

CONSTANT "SELF-DENIAL" AND RESILIENCE. *Life history recollections of sisters remaining after dissolution (1950-1989)*¹

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ABSTRACT: With the exception of four teaching orders, religious institutes were disbanded in Hungary in 1950. The number of members in the remaining three male and one female teaching orders was strictly limited by the state. This study analyses the narrative recollections of some members of the sole female religious order permitted to remain (albeit partially!) during the period of Communist dictatorship (1950-1989). Through the analysis of life histories, the study is intended to show the coping strategies enabling these sisters to "officially" survive in a hostile ideological environment. The study shows that the sisters' limited leeway led to changes in the composition of their religious community, in their relationships to one another, in their leaders' tasks as well as resulting in a new interpretation of asceticism. It can be seen that they were able to cope with the new circumstances by adopting a resilient approach.

KEYWORDS: life history narrative, constant maintenance of vocation, virtuosity of asceticism, resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Faced with the challenges of the modern era, church historians and theologians often deal with the current situation of religious institutes. However, the same does not apply to sociologists. This negligence by sociologists is rather surprising as the social and cultural influence of religious institutes throughout the centuries is a well-known fact. There were times when science, education and care for the sick, the poor and the orphaned would not have functioned without monks and sisters. Despite that, religious institutes cannot claim to be a popular research topic in sociology or even in the sociology of religion. Today, the topic of religious orders arises in connection with the tension between religiousness and modernisation and as such, it exceeds the scope of a marginal problem limited to a small group, and can be justifiably expected to appeal to a wider audience.

In addition, this topic is not at all irrelevant in East-Central Europe, including Hungary, due to the oppression of religion during the Communist dictatorship. In 1950, all but four religious

¹ This study was written to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the dissolution of religious institutes. It deals with the memories of some members of an order which was allowed to remain at the time of dispersion. I owe thanks to the superior of the order and the sisters who shared their experiences with me in the interviews.

orders were forcefully disbanded in Hungary. It would appear that it is vital to understand what devoted religious people experienced after being disbanded. By researching this topic, we not only get a vivid picture of the lives of sisters but also of those of ordinary people with "dissenting" views. For self-knowledge on a social level, we need to know how societal changes affect people's identities and what strategies can help survive change. Sociology is able to make a major contribution to the understanding of this. By their own definition, religious brother and women no other than consecrated life. Basically, there are two types of religious orders - monastic and apostolic. This study is about the latter, since it deals with a female teaching order, The Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame.

From the point of view of sociology, religious institutes can be regarded as an attempt at reaching God (the transcendental). According to Max Weber (1992), a classic in sociology, women religious are religious virtuosi whose lives centre around salvation. In terms of religion, a virtuoso is someone who, in their everyday life, is able to constantly maintain a particular religious attitude which allows them to have access to God's grace. Women religious must strive for their salvation on a daily basis. They can only be certain to achieve their goal if they manage to maintain this endeavour in their lifestyle. After Weber, this study is going to refer to virtuosity as „maintenance of vocation.”

Traditionally, life in a religious institute is based on three vows: poverty, obedience and chastity. It is with a view to living these goals that women religious create their everyday routines. (Bögre, Szabó, 2010; Weber, 1992; Révay, 2003)

Some authors have recently given a more sophisticated definition of religious institutes. Religious institutes create Utopian communities according to Séguy (2014) which enable them to escape from the world but also to build a special relationship with the world. This lifestyle is an ideal whose goal can be achieved by leading an ascetic life. (Abbruzzese, 2014) In her analysis, Hervieu-Léger (2014) refers to life in a religious institute as „the virtuosity of self-denial”, which, in her view too, is based on asceticism. This is a lifestyle which, in every respect, goes against the grain in a secular world.

This study will attempt to establish how “the virtuosity of self-denial”, the asceticism changed for the sisters who were „allowed” to remain in Church-maintained secondary grammar schools after 1950. What did the „maintenance of vocation” involve in the everyday lives of those whose leeway was not only limited by their religious order but also by the state party (1950-1990)? This study is also an attempt to interpret, with the aid of sociological terms, the stories which the sisters told. A better knowledge of these sisters' past will facilitate the understanding of the role of religious orders today as well as providing insights into the complex relationship between secularisation and modernisation.

COMMENTS ON METHODOLOGY

The life history interviews analysed in the study constitute part of a collection entitled 'The Voice of the Church Archives'². The aim of this collection is to conserve for posterity the life experience of the members of Hungarian religious orders. For this study, I selected the interviews which contained stories by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. In addition to the interviews, I also analysed some autobiographical texts kept in the archives of the order.

Thus, a total of eight autobiographical recollections and 23 life history interviews were

² The Voice of the Church Archives: The collection is located in the Institute of Sociology of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, coordinated by the author. The archive is a collection of religious life stories whose subjects maintained their religiosity in some way before the change of regime (1989/1990) in Hungary. Thus, it contains the life stories of priests, monks, nuns, sisters, lay people, Catholics, Reformed, and believers belonging to a small church. The archive is currently under construction, but is already available to thesis writers, PhD students and researchers.

analysed³ 28 of the interviewees belonged to the order of the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame, whilst 2 had attended Patrona Hungariae Grammar School. 1 interviewee belonged to another religious order but had taught at Patrona for decades. At the time of the interviews, the respondents were all pensioners aged 62-90. During their careers, most of them had worked in both grammar schools of the order, teaching or doing housework.⁴

In the life history interviews, the questions were related to the sisters' family backgrounds, their paths towards becoming sisters as well as their lives before and after the dissolution of their order. The autobiographies too comprise these topics. Each Interview took 1.5 - 3 hours, while the written documents consist of 5 - 8 pages.

