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Preserving Hungary's Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Eger Quartermasters

Abstract

This article presents the historical and social context of the Eger Quartermasters' Council, an institution dating back several centuries and forming part of Hungary's intangible cultural heritage, as well as its contemporary role in community building and the preservation of values. The author attempts to describe the processes of cultural memory, identity, and the transmission of tradition through the practices of an active local community. The analysis also covers the sacral, charitable, and local patriotic activities of the quartermasters, highlighting how bringing the traditions of the past into the present can sustain a continuous sense of national and local identity.

Keywords: Eger quartermasters (*fertálmesterség*), Intangible Cultural Heritage, cultural remembrance, local patriotism, preservation of traditions, community building, 9.5 mm film, Eger chroniclers

Introduction

*“The present is built upon the past, the future is founded on the present.
To respect the past is therefore the noblest of traditions.”*
– Imre Breznay, quartermaster (Breznay 1939, 11)

Preserving the values inherited and received from our ancestors is an important task. The transformative power of remembrance can be strengthened by numerous external and internal factors. Without historical context, personal memory loses its value, remaining limited and narrow-minded. Therefore, groups that preserve Hungarian historical traditions, or those operating on an even broader scale, are important transformative factors. Equally, their active presence and activities provide an opportunity to preserve and continually reinterpret memory and national identity. If these groups, which operate based on religious, social, and human values, participate continuously in public discourse, this can have a decisive impact on the continuity of national consciousness: “An increasingly complex and comprehensive understanding of memory has prompted several nations to rethink their positive national self-image, grounded on firm foundations” (Assmann 1999, 45).

Newly discovered documents contribute to the construction of national narratives, which provide the nation’s citizens with a further legacy. Memory is an active, expanding process that is constantly built upon new sources, and in which both external and internal factors play a role:

- External factors include, for example, the influence of the media and films, which can alter the basis of social dialogue and provide previously inaccessible emotional resonance to broader sections of society (cf. Antal 2022).
- Internal factors represent a more personal, more direct form of memory. Memory does not live solely in the media, archives, and memorials, but also as embodied memory, passed down from one generation to the next across three or even four generations, in a synchronous relationship, where generational dynamics are a defining factor in the formation of memory (Assmann 1999, 86).

Cultural memories and heritage embody the shared spiritual values of the nation, and therefore their preservation is everyone’s duty.

Hungarian legislation places particular emphasis on the protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Within this framework, the aim is to recognise the value

of images, moving images and audio recordings, to preserve them and to pass them on to future generations. “Cultural assets: the outstanding and characteristic material, visual, audio, written and other evidence—with the exception of immovable property—of the origin and development of inanimate and living nature, and of the history of humanity, the Hungarian nation and Hungary, as well as works of art.”¹

This article focuses on Intangible Cultural Heritage, which features in the chosen topic of my DLA dissertation in film, and in my documentary masterpiece, which links to the Eger quartermasters from the 1930s through events captured on 9.5 mm film reels by the “Eger chroniclers”.

The personal relevance of this choice of topic is that, since 2019, I have been participating as a member in the work of the Eger Quartermasters’ Council, which is also listed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage Register.² We recently celebrated the 30th anniversary of the re-establishment of the Eger Quartermasters’ Council, and I consider it very important to strengthen intergenerational bonds, support young talent, and nurture a sense of local pride.



Picture 1. Group photo of the quartermasters who took their oath in 2019 (Courtesy of the author)

1 Act LXIV of 2001 on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Section 7.

2 According to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, this type of heritage consists of knowledge and practices passed down from generation to generation, which define the identity of a community. It is important that the community bearing such heritage consciously safeguards the cultural treasures in its possession.

A historical overview of the quartermasters

“Emotions, motivations, and humanity’s cultural heritage spanning thousands of years together form our inner world.”

– Tamás Freund (Szegedi 2019, 12)

The Eger quartermaster institution, rooted in a history spanning several hundred years and still actively functioning today, is a fine example of the preservation and nurturing of intangible cultural heritage.

The institution of the quartermaster is a very ancient form of folk administration. In the 15th–19th centuries, in various towns of the Carpathian Basin, the corporal (*tizedes*) elected by the individual districts, and later the quartermasters (*fertálmesterek*) following the German settlement, acted as intermediaries between the districts and the town authorities, oversaw order and moral conduct, and protected the underrepresented.

The office of quartermaster (Latin: *decurio*; German: *Viertelmeister*) was once regarded as an ‘office’ operating throughout the Carpathian Basin. Although the practice of quartermasters had existed since the 16th century, it reached its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries. Whilst there were variations in certain areas, the operational mechanisms, and the duties to be performed were essentially the same everywhere (Petercsák 2014, 15–16).

