

Hălchiu

Village in Transylvania

Hălchiu (German 'Heldsdorf', Hungarian 'Höltövény') is a village 507m above sea level in the North of the region of Țara Bârsei. The village and surrounding fields are on a highland plateau and exposed to high winds from all sides. This makes the area one of the coldest in the Țara Bârsei. Not much is known about how the village became established. Legend has it that Knight Fulkun started the settlement between 1225 shortly after the departure of the Teutonic Knights and 1241 or the first Mongol invasion. Knight Ful-



Village square seen from the clock tower

kun is said to be represented on the village coat of arms. Fulkun remained loyal to the Hungarian King. Another legend however says that Hălchiu was set up half way between the neighbouring villages of Codlea and Feldioara. The altar of the Lutheran church of Hălchiu is said to have been built on the boundary stone between the two parishes. Documentary evidence of Hălchiu first appears in 1377. Ghimbav and Hălchiu are the only two villages in the Țara Bârsei not to have any woodlands. Timber and firewood were therefore hard to come by. After repeated bouts of plague in the VXIIIth century, Hălchiu's population grew steadily due to more births and immigration from surrounding areas. When the fields and meadows around Hălchiu were no longer able to sustain them, the villagers had to find other ways of making a living. They started transporting goods produced or traded in Braşov all the way to Vienna, Leipzig, Lvov and of course eastwards to Constantinopol. Agriculture

however was to remain the main source of income. It became even more important when in 1889 a sugar extraction plant was built in Bod.

Although Hălchiu was open to innovation it didn't always move with the times. When the railway linking Braşov to Sighişoara (1868-1873) was built Hălchiu decided against making land available for a connection. As a result it lost much of its competitive edge to traders with rail links. In other ways, Hălchiu was very progressive. By 1909 it was the second village after Codlea to have a power station and generate its own electricity. After the Second World War, Hălchiu had the only farmer's handball team to make it into the Romanian First Division. During communist times many inhabitants of Hălchiu changed their occupation and started to the factories of nearby Braşov. Hălchiu is a prosperous and successful community.

Lutheran Church

The Lutheran Church in Hălchiu was built relatively recently in 1807. The first church on the site dates back to the 14th century. It was destroyed in the great earthquake of 26 October 1802. All that was left at the time were the chancel, the precious altar, the church spire and the western portal. The villagers quickly set about rebuilding the church. Two large oak beams were used either side of the nave to strengthen the structure. The new church was consecrated in 1807 and the loan for the work paid off by 1814. The fortifications of Hălchiu were unique in that they were square. The walls were secured with a tower in each corner. Hălchiu was divided into 'neighbourhoods' and these were named 'quarters' after the shape of the fortifications. These



'quarters' were respectively responsible for one wall and the corresponding tower. This involved defence in wartime and upkeep in peacetime.

The church fortifications were demolished in 1894. In their Place a school building and community hall were erected. These were the last church fortifications in Transylvania for which the state authorities for monument preservation gave permission for demolition. Drawings of the fortified church can be seen in the western entrance hall. They show the fortified church as it stood in 1747 and again before the walls were removed in 1894.



Fortified church in 1727.

Drawing by Andream Altomonte

Two models of the fortified church to the scale of 1:250 also exist. They relate to the same time as the drawings. In 1910 electric lighting was installed in the church and since 1912 the Christmas tree is being electrically lit.



Fortifications before their removal in 1895.

Model to the scale of 1:250 by Heinrich Lukesch

Altar

At 7.7m wide and 8.8m high the altar is the largest of its kind in Southeast Europe. The altar panels are painted on both sides. Such altars became common in Western



Church interior

Europe when windows were first introduced in churches which reduced the wall space for paintings. The altar was built around 1525-1530 by an anonymous artist. At the time Hălchiu was catholic but would shortly become Lutheran. The altar table is 1.45m high, 3.5m wide and 1m deep. Statues of five saints are located in recesses under the panels. They represent from left to right: St Peter, Moses carrying the tablets of stone, Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac, Aaron and St Paul.

Above the niches and saints is the shrine of the altar containing life sized statues with the figure of Jesus in the middle surrounded by the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The four inside panels contain paintings of scenes from the bible beginning top left with the crucifixion of St Andrew. During catholic times St Andrew was the patron saint of the church in Hălchiu. The painting on the lower

left panel represents St Andrew saving the bishop from temptation. The top right hand panel shows the crucifixion of St Peter and below that is a rendering of the execution of St Jacob.



Altar: open

During lent the altar triptych is closed to reveal the eight paintings on the back panels measuring 1.86x1.66m each and showing the Passion of Christ. The top left panels show Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal through Judas, his arrest, interrogation and scourging. Below Jesus is shown being given the crown of thorns before Pilates, carrying the cross and being crucified.

In 1977 the altar was restored by the renowned Gisela Richter. Spotlights were fitted at the same time. Up to about 1900 a chalk inscription could be seen on the back of the



Altar: closed

altar. It stated that on 28 October 1599 Mihai Vaida (Mihai Viteazul) unsuccessfully attempted five times to take the fortified church.

Organ

The first organ in the Hălchiu church dated back to 1709. It was built by the Silesian Johann Prause. In 1785 it was replaced by another organ which in turn was destroyed in an earthquake in 1802. It wasn't until 1808 that a new organ could be commissioned to be built by Johann Thoiss of Râșnov. Thoiss used serviceable parts from the old organ. In the course of a general overhaul in 1939, an electric blower was installed. Following a campaign by natives of Hălchiu around the world, the organ was renovated in 2007 by a Honigberg workshop under the auspices of the Swiss Foundation for Organ Restoration in Romania. The restored organ combined with the marvellous acoustics of the church has become highly valued by organists. The well known organist



Dr Steffen Schlandt is making recordings in this church..

Bells and Clock Tower

The clocktower of the Hălchiu church houses one of the oldest church bells in the Țara Bârsei. It dates back to 1434. The other three church bells were also made of bronze and were confiscated during the First World War. It wasn't until 1923 that new sonorous steel bells could be bought. They are still in use today. The tower clock dates from 1900. Since 1983 the bells and tower clock are electrical operated. The operation systems were donated by the Hălchiu Association in Germany.

© by Förderverein Heldsdorf e.V. Oberursel
Autor: Karl-Heinz Brenndörfer
Translated by Marianna Nicholas