These two sources can be regarded as similar since both of them express the interviewees' identity as it was seen by the interviewees themselves. Life history interviews and autobiographies are considered to be sources of biography research, able to provide an important contribution to the study of the relationship between society and the individual. (Ross 2005)

The texts were analysed with the method of grounded theory (GT), with special attention to make sure that the codes were produced on the basis of the interviewees' experiences. (Corbin, Strauss 2015.) This method offers the advantage that it is primarily the interviewees' considerations and experiences that prevail and not the researcher's prior knowledge. Thus, the researcher can stay more open to new revelations, which may enrich the analysis. The final goal is to reach Geertz' (1994) thick description. (Corbin, Strauss 2015:25.)

Regarding the life histories recounted by the Sisters, it is essential to bear the following points in mind:

1. The interviews were conducted with sisters who were allowed to teach and work in the Church-run grammar schools during dispersion and were still members of the order at the time of the interviews. Obviously, these sisters' life histories were different from those of the sisters who eventually might have given up their vocation due to fatigue or marriage. Our research only covered the first group.

2. Like all interviewees, the sisters (also) recounted their life histories from the perspective of the present time. (Bögre, 2003) The interviews were conducted with elderly persons who were sisters and were living in the order at the time of the interviews. That means that the interviewees survived their dissolution, lived to see the change of regime (1989/1990) and were viewed as heroes by society and by themselves. This framework of self-interpretation also appeared in their narratives.

2.1. Without exaggeration, to a sister, her order means her chosen family. We tend to strongly filter information that we share about our own family. Underlying the generally positive life history accounts by the sisters is the anthropological fact that we try to cultivate a positive attitude towards our own group.

2.2. In addition to the loyalty to their order, the interviewees' identity as sisters (in the interviews) was also shaped by their Christian mindset alongside with Christian language usage. Behind the framework of religious thinking are biblical events, the characters therein

³ The interviews were conducted by historian András Mezey, historian Judit M. Lobmayer, journalist Andrea Rózsásné Kubányi and the author of this paper. The recollections were written down by the sisters themselves. Data were collected from 2001 to 2019.

⁴ The interviewees included in this study taught at both grammar schools of the order (Svetits Catholic Grammar School in Debrecen and Patrona Hungariae Grammar School in Budapest). The study deals more with the latter, the reason being that fewer studies have been published on that topic so far.

and the teachings thereof, as well as the individual interviewees' theological knowledge. All that offered the speakers a meta-narrative framework in which they were able to find their own position.

3. The life history narratives are made up of real-life experiences, of episodic memory (Keszei, 2015). Thus, the life situations of the individual interviewees determined the set of stories to be recounted. There are differences between the experience of teacher sisters and that of house sisters (those working in the kitchen, looking after the sick, and doing work around the house), between the experience of superiors and that of rank-and-file sisters, differences between young and elderly sisters, etc. This study primarily includes the stories by the sisters involved in teaching.

4. This study examines the life histories of elderly people, who - with the passage of time - tend to see their memories through rose-tinted glasses ("beautified"). At their stage of life, an elderly person has the task to "tidy up" their past. A characteristic of a good and wise ageing process is the acceptance and ordering of life events (both negative and positive ones). (Erikson, 1991)

5. Lastly, the interviewer also makes a difference. The presence of the interviewer determined the stories told, since an interview is the interaction of two people. (Holstein, Gurbrium, 2013) Who the interviewer is, how they worded the subject of their research and what they intend to do with the stories told all have an influence on the content of a particular life history. In this case, the interviewers were sociologists, historians, a journalist and the interviewees knew to be related to the Catholic church to some extent. For this reason, they were able to freely use religious language and references to religious values.

THE 1950 "DISSOLUTION" OF ORDERS

Religious orders have existed in the East and West for over 1,500 years. Change can occur gradually but is at times coerced by political power, involving prohibition and/ or banishment. Long-standing orders have often experienced dissolution and relaunches (Puskely, 1995) like the closure of cloisters by Napoleon (Abbruzzese, 2014) and the abolition of "useless" orders by Joseph II in Hungary (Révay, 2003).

In 1950, the Hungarian state revoked the operation permits of religious orders, disbanding their members. However, the persecution of the Church did not start with the dissolution of orders but with the banning of religious associations and movements (1946-1948), the closure of Church-run schools (1948) and the staged show trial of Cardinal Prince Primate József Mindszenty (1949). In the summer of 1950, the state began deporting women religious and religious brothers to internment camps. The banning of orders in the autumn of 1950 was part of this process, intended to blackmail the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference (HCBC) into signing a partial agreement with the Communist state (Bögre, 2004; Szabó, 2001).

In a speech at an MDP Central Leadership⁵ session on May 31- June 1 1950, József Révay⁶ called religious orders "clerical reactionaries":

"The most important organisations clerical reactionary forces use to influence and mobilise the masses are the various male and female religious orders. In Hungary, there are [...] 63 religious orders with 11,538 members. [...] The people's democracy has distributed their land property

⁵ MDP=Magyar Dolgozók Pártja = Hungarian Working People's Party

⁶ József Révai (1898-1959) Communist politician. Editor-in-chief of the Communist daily Szabad Nép (Free People) from 1945 to 1950. From the autumn of 1945 on, member of both the Central Leadership and of the Political Committee of the Hungarian Working People's Party. From June 11 1949 to July 2 1953, Minister for the Education of the People, and from 1953 on, Deputy Chairman of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic.

among the working peasantry but they were allowed to keep their monasteries, convents, and cloisters. The question arises: is this situation sustainable in a people's democracy?''

In response, the Rákosi regime disbanded all orders between June 6 and September 7 1950 (Bögre, Szabó 2010; Pálos 2008, Borsodi, 2000:185), closing 635 cloisters (Bögre, Szabó, 2010; Pálos, 2008; Borsodi, 2000:185). 938 religious brother and 2,441 women religious returned in 1990 (Révay, 2003).

