
THE BELL PROCUREMENT PROCESS IN THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITIES IN TRANSYLVANIA (19th – 20th CENTURIES)

Elena Crinela Holom*

*Babes-Bolyai University, Centre for Population Studies, 68 Avram Iancu St., Cluj-Napoca 400083,
Romania*

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Abstract

The process of buying bells made by the Romanian communities in Transylvania highlighted a number of symbolic aspects and reasons. Thus, the bell contributed to welding the community through its sound and through the concerted effort made to purchase it. It also maintained a spiritual connection between the man who was away and the community he had been born in. Bells were also bought from the desire to own something new, unique or to replace the lost ones or those that no longer technically and qualitatively met the new requirements. Also, the bell offered as a gift had a sentimental value as it was also a way of preserving over time its own memory or the memory of the loved ones. The gift was also a way of thanking the deity for the benefits offered, or was given because of the faith in the reward that would be received.

Keywords: bells, procurement, purchase, acquisition, Transylvania, symbolism, reasons

1. Introduction

The process of bell procurement, beyond the financial issues involved, allows capturing some coordinates, some mental levels of those involved in this process. Can there be raised a series of inquiries about the impulses, the reasons that urge people to make extraordinary efforts to be able to buy these objects of worship? Equally, this action also allows to nominally observe the buyers or donors who could be personalities, ordinary people or institutions.

A first aspect considered relates to the reasons people wanted to buy a bell. A first explanation is related to the importance attached to the sound. In addition to the functions of gathering Christians together for liturgical moments, of reminding the moments of joy or sadness of the communities lives, bells also fulfil a series of symbolic functions, but which are equally important: the prophylactic function, to prevent and protect communities but also a liaison between the community of the living and that of the dead. Also, the bell has a

* E-mail: elena_crinela@yahoo.com

strong conservative function: those who hear the bell feel like part of the community, develop their membership identity in the sonorous space [1].

2. More about the process of bells procurement

In addition to these explanations of a general nature, there are also many explanations of a private nature and it is the later that we will insist on below. Communities have always felt the need to have something new, to replace the small, cracked bells, by other larger and more beautiful that should also adapt to the new acoustic demands of the community or to try to return to the original sound arrangements by replacing the melted, destroyed or stolen bells as a result of some primarily military events. Thus, in 1908, *“on the day of Saints Peter and Paul, the believers of Egereseg and of the filial of Sâncraiu have got on to see their dream come true, to hear new bells in their church”* [2]. Or, in Braşov-Citadel in 1928 *“after many insistences, 3 new bells were purchased”* [3]. In 1951, in the parish of Banpotoc, *“a new bell was consecrated”* [4]. In Oradea - Iosia in 1983, *“a new bell was purchased (366 kg), added to the existing one”* [5], and in 1985, in the parish of Crasna Vişeuului, Reverend Iustinian of Maramureş *“officiates the consecration of a new bell”* [6].

By purchasing new bells, communities intended to replace the bells that no longer matched the technical or qualitative demands of those times: *“the Greek Orthodox parish council of the old town of Haţeg has proposed by his committee to procure a large bell instead of the cracked one”* [7]; *“this was a necessity that everyone felt, to procure on behalf of our church larger bells instead of the small and disharmonious ones that we have”*[8]; *“we really needed a large bell, because the two were too small and no longer fully corresponded our holy purpose ”* [9].

Communities have always been proud of their bells, as these were part of their symbolic inventory. Therefore, possessing a larger bell or that should have a more pleasant sound stamp were constant ‘problems’. Similar situations can also be identified in the French space. For example, the parish of Sigy (Seine-et-Marne) acquired in 1858 a 1500 kg bell and the inhabitants of the region, stricken by the power and beauty of its timbre called it *“the beauty in the valley”* [1, p. 80]. To achieve a perfect harmony they considered necessary to order the bells at the same time and from the same company *“thus, ordering the three of them at one and the same place, they should harmonise better”* [7].

