

Daniel Véri

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

The Tiszaeszlár Blood Libel: Image and Propaganda

The Tiszaeszlár blood libel (1882–83) is beyond any doubt a major episode of modern Hungarian history.¹ The cultural importance of the affair is highlighted by a rather strange phenomenon: Tiszaeszlár appears to be a key issue of identity for at least two distinct groups; Hungarian right wing extremists and Hungarian artists of Jewish descent are equally invested in the case. Artistically or culturally significant works authored outside these two groups are extremely rare.

The interpretations of the Tiszaeszlár case show profound affinity with Hungary's social and political history. On the one hand, Tiszaeszlár has always been inevitably thematized when the extreme right had gained momentum. On the other hand, interpretations by Jewish artists prove to be a delicate barometer for measuring actual levels of hidden and open anti-Semitism. Contemporary politics have always been a major factor for both the genesis and the understanding of these works.

For this conference I have chosen to present visual material related to the case, namely a lithograph, drawings, and paintings. All of these works belong to an artistic tradition nurtured by the extreme right. Creators and public of the blood libel related works belong to subsequent and interrelated anti-Semitic subcultures present from the beginning of the case – 1882 – to this day.

¹The case in a nutshell: in 1882, Eszter Solymosi, a young peasant girl went missing in the village of Tiszaeszlár. Soon local Jews were accused of ritual murder; it was claimed that they needed the girl's blood for the approaching Passover. From village rumours the case grew to gain nationwide importance. During the investigation – which did not lack premeditated elements – Móric Scharf, son of a defendant was forced to make a false testimony. The trial was held in 1883, where the defence had been led by lawyer Károly Eötvös, a well-known liberal politician. At the end of the Europe-wide disputed, infamous case all of the defendants were cleared of the charges.

Musical interpretations of the blood accusation appeared as early as 1883, before and after the trial. Both a polka and publications of a ‘folk’ song attest to the necessity of complimentary illustration: the message lies much more in the visual rendering than the melody itself. These musical sheets equally show the eminent role of the press in anti-Semitic propaganda.

One of most important aspects of blood libel-related artworks is the making of a ‘martyr’, Eszter Solymosi. An imaginary portrait had been created in 1882 which has subsequently been used to stage the speech of a member of the Hungarian parliament at the first *Internationaler Antijüdischer Kongress* in Dresden. Going through various, interconnected stages from 1882 to present day, an iconography has been established featuring the girl as a Hungarian and Christian martyr. The function of these images takes us back to the village itself: since the 1990s, Tiszaeszlár has become a genuine pilgrimage site, a real *lieu de mémoire* for right wing extremists. Another major aspect is the question of monumental paintings depicting the blood libel. One such painting was created in Zagreb in 1882. Although neither the work itself nor reproductions have survived, from contemporary descriptions, drawings as well as other sources we can trace the painting and its success. A second, monumental painting (cca. 2 by 4 meters) surfaced in 2013, which has been attributed falsely to Mihály Munkácsy and connected – incorrectly, according to my opinion – to the Tiszaeszlár blood libel. In my presentation I will attempt to analyze this work and to reconstruct its context, tracing back its iconographical tradition to the late fifteenth century.

The image production related to the Tiszaeszlár blood libel attests to the long lasting importance of the case and to the omnipresence of visuality in anti-Semitic propaganda. Analyses of these works could contribute to the understanding of not only the art history of this blood libel but also to the cultural historical context of such famous cases in Central and Eastern Europe as the Hilsner affair (Polná, 1899–1900) or the Beilis affair (Kiev, 1911–13).