	Name	Description
1.	Orders operating legally after	Four orders were legal.
1.1.	Four teaching orders were allowed to operate partially.	They ran grammar schools: the Benedictines, Franciscans, Piarists and the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame.
1.2.	Shortly before the change of regime in 1990, the Catholic Church was allowed to found a new order, whose vocation was to care for the elderly.	In 1986, The Society of Our Lady of Hungary was founded by Cardinal Dr. László Lékai, helped by the Society of the People's Daughters of the Heart of Jesus, whose members volunteered and were appointed by their highest superior to carry out the foundation by way of domestic missionary work. ⁸
2.	Orders working illegally	They operated in the underground church.⁹
2.1.	Operating together in secret.	We only know of one order with the whole community staying together. ¹⁰ The secret police knew of them but they were not arrested.
2.2.	Founded in secret after the dispersion.	We only know of one such order. Its members and superiors lived in small communities (3-4 persons in a flat) and the whole community continuously kept in contact from 1955. Some of them were in prison.
2.3.	The superior partly held the members together.	The members lived dispersed, but from time to time, their superiors held part of the community together.
2.4.	To survive, the members met each other from time to time.	The same as 2.3., but some members were helped to flee the country.
3.	Those not choosing illegality	The superiors could not/did not dare to hold the community together.
3.1.	The members dispersed and kept in touch on a random basis.	The members held together and supported each other in everyday life as far as possible.
3.2.	The members of the order did not keep in contact.	The members lived isolated from each other.

Table 1: Some typical strategies adopted by orders after their dissolution. (Constructed by the author of this paper, 2020)

The various strategies are due to factors like the founders' charisma, the superiors' character, their attitudes, interpretation of the situation, the members' age and educational background, etc. The Rákosi regime treated any attempt at resistance as hostile behaviour to retaliate against, but in the members' own interpretation, all they did was try to defend their identity (Kis, 2019).

⁷ The newspaper "Szabad Nép" (=Free People), June 6 1950

⁸ Quoted from the official website of the Society. <https://regi.katolikus.hu/rendek.php?h=46> [Last accessed July 3 2020.]

⁹ Unlike those operating legally, the orders in the other categories are not named in this study. As no comprehensive research has ever been done into this area, the orders' self-classification might differ from the researchers'. In order to avoid causing offense or grudge, their anonymity shall be safeguarded. At the same time, there appears to be a need for comprehensive research into this topic to obtain results that are acceptable to both the researchers' community and the orders involved.

¹⁰ At the request of the order, we do not name it and follow this policy in the case of the other orders as well.

THE START OF THE SCHOOL YEAR IN 1950 - CONSTRAINTS AND POSSIBILITIES

The August 30th 1950 agreement between the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference (HCBC) and the state included the reopening of eight Catholic grammar schools (six for boys and two for girls) (Pusztai, 2004:88) by four orders (the Benedictines, Franciscans, Piarists and the Poor School Sisters).¹¹ To prevent these orders from being accused of collaboration, the HCBC issued a statement before the start of the school year 1950/1951.

Extract from the August 29th 1950 circular letter by Archbishop József Grósz:

"... it was only at the request of the Bishops' Conference that the orders involved agreed to take back the schools [...] The Bishops' Conference expresses their thanks to the orders involved and prays for God's blessing on their work." (Pálos, 2008:90)

The letter does not mention the one-sided nature of the "negotiations". Still, the HCBC presumably not only supported the cooperation of the orders but also asked for it. The framework of the negotiations was determined by the Communists, who stipulated that the eight schools could be run by no more than 4 orders.

Why did the Communists choose the Poor School Sisters? In 1948, at the time of the nationalization of Church-run schools, the sisters had 39 institutions from nursery to higher education, yet they were not the largest order teaching girls in the country. The HCBC is reported to have first suggested the Loreto Sisters as an order with a long history and experience in the capital city, but Rákosi rejected them since they had an aristocratic sounding name (in Hungarian: the 'English Misses').

According to oral reports and Éva Veidinger, historian of the order, the final decision was made by Bishop Endre Hamvas, who gave an explicit command. The bishop ordered the Poor School Sisters' superior to take on the two girls' grammar schools. She obeyed, but it made her fall ill.¹² The Poor School Sisters had to open two grammar schools in 1950. Patrona Hungariae Grammar School (Patrona) in Budapest and Svetits Catholic Grammar School (Svetits), in Debrecen.¹³ 60 sisters were permitted in Patrona and Svetits (teachers, dorm teachers and house sisters), but what happened to the other Poor School Sisters? When dissolved, the order had 365 members, so 295 must have lived like the members of the other disbanded orders. Thus, only a fraction of the Poor School Sisters, initially sneeringly nicknamed "red sisters", were allowed to officially stay sisters.¹⁴

1951 statistics show that 17 moved to old people's homes, 21 received a pension, while 25 got a welfare pension. 26 sisters worked as cantors, sacrists or church cleaners, 20 taught at state schools. 3 worked in a factory or at the railways. 69 did housework in private households and 15 helped their relatives or acquaintances in the household. Only 7 were self-employed.¹⁵ (Tornay, Lobmayer, Veidinger, 2015:200) In sum, contrary to popular belief, the majority of the

¹¹ The Congregation of the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame was founded by Karolina Gerhardinger (1797-1879). Basically, the order was devoted to the education of girls. Their institutions included nursery schools, primary and secondary vocational and grammar schools as well as teacher training facilities. The sisters in the order worked as educators and those not able to do so carried out household tasks like doing the laundry, cooking and cleaning, and looked after the sick. They were called house sisters and are also included in this study.

¹² Mentioned by sister K.I.A. in an interview by J. Lobmayer in 2004.

¹³ In this study, more is written about Patrona than Svetits. Nevertheless, since the teacher sisters alternately worked at both schools, the statements do not only refer to Patrona but to Svetits as well. There have been several publications regarding Svetits, while this study fills a gap in the literature with respect to Patrona.