After the events of World War I, most communities that had suffered as a result of bell requisition, immediately began proceedings to buy new ones. In fact, this action was seeking for the return to the previous sound chords and for the state of normality that had been interrupted for four years by the bitter war [10]. For example, during the assembly of December 20, 1921 of the curatorship and of the Greek Catholic people in the village of Poşaga de Jos, the president of the assembly, Iosif Hăţăgan, proposed *“to be willing to decide that they want to buy a bell instead of the one that had been taken away”*. The assembly decided the purchase of a bell *“weighing 30 kilograms”* [11]. In 1922, the Greek-

Catholic parish of Sâncel bought a bell from Oituz factory in Bucharest, because it only had a small bell and *“the large one had been taken away by the Hungarian state in 1917”* [12].

The desire to return to the sound chords previous to the Great War, the sadness of losing the large bell are laid out with an extraordinary emotion by the priest Ilariu Plotogea of Tohanul Nou *“as all over, the same happened with us, the Hungarian military authorities, in 1916, took us of the two bells that we had, the larger one, changing its shape and meaning ... for almost six years our church used only the small bell, so that the believers living further from the church could not hear its sound calling them to prayer, and not being well informed, they came to church either too early or too late. In addition, whenever we heard the small bell chiming we remembered the sad moment, when we had been taken away the bell”* [13].

Such examples of replacing the bells melted for war needs are numerous and they can be detected by researching archives, the press of those times, the articles and monographs devoted to some churches, villages and cities across Transylvania.

Bell acquisition by purchase and donation highlights a discussion that concerns the issues and symbolism of the gift. Marcel Mauss examines gift related issues by emphasizing the obligation of giving gifts in exchange for those received [14]. In Christianity gifts are considered to stand under the sign of the Holy Spirit. The condition of their occurrence in the world is ‘cleaning of passion’. Then there is also a seemingly paradoxical logic of the gift. Give and you’ll gain! The effect will be supernatural and the one who gives, will take back *“grace upon grace”* [15].

This logic of the gift explains why people were donating or contributing (sometimes even from the small amount they had) to equip and beautify the church, the foundation of which was laid by Jesus Christ and who thus identify with it. By making presents to the Church they were making presents to Christ. Then there was also a reward for the work done and a compensation that was to be received from the divinity. By making a present, you will gain and by making a present to Jesus, you will get back divine blessing.

Often, the gift was also offered to ancestors, to the dead, thus going beyond the limits of this world and also bringing with it the presence of the great absence of the one that had gone [15, p. 14]. There are many bells donated in memory of the missing loved ones. For example, Simon Chira of Aiton bought for the church in his village a bell weighing 23 kg in memory of his sons, Emanoil, Nicolae and Vasile, who died on the battlefield during the First World War [16]. In 1930, the large bell of the Greek Catholic church in the village of Topa-Mica, Cluj was made *“to the remembrance of priestess Maria Cosma born Podoabă and of her mother, Raveica”* [17]. The church bell in the village of Tohanul Nou, Braşov was donated by a believer *“out of the urge of an unforgettable love and gratitude to his deceased father”* [13]. The inscription on the bell of the village of Loman stated that *“this bell has been donated to the church in Loman by Macsim Nulc in memory of his late parents”* [18].

By donating bells in the memory of a missing person, the survivors symbolically kept in touch with them through the bell, their sound constantly reminding them of the beloved person, and singing the grief of some people left inconsolable following the loss. Also, bells ensured the eternal remembrance of those in memory of whom they had been erected, the bell being actually ‘baptised’ with their names.

Such examples can also be found in other religions. Thus, the great bell of the evangelical church in Sebeș, weighing 4,000 kg and named Erwin was donated by Dahinten family in memory of their son who died young [19].

Bells were purchased through donations made by personalities, generous people or institutions, through a purchase made by one or more persons. In general, most of the bells were purchased following the joint effort of several believers who lived or not in the area the use of the bell was intended for.

As shepherds of the church, some metropolitans, bishops, or simple priests worked hard to equip churches with the necessary bells. In the early 19th century, Samuil Vulcan, a Greek Catholic Bishop of Oradea, restored the clock tower that burned on June 19, 1836, “*also making new bells, the largest of which bears his name*” [20]. For the Orthodox Church in the village of Curciu, Sibiu, a bell weighing 80 kg and cast in 1851, was donated by Bishop Vasile Bârsan [21].

Bells donations were also made by Metropolitan Andrei Șaguna, in 1852 for the Orthodox church of Măgoaja [22], and in 1862 for the church in Mesteacăn he donated a bell worth 1000 crowns [23]. And perhaps such generous gestures have also been made for other churches across Transylvania.

