The spirit of the transilvanian fortified churches...**  
*The people have left, their buildings remain*

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**Abstract.** The fortified churches of the 'Transilvanian Saxons' in Romania are unique due to their typological variety, their number and due to their historical importance. After centuries of a changeful history, almost all of the saxons left Romania to Germany after the fall of Ceaucescu's regime to find a new home in the land where they came from 850 years ago. 16 years after this exodus the fortified churches, being not maintained are decaying more and more. The new inhabitants of the former saxon villages have their own churches and do not care for the churches of other confessions. But not only the churches are threatened, as also the facades of the peasants houses are being changed following the ideals of their new owners.

**Demografical changes**

The loss of cultural built heritage in many cases is caused by natural disasters as earthquake, fire, flood etc. Even worse than unexpected damage caused by nature is damage caused by humans destroying the heritage of other humans. After a natural disaster as well as in wars, the loss to the buildings uses to be far bigger than the loss of lives. In many times, it can be said: the buildings are lost, the people remain. But there are some incidents, due to which people are or feel forced to leave their intact homes in regard to go to other places, which they consider to be better ones. In these cases, we may say: the people left, the buildings remain. One example we can find in Transilvania, where some 200,000 so-called 'transilvanian saxons' have left Romania after the fall of Ceaucescu's regime.

"The colonization of Transylvania by Germans was begun by King Géza II of Hungary (1141–1162). For decades, the main task of

the German settlers was to defend the southeastern border of the Kingdom of Hungary. The colonization continued until the end of the 13th century. Although the colonists came mostly from the western Holy Roman Empire and generally spoke Franconian dialects, they were collectively known as Saxons because of Germans working for the Hungarian chancellery. For much of their history, these 'Saxons' held a privileged status with the Hungarians and Szeklers of Transylvania.” (Wikipedia)

Being constantly threatened by ottoman invasions and mercenaries of different origin for over 300 years, the saxons started to strengthen their stone churches. As a result, far over 200 fortified churches emerged in a relative small area. Rich in typology and showing valuable treasures as altars, painted furniture and stonework inside, the fortified churches of the Saxons are today considered as a unique cultural heritage. The old town of Sighisoara (Schäßburg) and 5 of the most representing fortified churches have been disclaimed Unesco world heritage in 1996.



*Figure 1.* The fortified church of Viscri (german Deutschweißkirch)

Having survived many threats over hundred of years in the past, the saxons in the 20th century suffered from reprisals under

Ceausescu and from the bad economic situation in the 1980s. As a result, the majority of the Germans living in Romania left to Germany as soon as they could after the communist regime of Ceausescu came to its end, hoping to live in better conditions.

The people left over night, leaving back their intact houses. The evangelical priests, who could have kept back the people from going, were often among the first closing the door behind themselves. Today, the most of the former saxons buildings are owned or lived in by romanians, hungarians and gipsies.



*Figure 2.* Intact saxon houses in Biertan (Birtäl), protected as world heritage

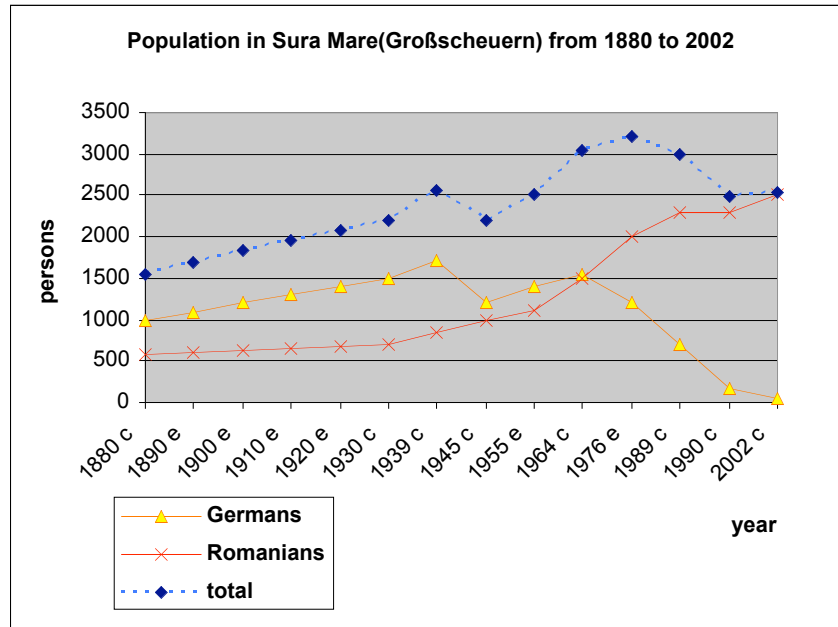


Table 1. development of the german and romanian population in the former saxon village of Sura Mare (german: Großscheuern).  
 Note: years marked 'c' showing numbers proved by census, years marked with 'e' showing numbers estimated by the author.