¹⁴ The contemptuous nickname "red sisters" was mentioned in several life history interviews as well as the historical records of the order of the Poor School Sisters.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, there is no data on the others.

Poor School Sisters shared the other dispersed sisters' lot. Recollections show auxiliary staff was composed of those either first to volunteer or the most loyal or those unable to find any other form of existence after their dispersion.

What advantages did reopening the grammar schools involve? Firstly, 60 of the 365 members could continue to be sisters. Secondly, the "partially remaining" orders were allowed to recruit 10 new members a year, yet between 1954 and 1985 the School Sisters had only 30 new teachers¹⁶ (Drahos, 1992). Thirdly, at the time of the change of regime in 1989, the Poor School Sisters had a house, two schools, an updated habit, not having to start from scratch. These advantages are not negligible, especially in the light of the problems facing the ageing orders, who lack new generations.

However, the sisters had many difficulties too, e.g. the contemptuous nickname "red sisters". In addition, they had to adapt to the leeway given by the state, which involved more drawbacks than benefits. As we will see, this restricted leeway was full of traps, requiring a new lifestyle.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE POOR SCHOOL SISTERS WHO EXPERIENCED DISPERSION

The analysis of the life history interviews has led to the emergence of several lesser known subject areas, of which the following will be discussed in this study: 1. Memories of life in the community before dispersion - preparing for the maintenance of vocation. 2. Memories to the running of the grammar schools - constant "self-denial." 3. Memories of running the grammar schools - resilience for the sake of preserving vocation.

These headings reveal the focus of the framework of the sisters' life histories and how they are described in sociological terms.

Memories of life in the community before dispersion - preparing for the maintenance of vocation

The first half of the memories recalled by the oldest sisters centred around major historical events. They talked about their pre-war years, their struggles during World War II and the consequences of the 1948 nationalization of Church-maintained schools. The overarching meta-framework holding together all three topics was the asceticism typical of sisters, which is henceforth going to be referred to as maintenance of vocation.

Dating back to the era before World War II, the "traditional" way of becoming a sister was a life in the community, which was characterized by shared work and joint participation in religious rituals. The novices quickly learned the dynamics of work and prayer in the order and considered these a natural part of their lifestyle. It must be noted that the postulants who found this hard were advised to leave by the superior and/or the novice mistress. It emerged from the accounts that there had been postulants who decided to leave the order of their own accord because they could not get used to the lifestyle of the community. This was not infrequent during postulancy. Permission to take the final vows was only granted to those able to show loyalty to the founder's charisma, which included obedience, humility and peaceful coexistence with the other sisters.

With regard to this period, the topics of "teaching a sense of duty" and "persistent willingness to help each other" often cropped up. "The sisters remembered the principle of "Novices have to be able to do all kinds of work" and if someone could not do it they could always count on the others to help them. The interviewees mentioned strictness and the checking that rules

¹⁶ The Piarists had only 44, the Franciscans 85 and the Benedictines as few as 31.

were obeyed as natural tools of education. If someone made a mistake, they had to make a public apology.

„They checked our cupboards because we had to keep them tidy as well. One evening I went to have supper and the novice mistress called me to the front, saying that my cupboard was untidy and telling me to apologise. I knelt down and apologized for my mistake. Meanwhile, I knew that I had left my cupboard in order but I knelt down and apologized. Later it turned out that she had only done it to test me, said a sister laughingly.”¹⁷ (This story refers to the time before 1945, prior to World War II.) These tests were devised to prepare the sisters for their vocation. Several of the interviewees declared: “I took my vows from the bottom of my heart”.¹⁸

Talking about the pre-war period, in addition to the above-mentioned topics, the sisters also spoke about merriment, playfulness, cheerfulness, and mutually celebrating each other. They evoked these memories like people who talk about the happy moments of their family lives.

It was the task of the superiors to plan the new generation’s careers. Being in charge of teaching orders, they decided what subjects each new teacher should teach later on. What mattered in these decisions was mainly the interests of the order rather than the candidate’s ability. Some baulked at their task, for example a sister who was assigned to study German at university. German was going to be her third major and she had never learned this language before. When she revealed her fears to her superior, the latter told her to calm down, saying that she would be suitable for the task. The young sister accepted her superior’s decision. *If she sees it that way, then it’s alright*¹⁹, commented the old sister on her own obedience.

Likewise, the stories about the war years were also about the maintenance of vocation. Several sisters talked about going where they were needed and volunteering to go to places which others had fled. As one of the sisters remarked, *“I did what could be done and what had to be done*

There were two themes in the wartime stories. One was about how they invariably managed to escape from Soviet soldiers, while the other theme was how they helped people. The former theme was an especially sensitive topic for the Poor School Sisters since these lucky escapes were not to be for everyone. One of the tragedies striking the order happened in October 1944, when some Soviet soldiers broke into the convent in Kiskunmajsa and shot Mária Etelka Simon dead as she was fleeing. Mária Etelka is looked upon as a martyr of the war (Puskely, 2005). The other tragic event is in connection with the siege of Budapest, when several women in the air-raid shelters, including some sisters, were raped by Soviet soldiers.²⁰ Few of the interviewees mentioned this, probably due to their feelings of grief and shame. In comparison to the dramatic events involving the deaths of those who paid with their life in defence of their chastity, the robbing and forced labour of the majority appeared to be insignificant.

Their mother house in Szeged was saved by the fact that they had put it at the disposal of the town authorities, who used it to accommodate those wounded in the bombings, so the Soviets could not occupy the building. “In return”, however, the sisters also looked after the patients of the psychiatric clinic.

„Not far from us, there was an institute for disabled children run by some sisters. Girls and boys aged 2 to 30 lived in separate pavilions. One night, the Russians broke into the buildings and the Sisters had to flee, leaving everything behind. Left without supervision, the children scattered and soiled everything

¹⁷Sister L.M.H., aged 87 at the time of the interview conducted by historian Judit M. Lobmayer in 2004.