To the purchase of three large bells for the church in Petroșani, Metropolitan Ioan Mețianu too, contributed in 1900 and donated 50 crowns [24]. In 1903, during the ascent to the bishop’s throne, Ioan I. Pop donated the cathedral church of Arad the great bell, commandeered in 1917 [25].

During the interwar period, a circular sent to the proto-presbyteral and parish offices of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of Alba Iulia and Sibiu urged all parishes to attend the collection for building the church in Blaj. This circular mentioned the personal commitment of Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan in gifting with a bell the church in Blaj [26].

The parish priests too, were among those who bore the full expense of buying a bell. For example, priest Grigoriu Pop of Bociocel purchased in 1890 a bell weighing 124 kg [27]. Priest Ioan Budoiu, together with his wife, bought a bell worth 220 florins for the church in Câmpuri-Surduc, Hunedoara [28]. In 1851, the church in Călata, Cluj received a bell from Teodor Moldovan, its former priest [29]. The church in Sângeorgiu de Mureș was endowed with a 220 crown bell, bought by the parish priest Nicolae Matora [30]. Also, priest Petru Pop of Subpădure village, Târnava deanery endowed his native village church with a bell purchased at his expense [31].

The Cathedral Church of Sibiu “*was equipped with bells again, instead of those kidnapped in the summer of 1917*” by Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan [32]. And it was also Metropolitan Nicolae who, in 1937, bought a bell for the monastery of Sâmbăta de Sus [33].

Buying a bell was a matter of personal pride “*I have been a priest for 10 years in this parish where I built a parish house, I cast this bell*” [34]; “*I purchased 3 new attuned bells, weighing from 300 to 800 kg, with iron chair*” [35]. Purchasing a bell was highly appreciated by the believers of the parish “*the deceased shepherded this parish ... providing this holy Church ... with all the church books and a bell, purchased at his expense*”[31]; “*the last united dean of Sebeș, prior to 1948, was Teodor Radu, when the great bell was cast*” [36].

Teachers, too, acquired church bells through their personal effort. One such case is that of teacher Lazăr Suci in the village of Podele, Zarand deanery, who in 1913 “*bought a new bell for the sacred Church worth 91 crowns, 20 fillers*” [37].

The bells were donated or purchased by the individual effort of some wealthy people or of some ordinary people, living or not in the village for the church of which they were making the gesture of generosity. In 1901, Mr. Tache Stănescu, an important owner and operator in Brașov “*was favoured with donating a bell weighing 178 kilograms*”. As a reward for this gesture, he was designated as a founder of the church of Mikoujfalú-Micfalău, Covasna and, together with his family, was written in the church diptych [9]. The church in Huedin has a bell purchased by Dr. Andrei Pop, a lawyer in Huedin [29], and notary public Alexandru Tătulescu gifted the church in Diciosânmartin-Târnaveni, a bell worth 30000 lei [38]. One of the five bells of the monastery of Sâmbăta de Sus, Brașov was donated in 1937 by trader Ilie Floașoiu of Sibiu [33].

Affluent people, even of other faiths donated bells for the churches in their area of residence. One such example is that of the Hungarian owner Șandorházi of the village of Suat, Cluj who donated a bell for the Romanian Orthodox church [39]. Perhaps, such remarkable gestures were made by others, too. Passing over the religious and ethnic differences, this man figured the importance of integration in the rural community and above all, of its cohesion.

Gifting bells was a gesture made by politicians, too. Thus, at the beginning of the third decade of the 20th century, on the appointment to the post of Prefect of Bihor county of Dr. N. Popovici of Ștei, Deputy C. Banu gave the church of Ștei, as a present, a new bell, larger than the old one that had been requisitioned for the needs of the war [40].

Other bells were bought by people the financial situation or function performed of whom we have no information about. They appear listed in name only. Thus, in 1910, Iuliu Ianoș donated at his expense the fourth and largest bell for the church of Dieci, Arad [41]. For the church of Călata, a bell was gifted by Teodor Roșca of Bucharest in 1923 [29], and in 1926 the believer Ion Pop bought the second bell from Anca company, of Cluj, for the parish of Someșul

Cald [39, p. 61]. Also, after World War I the believer Petru Gocan bought for the church of Berind, Cluj, a bell to replace the requisitioned one [17, p. 122].