## Problems

Despite the mostly well maintained condition in which the churches and houses of the saxons have been left, these buildings today are facing several problems:

1. The new inhabitants represent different nationalities and interests. As a result, they want to change the shape of the former saxon houses into houses showing romanian or hungarian style or to something which they consider to be 'modern'. Improving economical conditions as well as the fastly expanding market for foreign products makes it easy to use non-fitting materials and elements instead of traditional techniques.



*Figure 2.* The well preserved saxon peasant house in Seica Mica (german: Kleinschelken) - left - will probably undergo the same changing as its neighbour.

2. Buildings inhabited by owners not having means for a minimum maintenance just decay. In extreme cases, inhabitants take out the wooden elements (e.g. windows, shutters, floors) to use the materials as firewood



*Figure 3.* Houses which has been left already before 1989 are often showing a state of advanced decay (Roades/Radeln)

3. Many churches of the evangelical saxons are not in use any more due to the fact, that the othodox communities already have built own churches before the saxons left. In some cases, saxons refused to transfer the churches to other communitites. In many villages saxon communities are shrunked to less than 10, mostly elder people. They cannot do more than to manage the decay.



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*Figure 4. The abandoned church of Velt/Wölz*

## **Consequences**

The built heritage of the Transilvanian Saxons is in high danger to go lost. As far as the fortified churches as listed monuments are more or less in the scope of the owner as well as of the authorities, it may be considered that most of them will survive. However, the peasant houses as vernacular, anonymous architecture undergo a massive changing. Modernized facades, plastic windows and even changed roof lines lead to a loss of harmony between the fortified church – dominating the village – and the simple, but well designed peasant houses, being the necessary surrounding for the church. As a result, the church may remain as an intact, unused shell in a senseless modernized environment.

## **The challenges**

Today, the trend to change houses in the former saxon villages seems to get fully under way. In parallel, it is evident that the saxons who left Romania after 1990 will not return. As a result, many evangelical churches will run out of use.

Currently, there seems to be no initiative undertaken by authorities – either national or local – to influence the development by creating instruments to control building activities in rural regions.

Under these aspects, two challenges towards the future of the fortified churches and the vernacular architecture in the former saxon villages may be figured out:

1. to find new forms of sustainable use for the abandoned churches in order to grant a long term preservation
2. to stop the uglification of the villages through legislative instruments, education and consultancy

Speaking about 150-200 villages, it is evident that the challenges are big. However, some first signs of engagement can be seen:

- The british-romanian *Mihai Eminescu Trust* tries to save peasant architecture in some villages by reanimating traditional building techniques, thus creating a sustainable

structure of local economy. Yet, activities are limited to less than 10 villages

- The Cluj chamber of architects set up a '*declaration of Cluj*' in order to call attention to the destruction of the villages and the landscapes
- The *Inventory of the valuable saxon heritage* was issued between 1992 and 1998 with the support of the german government, in order to document the endangered heritage and to define its value. Yet, only a small part of the inventory has been published.
- Several *private persons* undertake measures by own means in order to save peasant houses, former schools or priest houses, which they bought or rent.
- A '*Fortified churches damage inventory*', undertaken by the author, tries to register the structural state of the art of all the saxon fortified churches. The inventory shall be an instrument used by the owner and each institution/person wanting to save a church in order to identify the right object, the necessary repairs and the needed costs
- The supreme consistory of the Evangelical Church installed a *Fortified churches coordination department*, trying to undertake urgent measures on decaying churches and applying for EU-funds to restore a number of churches.

## Conclusions

The villages of the 'saxons' in Transilvania are undergoing a massive change. While the evangelical churches are abandoned due to the exodus in the 90ies, traditional peasant houses are modernized by their new owners, thus loosing their character. The development seems to be irreversible, as the saxons, who live in Germany now, will not return to Romania.

While fortified churches may be saved due to their monument status and efforts undertaken by the owner, peasant architecture will go lost due to the change of ownership.



Facing a large number of villages, a possible way to preserve some fortified churches embedded in their traditional surrounding maybe to focus on a small number of places, where changings yet have not occurred so massively. There, the ensembles may be preserved by convincing the house-owners to respect the inherited design of their buildings, which where erected by people of a different nationality and religion.

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