¹⁸ Sister P.P., aged 89 at the time of the interview conducted by Zsuzsanna Bögre in 2010.

¹⁹ Sister P.P., aged 89 at the time of the interview conducted by Zsuzsanna Bögre in 2010.

²⁰ Recollections of M.M.R. in 2004.

and stayed in the dirt. ... Four of us agreed to clean them up ..."²¹(This story refers to the war years.) Little did they know what was waiting for them.

„Our Bishop Father talked to the Russian commanders and asked permission to bring food for the sick children from the Jesuits. Equipped with a handcart and baskets, four of us went to fetch the food we had been promised and we carried it home in pouring rain. We walked for more than five hours”(Continuation of the previous story.) The interviewee, the protagonist of the story, fell ill from exhaustion and was hospitalized for months.

Another topic regarding war time is the caring for the wounded. The sisters who remained in Budapest volunteered to help the Red Cross care for the wounded. Their help was alternately needed by Germans, Russians and Hungarians.

*„I was also assigned to look after the wounded. I was once asked if it was not hard for me as a young sister to nurse men? I told them that I looked at them as a mother looks at her child.”*²² Like the other stories, the history of their caring for the sick was about maintaining their vocation too.

It was in 1948, when Church-maintained schools were nationalized, that the last significant event before the dissolution took place. After that, the sisters' lives changed because they were not allowed to teach. The state condemned teachers of religious institutes to unemployment if they did not take on teaching jobs in state schools; on the other hand, the Church threatened to excommunicate them if they had taken on such jobs. The sisters interviewed did not take on teaching jobs in state schools at the time. Their decision was not only motivated by their obedience but also by rational reasons: *If I'd agreed to teach, the state would have posted me here and there and I would have been cut off from the community, but I am primarily a sister.*"²³ In 1948, *it was God we trusted in.*"²⁴ (The story is about the time of the nationalization of schools in 1948.) Between 1948 and 1950, the sisters still believed that they had a choice between their vocation to be sisters and their secular vocation. The majority opted for their vocation as sisters. This is how the teacher sisters became dressmakers, dried pasta manufacturers, nannies or even agricultural workers. The work was provided by the people around them, their neighbours and their family. Everybody paid them as much as they could. Once again, the sisters made this decision for the sake of maintaining their vocation.

Memories to the running of the grammar schools - constant "self-denial"

After the dissolution of religious institutes, the majority of the Poor School Sisters were also left to „go wherever they could” and to cope on their own. Only 60 of them had the privilege of starting work at Partona Hungariae (Budapest) and Svetits Catholic Grammar School (Debrecen) on September 15 1950. By „reaching an agreement” regarding the reopening of eight Church-run grammar schools (in relation to the closures in 1948, we can talk about a reopening) the Church „accepted” state control of its grammar schools. This involved incessant control, continual inspections and restrictions, the use of informants among staff and students, the installation of bugging devices in their rooms, etc.

Invariably, the themes underlying the stories of the grammar school years are related to maintaining vocation. However, there was more expression of individual perspectives and experiences than in the memories of the years prior to dispersion. It turned out that at the start of the school year the teachers viewed the situation of the grammar schools as serious. They had been given back run-down buildings without any equipment and had to receive the

²¹ Sister K.A.V., aged 74 at the time of the interview conducted by historian Judit M. Lobmayer in 1994.

²² Sister P.P., aged 89 at the time of the interview conducted by Zsuzsanna Bögre in 2010.

²³ ua. ibid.

²⁴ ua. ibid.

students in empty and filthy classrooms. In the dormitories, both teachers and students slept on sacks filled with straw. The kitchen sisters went to the market every day to make sure they had something to eat. At the time, religious institutes had no material background left and they could not turn to the state for help. Teacher sisters were not salaried. They only got a state contribution, which was not raised between 1950 and 1989.

„The state gave teachers a little, an annual fee, which amounted to a state school teacher’s salary for one month, and for this reason it was called a state contribution.I just don’t know what they contributed to because there was nothing else”²⁵. (This story refers to the whole period of dispersion, the years 1950-1989.)

As a result of their poverty, the grammar schools asked the parents for a financial contribution. However, these parents were also on the periphery of society. The laboratories and storerooms for subject-specific equipment were empty, and for decades, everything needed for experiments was built by the sisters. It was by the end of the 1970s that they managed to solve this problem with the assistance of parishes abroad. By then, all necessary equipment had been provided by parish communities in the West.

The poverty of the first few decades was not seen as a huge problem by the sisters. Basically, they simply reported it as a fact. What they really emphasized though was an abuse of their moral values, including their naivety, forgiveness and asceticism, which even encompassed a willingness to tolerate humiliation. All of this was because of a well developed system of informants in the grammar schools.

The organs supervising them (the ÁEH=the State Office for Church Affairs and the education departments of the local councils) strove to set the teachers at the grammar schools against each other, which left its mark upon their relationships. *„You have no idea what the atmosphere here was like.”* This remark refers to the whole time of dispersion, the years between 1950 and 1989.) The creation of tensions among staff and between teachers and students was not unknown to the „organs”. *„There were inspections nearly every day. But we didn’t crack up, which was God’s special grace. They often threatened us with Siberia.”²⁶* (This story refers to the time of the initial period of dispersion, to the time of totalitarian dictatorship, between about 1950 and 1970.)

The stories reveal that through the ÁEH head teachers were made to take measures which divided their communities. One such measure was the regulation regarding the wearing of habits (the clothes of their order). For the sisters, the habit had a symbolic meaning. It could only be worn within Patrona and only by the School Teacher Sisters (initially, 4 persons). The teachers „borrowed” from other orders did not have permission to wear the habit. The house sisters working at the school were not allowed to wear the habit (despite the fact that they officially belonged to the Poor School Sisters too). They were treated as civilians, while their salaries were much higher than those of the teacher sisters.