Some bells were bought by families and, on this occasion, the names of the husband, of the wife and even of the children were mentioned. Thus, the church in Hațeg was equipped with two bells purchased in 1895 by “*the laudable families of B. Popoviciu with his wife Susana and Ioan Baciú with his wife Șarlota, as a sign of reverence for our church*” [7]. For Bezid parish, Ioachim Roșca and his wife Ana, born Marcu, bought in 1922 from Shieb foundry in Sibiu, a 66-kilogram bell for the sum of 4613 lei [42]. In 1900, for the Church in the village of Sânicolau-Mare, Timiș “*our brave priest George Babernac and his wife Varvara gifted the little bell worth 497 crowns 10 fillers*” [43], and the large bell worth 3664 crowns and 86 fillers was bought by Albu family, “*the widow, Maria Albu, born Bunei and her daughters, Eliza, married Stoicănescu, Elisaveta, married Raica, and Ioana, married Albu*” [43].

And a number of institutions (banks in particular) donated or bought bells for the churches in Transylvania. One of the bells of the church from Huedin was bought by ‘Vlădeasa’ Bank of the same location [29, p. 70], and the National Bank of Romania in 1937, donated a bell for the monastery of Sâmbăta de Sus, Brașov [33]. On the other hand, a number of other institutions and banks contribute money to support the efforts of believers in buying bells.

The sense of connectedness and of perpetual belonging to the home community is preserved even if people, for various reasons, leave the heart of the village they were born in. Whether going to work in Romania or even overseas, Transylvanians will financially support the efforts of beautifying the home churches by procuring the necessary things for the divine worship, including bells.

One of the bells from the Greek Catholic church in Hopârta, Alba was purchased in 1925 by the believers of this village gone to work in Bucharest. In the correspondence exchanged with the Greek-Catholic parish priest Aurel Paculea, they presented the reasons why they wanted to contribute to the purchase of the church bell: “*the undersigned inhabitants and believers of the holy Church of the village of Hopârta, a place of worship from which we, too, have received the baptism and the Religious ceremony, the duties that we have in life to God ... being told by a few people from here, from our holy village that our holy church lacks exactly the signal for calling the believers, the bell, and as, many of us are away to earn a better bread in the City of Bucharest, we want to prove that we haven’t ceased to have our hearts and minds directed to that sa[cr]jed place we got the light, learning and religion from*” [44].

The special importance of the bell in people’s lives in the village of Hopârta made those who had left urgently to act and collect the amounts required and send the bell “*we bought the bell weighing 104 kilos, plus the balance weighing 36 kilos, a bell that we have already sent you by the CFR [Romanian Railways], at high speed, today, Monday, August 10, 1925 ... we send you attached to this letter the 100 lei left from miscellaneous expenses,*

from the money collected, to pay people to lift the bell to the tower of the Holy Church of the village of Hopârta” [44, p. 57].

At the same time with the bell bought from ‘Nicolae Ionescu bell, chandelier and candlestick’ factory in Bucharest, worth 12000 lei [44, p. 58]. The picture with the full names of the 29 donors was sent “*for buying the BELL of the church in the village of Hopârta, Alba de Jos county*” [44, p. 59].

Similar gestures have also been made by the Transylvanians emigrated overseas. The connection to the native village was maintained and preserved even in the souls of those who were thousands of miles away from home. From Aiton village, in 1906 and 1907, about 120 people went to work in America. In May, 1907, those who had left overseas sent the sum of 1000 crowns for the purchase of a church bell. This amount was used to order from Antoniou Novotny factory in Timișoara a bell weighing 214.5 kilograms, for the price of 950 crowns and 90 fillers. Forty-two believers working in America contributed amounts between 10 and 50 crowns for the bell acquisition [16, p. 23]. And in October 1907, other believers working in America and originating from Aiton sent 400 crowns to buy a bell weighing 40.5 kg, a metal chop weighing, and an icon. For all these, twenty-four believers have contributed, in amounts ranging between 5 and 40 crowns [16, p. 24].