In most settlements found in historical Hungary, districts with a limited degree of autonomy (tenths, streets, districts, quarters) emerged over time, headed by



Picture 2. Imre Breznay, quartermaster (Eger, Quartermasters’ Council, ‘Whispering Circle’ [*Suttogó*³]; photo: László Borbás)

³ Whispering Circle: In 2024, the Eger Quartermasters Council moved to its permanent headquarters at 9 Dobó Square in Eger. This is where members of the various districts hold their meetings and discussions (‘their little whisperings’).



Picture 3: 20th-century group photograph of quartermasters (Eger, Quartermasters' Council, 'Whispering Circle'; photo: László Borbás)

corporals, 'street captains' and 'captains' in areas with a Hungarian majority, and by 'quartermasters' in regions inhabited by Germans.

According to the research of Professor Tivadar Petercsák, the Hungarian term and the office of quartermasters (*fertálmester*) was widespread in those towns that had a significant German population. This office became established in Hungary following a European administrative tradition (Petercsák, Veres and Verók [eds.] 2015, 12).

This is a distinctive form of grassroots self-government, which differs in many ways from vineyard estates and the economic community's characteristic of the Székely people.

The Eger quartermaster system is a unique element of our intangible cultural heritage and the preservation of tradition in Hungary. Since 1996, quartermasters have been inaugurated in Eger every year on a Saturday close to 9 February, the feast day of Saint Apollonia. On this occasion, one man from each quarter of the town—a total of sixteen newly elected men—takes an oath before the town's mayor to continue the centuries-old tradition. The office of quartermasters has

been marked and characterised to this day by two ceremonial garments: the hundred-pleated cloak made of black broadcloth (a floor-length black broadcloth cloak with a round collar lined in red, black velvet at the neck, fastened under the chin with a silver clasp), and the quartermaster's staff with a ribbon (a 1.5-metre-long staff to which the current quartermaster also ties his own silk ribbon). For two and a half decades now, the representatives of the various quarters of the town have once again been present at Eger's public events and church services, safeguarding the values of their quarter and assisting those in need.

The office of quartermaster in Eger is special because, uniquely in Hungary, this position, which had been passed down from generation to generation for centuries and entrusted with duties that varied from era to era, survived in Eger until 1950. The prestige of the office of quartermaster reached its peak in the first half of the 20th century. High-ranking clergymen, members of parliament, county and town officials, and intellectuals all considered it an honour to serve as quartermasters.

Quartermasters on film and on photographs

Architect Sándor Hevesy, the expert who oversaw the reconstruction of Eger after the Second World War, is also known for his amateur footage as Eger's first film chronicler. His spirit was characterised by both the preservation of values and innovation. Contemporary film reels bear witness to his work, his passion for heritage conservation and his hobby, through which he preserved special moments from the 1930s for posterity. Sándor Hevesy first filmed his twin daughters, then went on to capture construction sites, street scenes and everyday life.



Picture 4. Still frames from 1931 film footage—quartermasters on the steps of Eger Cathedral (9.5 mm film, archive, photo: László Borbás)

"A dedicated team of amateur film reporters is now active in Eger too. Small, but more enthusiastic for it. There is no social or festive event where city engineer Sándor Hevesy, director Imre Kiszely or Sándor Luszti do not turn up with their little camera, which focuses on things and, whirring busily, captures them. Liquid history is being made, which is splendid photographic entertainment for those who create it, and a pleasant reminiscence for those who see it come to life on the white screen in the Korona's Yellow Hall or at the Casino. On ten-metre rolls of film, the 'Eger Newsreel' is born." ("A dedicated team of amateur film reporters is now active in Eger too", 1935.)

Hevesy's 9.5 mm cameras captured the quartermasters on film on several occasions.

The Present State of the Quartermaster's Office

Revived after the democratic transition, the quartermaster's office is now an integral part of local identity in Eger. The members of the body participate in the preservation and promotion of social, cultural, and historical values, in the development of the city, and carry out charitable activities. Their appearance in their distinctive attire adds splendour to the city's events.

Today, three hundred and thirty respected citizens of Eger can call themselves quartermasters, who meet at the monthly "grand whispering" held at the Franciscan friary. Here, the current mayor briefs the council on ongoing municipal tasks and future plans, whilst also listening to feedback and expectations from the public. Acting as a kind of living conscience, the quartermasters pay attention to issues that a member of the representative body may not have time to notice.

