

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN SĂCUIENI

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Abstract

In 1939 the Romanian Orthodox in Săcuieni, Bihor County, commenced the building works on the first Orthodox Church in town. The church designer was Gheorghe Molnar, an architect born in Oradea who, in the same year, 1939, immigrated to Australia where he worked as an architect, professor and cartoonist. Engineer Pintér Ștefan was the contractor; he was also born in Oradea and very active within the urban environment of Oradea in the interwar period.

The place of worship was built in stages. The works started in 1939 yet they were interrupted in 1940 because of the Second World War, being resumed only in the late 1970s. Inside, the current mural painting was made between 1987 and 1989 by the painter Constantin Savin. The iconostasis dates back from the years 1980-1982 and was made by the priest Argatu Alexandru from Suceava County.

The church has a triconch plan and consists of the altar apse, nave with a tower and side aisles and a narthex developed in length. The central tower built on pendentives together with the four blind towers placed in the corners of the nave and the bell tower on the west facade represent, in elevation, an extremely expressive ensemble.

Outside, the building composition is achieved by the play of volumes with varied heights. The facades have no decorations, being rhythmized only by the alternation between masonry and the gap between windows.

Key words: Orthodox Church, Săcuieni, Pintér Ștefan, George Molnar.

The project for the plan of the Orthodox Church in Săcuieni was dated Oradea, February 9, 1939 (Fig.1) and the project for facades was dated January 12, 1939¹ (Fig.2). The boards are signed by the architect engineers Pintér Ștefan and George Molnar (Fig.3). Next to George Molnar's stamp it is handwritten: "*for the plan*". This detail and also the fact that in the church *Charter* it is mentioned that he, "... Ștefan Pinter... was entrusted with building the holy place"² encourage us to put into circulation the fact that Pintér Ștefan was the contractor and George Molnar the architect of the church.

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¹ Archives of the Romanian Orthodox Bishopric, Oradea, *fund Buildings*, file: The Orthodox Church in Săcuieni, letter S, *Project for the Orthodox Church in Săcuieni*. The project was approved in the Parish Council Meeting on March 7, 1939 and 11 days later in the Diocesan Council meeting.

² *Legea Românească (Romanian Law)*, no.13/1939, p.177.

Little has been written about Pintér Ștefan's life and activity³. For George Molnar's biography we turned to the literature written in English as the architect immigrated to Australia in 1939⁴.

Pintér Ștefan was born in Oradea on March 4, 1902. His father, Mihai Pintér, was a master builder and, for decades, the technical director at the company of the renowned engineer from Oradea, Vilmos Rendes. Ștefan Pintér studied at the Premonstratesian School in his hometown and then attended the courses of the Polytechnic University of Budapest. After graduation, he returned to Oradea and worked for a short period of time at the company called *Palatinus*, and then he opened his own design office on 12 George Barițiu Street. The first work of the young architect was *Klobusitzky Palace* (on 31 Republicii Street), designed in 1926⁵. In 1927 he designed the wave pool in Băile 1 Mai, also called *The Bishopric Baths* in the interwar period, the first pool of this type in Romania. He won the first prize in the country for designing pools⁶. He was also awarded the first prize for extending the Jewish Hospital, the wing of the current morgue and the one-storey wing of the building facing Calea Averescu, a project that he made in 1929. In 1933 he designed the small Orthodox synagogue of the Rabi of Vișnița, situated on Crinului Street, on the corner with Kogălniceanu Street. Since the 1930s, Pintér became conspicuous in Oradea also by building numerous modernist houses and edifices: the group of houses on the Canon's Row and Museum Streets, Olosig Roman-Catholic parish house on 28 Republicii Street as well as Olosig Roman-Catholic School, also known as *Stark School*, on Brașovului Street, 1934⁷.

