

# Lutheranism and Family History in Trans-Danubia

by Vic Berecz

When people think of Christianity in Hungary, the standard perception is of a Roman Catholic country with a significant Protestant minority in the form of the Calvinistic Reformed (*Református*) church. But, both historic and present-day Hungary also had another smaller, but locally-important Protestant minority -- the Lutheran Church, often called the *Evangelikus* church. From the time of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the present, Lutheranism was particularly important in historic Sopron and Vas counties and to their south and east in parts of Győr, Veszprém, and Zala counties -- in other words, the entire northwest of present-day Hungary known as Trans-Danubia (Dunántúl). In the larger cities and towns of that area, many of the Lutherans were of German origin. But, in the smaller towns and villages tens-of-thousands of Magyars were -- and still are -- also Lutheran adherents.

As a *Family Historian*, whose paternal grandfather's ancestors were all Lutherans from Vas and Sopron counties, I've had to deal extensively with Lutheran church records in Hungary. You will likely need to do the same if your Protestant ancestors came from that area. It presents some unique challenges because of the history of the area. Here's a summary of the current family history research situation for those of us whose ancestors lived in the northwestern part of present-day Hungary.

Most of us should be able to trace our ancestors back rather easily to about 1830. The complete baptismal/birth, marriage, and death/burial registers (anyakönyvek) of virtually every congregation -- Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish -- of that region exist for the period 1828-1895 and are easily accessible in the U.S. through your local Family History Center (see *End Notes*). Those church records for some Protestant congregations date back to the 1780's. In Hungary, it was not until 1895 that civil records of births, marriages, and deaths were required.

While Roman Catholic records exist for the earlier part of the 1700's, Protestant records in this region only exist for the few churches that were allowed by the Habsburgs to remain open. Therefore, the 1700-1780 period is a rather difficult time to trace your Lutheran ancestors. Prior to 1700, Roman Catholic records exist only for a handful of larger cities, and Lutheran records only exist for the city of Sopron. So, those who can trace their ancestors with certainty before 1700 are few and far between. The Lutheran church registers of the city of Sopron date back to 1624 and are among the oldest church records in the entire country.



The Lutheran Church of Sopron in the center of the old city.

If you'll forgive a brief departure into general historic detail, I'll set the stage for helping you to research your family's history in northwestern Hungary. Protestantism came to Hungary within a decade of Martin Luther nailing his 95-theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. By the late 1500's, Hungary was for all practical purposes a Protestant nation. By then, Protestantism began to differentiate into its two major branches, Lutheran and Calvinist. But, Hungary's Habsburg rulers remained staunch Roman Catholics and supported the so-called *counter-reformation* that encouraged -- sometimes quite forcefully -- the return to Catholicism. Since much of Hungary was under Turkish occupation in the late 1500's and early 1600's, these anti-Protestant efforts focused on the northwest part of historic Hungary that was under Habsburg control.

After a decade of extremely violent anti-Protestant initiatives, the Habsburg King Leopold in 1681 issued a decree at the Diet of Sopron which granted freedom of religion to Protestants, albeit with many constraints. Protestants were permitted to maintain their churches in county seats, and worship in private homes was uninhibited. This allowed some wealthy Protestant nobles to maintain private chapels in their homes for their families and servants. In 1691 the situation was further clarified by his *Explanatio*

*Leopoldina* (King Leopold's Explanation). In this second part of the so-called *Sopron Articles*, the King defined several "articulated places" – a specific and short list of towns and villages in the north and west of the country which were permitted to retain Lutheran churches. Basically, two or three places in each of eleven historic northwestern counties (which now are in Slovakia and Hungary) were designated. In other areas of Hungary existing Protestant – primarily Reformed – churches were permitted to continue to operate. Everyone was unhappy with the *Sopron Articles*. The Catholic clerics viewed them as a concession to the Protestants. The Protestants, especially the Lutherans of the northwest, viewed them as a threat to confiscate or close most of their remaining churches – which in fact later happened.

The Habsburg Kings were slow in enforcing these articles due to the on-going Turkish wars, and later the Rakóczi rebellion of the early 1700's. But, when that insurrection ended and Charles III assumed the throne in 1711, the counter-reformation activities again came to the forefront. In 1731, Charles in his *Carolina Resolutio* (Resolutions of King Charles) imposed further restrictions that closed schools, forced Protestants out of all public offices, required Protestant tradesmen to participate in Catholic ceremonies, and ensured that children of mixed marriages were brought up Catholic. Many more Protestant churches, even in county seats such as Győr and Veszprém, were closed. It was not until Joseph II's 1781 *Edict of Toleration* that this second period of extreme anti-Protestantism was somewhat mitigated.