„They [the house sisters] got a normal salary from the state. Although they had to live there as civilians, we lived our community on their salaries. That is crazy ...”²⁷ (The story refers to the whole period of dispersion, 1950-1989.)

We learned from the interviews that not all the grammar school teachers were allowed to live in the sisters’ house either. Only the Poor School Sisters were allowed to move into the house (which entailed living in a community and a lesser financial burden for those permitted to live in there), while the sisters belonging to other orders had to live in lodgings in town. This

²⁵ Sister M.M.F., aged 71 at the time of the interview conducted by Andrea Rózsásné Kubányi in 2004.

²⁶ Sister Á., aged 88 at the time of the interview conducted by historian Judit M. Lobmayer in 2004.

²⁷ Sister M.M.F., aged 71 at the time of the interview conducted by Andrea Rózsásné Kubányi in 2004.

could have led to some resentment in the community, in spite of the fact that this prohibition was imposed from outside. Furthermore, the state had a say in who was elected superior. Traditionally, superiors are elected democratically in all orders. After dispersion, superiors were only able to be elected with the approval of the ÁEH, which raises the question of self-censorship. Through these and further similar measures, the state party restricted the leeway of the religious order maintaining the grammar schools. The external constraints might have led to tensions among the sisters, although no stories made any allusion to their turning against each other permanently. At the same time, an atmosphere of mistrust emerged, which had not been typical before their dispersion.

Another addition to the restrictions was the fact that the leaders were forced to take part in peace rallies. Anyone refusing to participate had to answer to the officials of the ÁEH. And, to top it all, a network of informants involving teachers and students was built up in the schools.

„I remember a girl in my first group who, well, it turned out after a year that she'd regularly had to go to a certain place and report everything, even the way I put down my pen. Or when I lose my temper. Or how I behave, how I treat the parents. And then one day when the girl had a kind of nervous breakdown and by then ... at the time, I didn't know what to say ... she should tell them that she wouldn't do it. Simply because it makes her ill and her nerves can't take it..."²⁸(This story refers to the first half of the 1970s.)

By leaking the information they obtained back to the school leadership, the ÁEH indicated that „we know everything about you“, „you can't keep anything from us“ and „there are informants among you“, thereby aiming to undermine trust in the community. Such thoughts could have occurred even to the most naive sisters and that is exactly what the aim was. They instilled these and similar thoughts into the sisters' minds, who ended up looking for informants in their own ranks.

„Only once was I summoned to be interrogated with Sister Jolánta, when I was already Assistant, but I felt that atmosphere – although it had become a lot milder -, what I mean is that they kept bringing up topics which – well, they appeared to have been informed by someone. They constantly kept the superiors in uncertainty, suggesting that one of the sisters was an informant...“²⁹ (The story is about the first half of the 1980s.)

Part of the sisters' constant self-denial was also the fact that, by agreeing to run the two grammar schools, the Poor School Sisters could not enjoy society's sympathy for the dispersed religious institutes. They were not thought to deserve a share of the sympathy for the victims because they were still there. In addition, they gave up the unity of their community, as there were sisters living outside, in the world, with whom they were not allowed to keep in contact. They gave up the harmony which had been typical of their order during the times before. They were not allowed to be equal in each other's eyes and were incessantly experiencing division.

In view of all this, it would appear appropriate to claim that the maintenance of vocation by the sisters running the grammar schools involved constant 'self-denial', which constituted a new form of asceticism: accepting the restrictions by the state in exchange for a chance to hand down religious values to new generations.

It should be noted here that despite the abundance of stories there were topics which were not brought up or were hardly ever discussed. The sisters did not talk about their relationships with their superiors, although they were happy to expound on them when recalling the pre-dispersion era. They had hardly any stories to tell about each other, about other sisters. They

²⁸ Sister K.M.M., aged 69 at the time of the interview conducted by historian András Mezey in 2017.

²⁹ Sister J., aged 72 at the time of the interview conducted by historian András Mezey in 2017.

did not mention the community events of the order. There must have been such events but they cannot have been memorable if no one mentioned them. There were no stories about merriment and happy celebrations. By contrast, they talked a lot about their work, the tasks in a teacher's career, things to do relating to the children and their successes and failures as educators. Apart from struggles, there was another topic which left its mark on their memories of the grammar schools, namely the techniques of flexible survival and behaviour aimed at outsmarting those in power, which became increasingly typical during the 1970s and 1980s.

Recollections regarding life at the grammar schools – resilience for the sake of maintaining vocation

In addition to the phenomena mentioned above, most of the sisters recounted stories about resilient adaptation.. The notion of resilience allows the interpretation of statements like: „*The fight of these Communists against us and the way we stood our ground ...*”³⁰ According to the person remembering the past, the Communists were against them and „all they did” was merely stand their ground, which means staying true to themselves or, in other words, ‘constantly maintaining their vocation.’ It is hard to say whether it was the sisters who had always had a resilient mindset that agreed to start the grammar schools, or whether their resilience evolved as a result of their adapting to the circumstances. Probably, both suppositions are true.

In the stories about life in the order, the notion of resilience cropped up in several topics. The term resilience refers to flexible adaptation to societal changes. It describes the process of a group or an individual searching for a way to flexibly adapt to new circumstances in order to protect their own identity. The recollections of the sisters revealed resilience when they were talking about pushing the boundaries defined by the state party or when they were speaking about their students in stories which evidenced the teachers' overperformance both in terms of instruction and character formation. This means that the teacher sisters not only imparted knowledge to their students but they also formed their characters. Another indication of resilient behaviour is the stories about creating a subculture. The forms of behaviour which demonstrated resilience can also be construed as cultural resistance.