A modernist vision, this time, according to Bauhaus principles, as the architect himself described the houses he designed in Oradea, can also be seen in the residential buildings designed by George Molnar⁸. Molnar was born on April 25, 1910 in Oradea and died on December 16, 1998 in Sydney. He graduated from the Technical University of Budapest. After graduation he returned to Oradea and took part in various competitions for housing projects in the central area of the town⁹: residential buildings on 43 Roman Ciorogariu Street and 3 Libertății Street. In 1939 he left Romania and settled permanently in Australia where he worked as an architect, professor and cartoonist. He started his teaching career at the end of the Second World War, as a design and architecture professor at the University of Sydney. Two decades later he was teaching architecture at the University of New South Wales. Meanwhile, he also became known as a valuable cartoonist. His works were first published in *The Daily Telegraph*, being appreciated also by the opposition newspapers, among which we mention *The Sydney Morning Herald*, where he was employed between 1952 and 1984. Through his cartoons, Molnar showed, this time using a means of bidimensional artistic expression, his vision and beliefs about architecture, urban planning and financial society in Sydney. As an architect, he took part, together with the firm Stephenson & Turner, in the project competition for the Opera House in Sydney. 216 projects from 36 countries entered the competition¹⁰, the winning project being the one of the Danish architect John Utzon.

³ See: Fehér Dezső, *Bihor – Biharmegye, Oradea – Nagyvárad, Kulturtörténete és Öregdiákjainak. Emlékkönyve (Cultural History of Bihor County, of Oradea and a Memorial Album of its Former Pupils)*, Oradea, 1933-1937, p. 363-364; Pařka Ernest, *Aspecte edilitare între cele două războaie mondiale (Urban Issues between the Two World Wars)*, in *Istoria orașului Oradea*, Cogito Publishing House, Oradea 1995; Péter I. Zoltán, *3 secole de arhitectură orădeană (Three Centuries of Architecture in Oradea)*, Muzeul Țării Crișurilor Publishing House, Oradea, 2003.

⁴ Bibliographical sources used: Jo Holder, Robert Freestone, Joan Kerr, *Human Scale in Architecture: George Molnar's Sydney*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 2003; <http://www.pbase.com/csw62/molnar>; <http://www.architecturemedia.com/aa/aaissue.php?issueid=199901&article=13&typeon=3>.

⁵ Péter I. Zoltán, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁶ Fehér Dezső, *op. cit.*, p.363.

⁷ Some of the information on engineer Pintér's biography was given by Dr. Mircea Pașca, senior advisor at the Directorate for Culture and Heritage of Bihor County.

⁸ Jo Holder, Robert Freestone, Joan Kerr, *op. cit.*, p.12.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.17.

During his youth, Molnar designed, besides residential buildings, some buildings of worship: Haşaş Chapel¹¹ in Oradea and the church in Săcuieni.

On June 25, 1939, the Orthodox Bishop of Oradea, Nicolae Popoviciu, accompanied by Colonel Georgescu, the Prefect of Bihor, and architect engineer Pintér Ştefan¹² were travelling to Săcuieni (*Székelyhíd* in Hungarian) in order to consecrate the cornerstone of the Orthodox church¹³. The bishop's visit and its purpose were an opportunity for spiritual celebration for the Romanian-Orthodox community in the village near the western border of Romania, with a majority population of ethnic Hungarians: *"a group of priests together with the parish priest dr. Cipău, many intellectuals, pre-military, a campaign with music and a great multitude of believers welcomed their high pastor, disciplined and respectful and also with a slightly restrained quiver of joy"*¹⁴. The Orthodox bishop's presence was also welcomed by the representatives of the cohabitant religions, the Protopope Tămăianu on behalf of the Greek-Catholic Church and priest Haghin on behalf of the Roman-Catholic Church¹⁵, numerous local officials attending the service of consecration: praetor C. Roşcanu, S.Carol vice-mayor of the commune, Raşescu, the secretary of the commune¹⁶. The *Charter* was placed at the foundation of the church and it had the following content: *"With Father's will, the Son's help and with the Holy Spirit's doing, this cornerstone was placed for the Romanian-Orthodox Church in Săcuieni-Bihor, with the Patron Saints and the Apostles Emperor Constantine and Helen, on Sunday 25 June, the year of salvation 1939, in the tenth year of wise and glorious reign of his High Majesty King Carol II of Romania.*

The deputy Patriarch was His Holiness Dr. Nicodim Munteanu, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Suceava; the Metropolitan of Ardeal was His Holiness Dr. Nicolae Bălan; the Bishop of Oradea was His Grace Dr. Nicolae Popoviciu, the Deanery Administrator was Iconom Stavrofor Vasile Popoviciu, the parish priest was Dr. Liviu I. Cipău; churchwardens: I. Maier Emil Barbu, II. Spira Zdravcovici, III. Gh. Maghiaroş.