I have worked extensively with the Lutheran church records of two of the *articulated places*. Nemesdömölk in historic Vas county is now incorporated into the city of Celldömölk. Its beautiful old Lutheran church holds the records for a significant number of towns in the northern part of that county, including my Berecz ancestors who lived below the vineyard-covered slopes of the famous extinct volcano, Sághegy. The registers of Nemesdömölk are on six rolls of microfilm and were beginning to badly show their age when they were photographed in the early 1960's. The baptismal records begin in 1708, the marriage records in 1736, and the death records in 1796. It is not unusual that death records got late starts in the registers of *articulated places*, since by law people had to be buried in their home village, and Lutheran pastors were not permitted to conduct any religious rites outside the locality of their church. As a result, most Lutherans during the 1700's were buried on unconsecrated ground without the benefit of Protestant clergy.



The Lutheran Church at Nemesdömölk.

Vadosfa is a tiny village in the southern part of historic Sopron County known as Rábaköz. It is the smallest recognized settlement of the county, with a current population of only 94. Vadosfa is an old village, being first mentioned in the literature in 1227. Despite its small size, over the last three centuries Vadosfa played a major role in the history of Hungarian Protestantism. The Vadosfa Lutheran congregation began about 1644. By the 1740's Vadosfa had grown to a population of about 500, since it served as a refuge for dedicated Lutherans forced out of other towns. In 1750, the pastor at Vadosfa, Dr. Gregory Fábri, was appointed Superintendent and Bishop of the Trans-Danubian Evangelical Church. His church in Vadosfa served 30-35 predominantly Lutheran towns and villages nearby, where all the Protestant churches had been closed. This included many of my Székely and Fekete ancestors who lived in Vadosfa and Mátis ancestors in the much larger nearby town of Beled. A 1751 riot in Vadosfa, caused by a Catholic attempt to establish a chapel in the village, resulted in the imprisonment of Fábri and over 40 of his parishioners -- including my 5-great-grandfather, Péter Fekete. From the 1740's until the *Edict of Toleration*, Vadosfa was the most important Lutheran church in Hungary. During much of that period Pastor Márton Kutsera, Fábri's successor who



The 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran Church at Vadosfa.

previously served at Nemesdömölk, trod very carefully to ensure the survival of this symbolically critical church in the face of significant oppression. Even today the great neo-Romanesque Lutheran Church in Vadosfa, built in 1912, could easily seat the population of the village many-times over.

The Vadosfa Lutheran Church registers are also recorded on six rolls of microfilm. In general, the quality of the early records is much better than for the Nemesdömölk records. The baptisms begin in 1707, the marriages and burials in 1724. But, the burials recorded before 1790 are only for residents of Vadosfa itself, not of the surrounding towns and villages. An important help is an index of all marriages found in these registers. Vadosfa's church registers hold the vital records for many surrounding towns until 1828 – even after their Lutheran churches were re-established. Shown at the right is the author and his cousin beside the 1725 baptismal font of the Vadosfa Lutheran Church where many of their ancestors were baptized.



The 1725 Baptismal Font of the Lutheran Church at Vadosfa.

If your Protestant ancestors lived in historic northeastern Vas county or southeastern Sopron county, it is highly likely that the Lutheran Church registers of Nemesdömölk or Vadosfa will hold a treasure-trove of family history for you. But, these churches were used primarily for *planned events* by the Lutherans of surrounding towns and villages. Therefore, you are most likely to find marriages, and baptisms of well babies, in those registers. But, burials and emergency baptisms (of unwell babies) are more likely to have been carried out by the local Roman Catholic priest. Therefore – especially for the period 1730-1780 – it's worthwhile to check the local Catholic church registers for your Protestant family's records. While some priests did not record rites performed for Protestants, others did. These records are often easily recognizable because of special annotations such as: "Luth" for Lutheran, "Calv" for Calvinist (Reformed), "akotolika" or "akat" for non-Catholic, and "heretika" for heretic.

You may be interested to know that the Hungarian Lutheran Church remains the third largest religious denomination in the country even to this day, with over 300,000 members, and that scores of Lutheran congregations continue to actively function throughout the Trans-Danubia region.

#### **End Notes:**

**(1) Use of Family History Centers for Hungarian genealogy research:** Family History Centers (FHC) are operated by the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (often called the *Mormon* church) at most of their facilities. There is no charge to use the local FHC resources and volunteer help is available. Over 10,000 reels of Hungarian church records are available on microfilm and may be ordered from Salt Lake City for a small fee. For southwestern Connecticut residents, the FHC in Woodbridge is particularly convenient. Please note that, as a result of this author's efforts, the complete set of Nemesdömölk and Vadosfa microfilms are on permanent loan to that FHC and available for all to use.

**(2) Availability of Hungarian Family History Tutorial on the Internet:** this author maintains a website that includes much of his own family history. As an adjunct to that website, he is building a *Hungarian Family History Tutorial* which, while still incomplete, already contains much useful information for those interested in Hungarian genealogy. All may freely access that website at: [www.berecz.us/tutorial](http://www.berecz.us/tutorial) . Readers with an interest in Trans-Danubian family history of Lutherans should feel free to send their questions and comments to the author at: [Vic@Berecz.us](mailto:Vic@Berecz.us) .