Pushing the boundaries manifested itself in everyday decisions like raising state-defined student numbers in a class without asking permission, or adding accommodation in lodgings to the limited number of dormitory places (Debrecen). They tried to raise student numbers in spite of being aware of the fact that this could not go unnoticed or unpunished.

Another attempt at pushing boundaries was the acceptance of children from politically unreliable families who could never have attended other grammar schools in the 1950s and 1960s.

*„Mr Director was also able to completely understand the parents who sent their children to Catholic schools. And he went to extreme lengths to help them, and he even helped feed those who lived in the dorm. He gave them financial support. I consider Dr. László Kiss one of the greatest and most stable priests, teachers, Christians and head teachers of Catholic institutions. Practically, he was thrown out of Debrecen, and then he was allowed to give some lessons in the school in Pest (Budapest) so that he could support himself...”*³¹ (The story is about the first half of the 1960s.)

When the schools were opened in 1950, they were allowed to talk about the Christian version of the teaching materials in addition to the state version. For conscientious reasons, the sisters deemed this essential, and it also helped them to agree to teach. Notwithstanding, there was a sister who refused to study history at university, despite being asked to do so by

³⁰ Sister H., aged 91 at the time of the interview conducted by historian Judit M. Lobmayer in 2004.

³¹ Ua. *ibid.*

her order. „*The whole atmosphere there was so that I said I wouldn't do it ...*”³² (The remark refers to the ideological atmosphere of universities in the 1950s.) Due to the chaotic and confusing circumstances, obedience, which had worked so well before, started to contain new elements. The order needed a history teacher but the sister could not accept the atheist spirit of the history course at university. Thus, she decided to give up her university studies. After her decision in the above case, the sister could not become a teacher in a grammar school, so she got a job as a factory hand for a while. „*I was primarily a sister, not a teacher*”.³³

The choice of school trip destinations can also be regarded as a resilient response. In 1962, a group went on a trip to the Lóvérék Hills in Sopron, where they „deliberately” went to the state border,³⁴ although they should have applied for permission. Another instance of pushing boundaries was when it was already possible to travel abroad and they chose Italy, where they visited the central house of the sisters in Rome as well as the battle scene at Doberdo where they commemorated the Hungarian World War I heroes. Neither of these choices was approved of by the Communist ideology of the time.

In a similar way, they tried to rewrite the state celebrations (which had been designed to spread Communist ideology). On November 7, they initially held lectures, „*but only about what happened here and what happened there and we did not glorify anyone.*”³⁵ (This comment refers to the 1960s and 1970s.) Later they thought that they would organise a Russian language competition rather than observe the Great October Socialist Revolution, which was a Soviet state holiday. A further example is the reinstatement of March 15 celebrations prohibited by the Communists, marking the occasion with a Hungarian folk song competition to commemorate the Hungarian national war of independence (1848-1849).

The students too did their share of resistance. In 1961, at the time of the great reiligious court trials, the students knew which of them had had their homes searched the night before and whose parents had been arrested. The next day many of those had eyes demonstrating lack of sleep. (Wirthné Diera, 2015) This forged a strong class community, even without words.

The students did not consider themselves victims and they did not conceal their opinion when they met a peace priest.³⁶

„*Or it was common for us to pretend to go to confession to an ostracised peace priest and then we'd say: Oh, it's you – and slam the door of the confessional.*”³⁷ (The story refers to the first half of the 1960s.)

Another time:

„*Richárd Horváth, this envoy of the peace priests, turned up and everybody was commanded to go down to the large hall to listen to his hymn of peace regarding the good relations between the state and the Church. Then we began to stamp our feet very loudly and you couldn't hear a word. He was running up and down, his eyes flashing. The floor creaked so loudly that he had to stop his speech ...*”³⁸ (The stories refer to the first half of the 1960s.)

³² Sister P.P., aged 89 at the time of the interview conducted by Zsuzsanna Bögre.

³³ Ua. *ibid.*

³⁴ To the Austrian border, which counted as a border zone and ordinary people were only allowed to enter with special permission. The border was considered dangerous because Austria belonged to Western Europe.

³⁵ Sister P.P., aged 89 at the time of the interview conducted by Zsuzsanna Bögre in 2010.

³⁶ Peace priests: priests collaborating with the state party.

³⁷ Sister Á.Sz., aged 68 at the time of the interview conducted by Zsuzsanna Bögre in 2010.

³⁸ Ua. *ibid.*

Besides the students, the head teachers and superiors also tried to gain more leeway. This is how a head teacher explained it:

„Our order is under the congregation, not under the local bishop. So when I as a head teacher was instructed even by the bishop himself to attend the peace rallies together with the priests, I could tell him: Mr Bishop, you can't give me orders because legally we aren't under you, Mr Bishop ...”³⁹ (The story refers to the 1960s.)

Or, with reference to the case of a provincial:

„For example, I held Jolánta in high esteem, she was the provincial at the time, and they really wanted her to go to the peace rallies, because that would have added to the shine of their power. And they couldn't bite the bullet that she didn't want to go, and she told them she didn't want to. And really, they launched a terribly disgusting campaign against her, with the participation of some of the Church leaders too, who really assisted them. They claimed that this woman was not suitable for leadership if she is so unable to collaborate. Jolánta used to talk about what had happened or about being spoken to by a cardinal. These things could really make you suffer.”⁴⁰ (This story refers to the late 1970s.)

In the late 1980s, the controls slackened and it was possible to display resilient behaviour more openly:

„The school-leavers' farewell ceremony promised to be really beautiful because things were kind of working out well. So I said 'I'd go and take them (the ÁEH) an invitation'. „And then I really went, without an appointment. And that was really bold on my part. Because you know, that wasn't like doing the big boss a kind of favour. And they took it like „What? She didn't even ask for an appointment?” And when it turned out that this had been a serious omission on my part, I said that if I had made a serious omission, I would be happy to wait until they were finished with Mr State Secretary – as they were busy doing something really big. And then I just sat there for hours, and in the meantime I saw the comings and goings and also what was true and what wasn't. And then finally he wasn't able to get back into his role. So by going there I annoyed him”⁴¹ (The story refers to the mid-80s.)