The County Prefect was Colonel D. Georgescu, praetor Cornel Roşcanu, mayor of the commune Major Emil Barbu, first notary Petre Frenţiu, members in the parish committee: Major Remus Ciuntu, Dr. Romul Rusu, Gh. Cristea, honorary advisors: Antonie Todan, Dumitru Baltă, Eraclie Miroiescu, Ivan Marinescu, Ion Anghel, Simion Tincă, Gh. Pop, Teodor Todoran and Teodor Abrudan, while the architect engineer Ştefan Pintér was entrusted with building the holy place.

*The cornerstone of the church was consecrated by the prayers of His Holiness Himself Dr. Nicolae Popoviciu, the Bishop of Oradea, for the glory, happiness and salvation of all those people who fear God, with faith and love they shall enter and worship in it. Amen"*¹⁷.

The church in Săcuieni was built in stages. The works started in 1939¹⁸ yet they were interrupted in 1940 because of the Second World War, being resumed only in the late 1970s. Inside, the current mural painting was made between 1987 and 1989 by the accredited church painter Constantin Savin from Bucharest (Fig. 4). The iconostasis (Fig. 5) dates back from the years 1980-1982 and was made by father Argatu Alexandru, the parish priest of Boroia in Suceava County¹⁹. Over the years, the church has had various patrons: at the consecration of the cornerstone in 1939, it was dedicated to St. Constantine and Helen, then to *St Archangels Michael and Gabriel* and to *Saint Nicholas*. The church has now two patron saints, on one hand that of *Saint Michael and Gabriel* and that of *Saint Hierarch Nicholas*.

¹¹ National Archives, Bihor County Branch, *fund Oradea Town Hall*, no. inv. 96, file no. 5/1938, page 149; Pintér Ştefan's stamp and signature can also be seen on the project.

¹² Legea Românească (Romanian Law), no.13/1939, p.176.

¹³ Săcuieni has been a town since 2004.

¹⁴ Legea Românească (Romanian Law), no.13/1939, p.176.

¹⁵ *Ibidem* p.178.

¹⁶ *Ibidem* p.176.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p.176-177.

¹⁸ The church inscription mentions 1937 as the year when building works began. Since the architecture project is dated 1939, we will also accept the year 1939 as the starting date of construction.

¹⁹ A piece of information reported by Father Dean of Marghita, Şugar Ioan, who was the parish priest in Săcuieni during April 1983 and February 2000.

The church has a triconch plan and consists of the altar apse, nave with a tower and side aisles and a narthex developed in length. The central tower built on pendentives together with the four blind towers, of smaller sizes, placed in the corners of nave and the bell tower on the west facade represent, in elevation, an extremely expressive ensemble that reminds us of the religious architecture in the Romanian Country in the 16th century, precisely the edifices of Neagoe Basarab.

Outside, the building composition is achieved by the play of volumes with varied heights. The composition of the church is dominated by the main tower, the end of the helmet touching the highest point of the edifice, then it comes the tower helmet on the west facade, the nave roof, the helmets of the four spires and the shortest being the three apses. Following the Byzantine tradition, the altar apse and the side apses of the nave are polygonal in the outside and semicircular in the inside. The facades have no decorations, being rhythmized only by the alternation between masonry and the gap between windows. The decorative approach of the facades leaves visible the demarcation of each liturgical space (Fig. 6). The apses are treated identically, being completely devoid of decorations, each being provided with long and narrow windows, and ended in an arch bond. The nave walls are also devoid of decorations; yet there is an alternation of masonry and mock brick in the upper area, in the central spire and in the smaller spires, being cited again the Eastern, Byzantine model. The composition unity is achieved by the similar decoration of the tower on the western facade. The exterior walls of the narthex are perforated in the lower area by elongated and narrow windows, ending in an arch bond, and by smaller windows in the upper area.

Austere decoration, the prevalence of fullness over gaps, the narrow openings related to the generous dimensions of the edifice provide the church with particular monumentality and architectural configuration among the Orthodox religious buildings designed in Bihor County in the interwar period.

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Sources of illustrations

Fig.1,2,3: Archives of the Romanian Orthodox Bishopric, fund Buildings, file The Orthodox Church in Săcuieni

Fig.4,5,6: photographs taken by Adriana Ruge