In the Greek Catholic parish of Cut, Alba with “*the money of the Americans a beautiful bell was been bought for the church and 5000 Lei have been deposited to the bank*” [45]. For the Orthodox Church in the parish of Zlatna, Alba, one of the bells was bought by “*a believer who had been to America, Ion Vințan a Savului, for 12 thousand lei*” [46]. Even after the First World War, while most of the bells had been requisitioned, many of those who were in America or who returned from there would buy new ones or donate substantial amounts for this purpose. In 1926, the bells of the church of Ciuguzel were bought by the “*American people*” originating in Ciuguzel, Suciul Vasile and Florea Ioan [47].

A great example of solidarity and added effort was proved by the Greek Catholic parishioners of Cugir, Alba, who in 1922 managed to buy a bell exclusively from donations made by people or institutions of the locality. 532 people of Cugir contributed and their names are alphabetically written in a notebook which is kept at the National Archives of Alba County. At the end of this notebook there is a small index of names of donors and the amounts donated. Thus, from letter A 465 lei were collected, from B 2750 lei, from C 4200, from D 1150 lei, from E 100 lei, from F 205lei, from G 955 lei, from H 883 lei, from I and J 873 lei, from L 815 lei, from M 4180 lei, from N 653 lei, from O 625 lei, from P 1429 lei, from R 950 lei, from S 1335 lei, from T 1595, from Z 75 lei [48]. The amounts donated by the believers amounted to 22986 lei. The plant in Cugir donated 1000 lei while from the party organised by the students of Cugir 749 lei were collected and from the party organised for the benefit of bells 255 lei were collected. The bell was purchased for the amount of 22980 lei, the trip to bring the bell cost 450 lei, its lifting to the tower 522 lei, and the bell carriage cost 1 leu and 15 bani. For bringing and installation

celebrations the following amounts were also spent: 40 lei for adorning the chariot that carried the bell, 43 lei and 50 bani for the purchase of two flags and a book, 192 lei for the music and 100 lei for the purchase of two beams. A total of 24358 lei and 65 bani were spent and 632 lei and 35 bani remained in the church chest [48, p. 36].

The believers in Cugir town showed an extraordinary solidarity, cohesion and connection, a true ‘consensus model’ in the opinion of Émile Durkheim. He said that a society cannot exist without solidarity [49]. The bell was the one that played an important role in highlighting this solidarity.

The symbolism of the gift also takes into consideration the obligation to return it to the one who offered it [14, p. 136]. What was it? In most cases, this return was a symbolic one, yet fraught with meaning. Most of the times, donors were written as founders of the church “*in gratitude, we should immortalise his name by choosing him as a builder*” [9]; “*thanking her again and before, also writing her among the church benefactors*” [50].

A practical way for the return the received gift could also be achieved through the open expression of thanksgiving, by brought to the public knowledge “*on behalf of the Greek Orthodox church in the village of Tecsești, the deanery of Alba Iulia, the deepest public gratitude valued as a tribute of gratitude to the greatest valued generous gentlemen, who knowing well our state were willing to buy a bell*” [51]; “*the parish committee comes to fulfil a sacred wish, to thus express its sincere gratitude for the great deeds and generous sacrifices madeby decorating our church tower by two new bells*” [7]; “*the parish committee comes to fulfil a sacred wish, to thus express its sincere gratitude for the great deeds and generous sacrifices madeby decorating our church tower by two new bells ... the believers in the parish of Buzd, Mediaș tract, come in this way too, to bring the most sincere gratitude to the parish priest Ioachim Roșca and his wife Ana, born Marcu, who bought a bell. May God reward thousandfold this good deed.*” [52] And such examples could be continued.

By bringing to public knowledge the names of those who contributed to the bell purchase, donors were offered as examples and were appreciated for the dedication shown to the house of God “*urging to such generous further actions, praises people joining the church*” [2].

3. Conclusions

Whether gifted by personalities, institutions, men or women, by wealthy or less wealthy people, by one or more believers, bells were important, especially from a symbolic point of view. The bell contributed to welding the community through its sound and through the concerted effort made to purchase it. Also, it maintained a spiritual connection between the man who was away and the community he had been born in. Bells were also bought from the desire to own something new, unique or to replace those that no longer technically and qualitatively met the new requirements.

The bell offered as a gift had a sentimental value as it was a way of preserving over time its own memory or the memory of the loved ones. The gift was also a way of thanking the deity for the offered benefits, or was given due to the faith in the reward that would be received.

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