The sisters' incessant overwork also led to resilience. That is how they managed to earn the love of their students and to show the parents results as well as maintaining their vocation through teaching. There was a sister who explicitly said that until her retirement she had kept feeling *„relentless stress and pressure”*.⁴² The reason could have been the excessive number of positions held by each person due to staff numbers being kept low by the state. Simultaneously or consecutively, the sisters were made superiors, prefects, form teachers, head teachers, assistants to the superior, etc. The same sisters carried out the work of teaching and character formation at school and in the dormitories as well as the leadership and management tasks in the order. Individual teachers were hardly able to list all their positions, tasks and postings. Overperformance was mainly revealed in connection with the students' character formation. The dorm teachers used to spend their weekends with the students too, engaging them in a plethora of activities which they had to prepare as well.

„Well, for example, if in a Bible lesson, or any other time, you know, we had character formation lessons, or etiquette lessons, well, or many times they brought up their problems with their parents. Or conflicts, and then we talked about these really seriously, for example. So I think that they could learn from these. Like, wow, you can do it like that too. Or for example, how you can deal with conflict. And then we discussed one or two and we tried it out. And this was almost kind

³⁹ Sister M.M.F., aged 71 at the time of the interview conducted by Andrea Rózsásné Kubányi in 2004.

⁴⁰ Sister Á., aged 68 at the time of the interview conducted by historian András Mezey in 2017.

⁴¹ Sister K.K.M., aged 69 at the time of the interview conducted by historian András Mezey in 2017.

⁴² Sister É., aged 71 at the time of the interview conducted by historian András Mezey in 2017.

of closer to me than, say, the lessons at school. Because at school, there was no way around it, ... They had to be able to take their final exams in Mathematics and Physics, too, and you know, I thought it was really important to get them to like these subjects if possible."⁴³ (The story refers to the mid-80s.)

Their resilience was also strengthened by their *creation of a subculture*. The grammar schools did not lock themselves up within their own four walls but actively sought contact with the other Church-run grammar schools. For instance, the eight grammar schools organized academic competitions among themselves. With a lot of creativity, they built relations among the grammar schools but in a way that prevented the authorities from finding fault with them. Still, they were involved in creating a kind of 'enclave'. „*We kept getting together. We organized study trips via Debrecen, Pannonhalma and Kecskemét (towns with grammar schools run by the Poor School Sisters, the Benedictines and the Piarists respectively). This also offered the children a chance to meet each other. We didn't want them to have one-sided lives. The Piarist grammar school in Budapest collaborated closely with Patrona on things like dance classes, the school-leavers' ball, etc.*"⁴⁴ (The story refers to the time of dispersion, 1950-1989.) All that helped young people to meet each other, which later had an influence on their choice of spouse as well. This is how the creation of a subculture was complemented and became more influential.

SUMMARY

After the dispersion of religious institutes in Hungary, there was a single female order left, the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame, who were allowed to maintain two grammar schools between 1950 and 1989. Under the new political and social circumstances, the teacher sisters made a long journey in terms of their identities as sisters. Fundamentally, our research was carried out on the basis of life history interviews which were complemented with written recollections and sources from the histories of the orders.

The key topics emerging before their dispersion are obedience to superiors and serving other people (before their dispersion) and the attitude of „I am going to stay a sister whatever the circumstances might be" (after their dispersion in 1948). These topics can be regarded as manifestations of the sisters' asceticism.

As regards the time after their dispersion, there was a change of topics in the Poor School Sisters' recollections. One such topic was „constant self-denial", while the other was description of resilient actions for the sake of survival. The content of self-denial (in other words, asceticism) was different from the time before their dispersion. The sisters had to forgo their peaceful unity of their community, because some of them were the lucky ones, who were able to remain in the order, whereas others had to live „outside", taking on civilian jobs. They had to forgo the atmosphere of complete trust within the order, since the state's henchmen relentlessly worked to incite mistrust among the sisters. In addition, they had to forgo entirely open communication within the order, withing teaching staff and with the students, as it was impossible to tell who happened to be an agent. This atmosphere was not conducive to cheerfulness and a feeling of constant happiness, and consequently, these were not mentioned at all.

The other major topic was the opposite of the former, i.e. rather than talk about the hardships, they described their flexible adaptation to the circumstances. The latter can be called resilience, which, in my opinion, enabled the sisters to maintain their vocation during the dictatorship. The sisters learned to operate with restricted leeway and to make the best of the loopholes left by the state party. This took ingenuity, creativity and courage. They kept pushing the boundaries set by the state party, rewriting the content of state holidays and using school trips

⁴³ Sister K.M.M., aged 69 at the time of the interview conducted by historian András Mezey in 2017.

⁴⁴ Sister E.B., aged 64 at the time of the interview conducted by Zsuzsanna Bögre in 2010.

for the propagation of religious values. Overperformance regarding the work in the grammar schools also counts as resilient behaviour, since the sisters used every opportunity for religious formation. They lived together with the students, teaching and forming them at weekends too. In addition to individual formation, they also joined forces with the other church grammar schools to give young people opportunities to meet, which resulted in many of them choosing their spouses in these circles. Thereby the sisters also contributed to the establishment of a religious subculture. Even if not consciously, the sisters took these resilient steps in self-defence. After their dispersion, their existence was determined by these two behavioural strategies, and it was the tension between these two strategies that they lived in for forty years.

For reasons of limited space, the study cannot discuss the more recent developments occurring after the change of regime in 1990. It would be worth continuing research into the orders which were driven underground or those which lived in complete dispersion. It would be worth investigating (and comparing with the Poor School Sisters' lives) what constant self-denial and asceticism meant in those orders and if and how resilience emerged in those circles.

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