In Eger, quartermasters were first elected three hundred years ago to represent the city's districts. The duties associated with the office have changed over the centuries, but the swearing-in of new quartermasters took place every year until 1949. Due to its prohibition, the election of quartermasters was suspended for nearly half a century. It was revived in 1995/1996, and in 2014, 'The Living Tradition of the Eger Quartermasters' was added to the national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.⁴

⁴ The aim of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is to identify and register elements of intangible cultural heritage located within the territories of the signatory countries.

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted as part of the UNESCO treaty in 2003 in Hungary too. Intangible cultural heritage is essentially a cultural practice existing in oral traditions, knowledge, skills, and customs, and linked to living communities. This heritage, passed down from generation to generation and constantly recreated by communities, provides them with a shared identity and a sense of continuity.

The sacred connection of the quartermasters

Within the Eger Quartermasters' Council, Christian values, a connection to the faith, and participation in regular church services are routine. They have chosen Saint Apollonia as their patron saint, who lived in Alexandria in the 3rd century. During the persecutions of Christians, she was captured, tortured, and had her teeth knocked out. She did not renounce her faith, but instead threw herself voluntarily into the fire. She is the patron saint of dentists and those suffering from dental ailments. Her statue leads the procession during the inauguration of the new quartermasters.

The use of sacred language and prayer form a part of the various religious and additional events. It has become a tradition which the Eger Quartermasters' Council organises with connection to the Feast of the Annunciation, where everyone is invited to join in communal prayer at Dobó Square, stepping out of the silence of the churches. The aim of this initiative, launched in 2022, is to pray together to the Virgin Mary for peace, the protection of life and for families.

Every year, members of the council take part in the opening ceremony of the Eger Bikavér Festival, as well as in the prayer service held at the statue of Saint Donatus as part of the festivities, the autumn harvest parade, and the wine blessing ceremony on Saint John's Day.

The quartermasters still have an important role today in continuing the traditions of the past, acting as spokespeople for their districts to preserve and promote local values. A process has begun to have the stone crosses of Eger, which were demolished or destroyed, to be rebuilt, and re-erected. The cross re-erected in 2016 by the quartermasters of Cifra-Sánc and Felsőváros is also part of this mission.

Plans are underway to rebuild another stone cross that stood in Hunyadi Square in the 19th century and was still visible in photographs taken in the 1930s.

The Eger Quartermasters' Council has also erected a memorial pillar in the park in front of the basilica, where they pay tribute to the memory of deceased quartermasters. The organisation's members felt that a memorial should be erected for those who did so much for the town through their work. The chairman of the council put it this way: the memorial pillar symbolises togetherness. It commemorates not death, but life.

The activities of the quartermasters

*"Our successes show us the way forward, strengthen us,
and highlight that we are on the right path."*

(Várkonyi 2023, 2)

Thirty years have passed since the reorganisation in 1996, and the body remains united. The fundamental aims are community building, the preservation of traditions, the promotion of Eger's spiritual uplift, and turning towards one another. The Christian faith provides a solid foundation for carrying out their work. The growth of the districts (the joining of Felsőváros and Felnémet) can be counted as a success. Sixteen districts are active across sixteen quarters of the city, working to showcase and make the area's unique characteristics part of the public domain.

There is no larger cohesive community in Eger today (three hundred and thirty members). The neighbourhoods are constantly creating and building: the Bell Tower and the statue of St Stephen, the statue and square of Albert Wass, playgrounds, workout-park, the restoration of the statue of Mary on the Rác 'high-town', the erection of a cross at the Cifra Gate, etc. Members also organise programmes independently (e.g., cleaning up the Children's Home, tidying up the area around the Rókus Chapel). The choir, which has been active for at least twenty years, still performs regularly to this day.

Engaging with the local community is also an ongoing effort. For example, the body is active in organising and running the numerous St Nicholas celebrations, Christmas tree erections and church festivals. A significant achievement is that the annual programmes have expanded, meaning the quartermasters have ventured beyond the city limits. The Eger Quartermasters' Council has established links with Pécs, the Jász people, the Skanzen in Szentendre, the people of Karcag whom they met through heritage conservation, the masked Carnival Custom preservers of Novaj, Zetelaka, Csíksomlyó, Devecser, the historian

Mihály Nagy from Nagyvárad, and the list goes on. In 2024, the council acquired its own premises, where the quarters can hold their Whispering Circles meetings, receive guests, and host presentations.

Overall, it can be said that within the Eger Quartermasters' Council, external and internal factors reveal the two sides of the dynamics of remembrance: their collaboration ensures that the newly uncovered heritage is realised not only at an individual or community level, but also within the broader framework of national narratives. This underscores the central idea of the opening sentence of my essay: heritage is not static, but a process of continuous construction and transformation.

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