

SPIRITUAL PATH

ORADEA – THE TOWN OF CHURCHES

In the case of Oradea, a city with a rich, beautiful and long history, churches frequently played an important part. Its early beginnings are tied to the establishment of such a religious location. The legend of its foundation recorded in the *Vienna Illuminated Chronicle* mentions that, while on a hunt, king Ladislaus I(1077-1095) “*found in the parish of the Fortress of Bihor, between the Criş Rivers, a place where, beckoned by angels, he decided to build a monastery dedicated to The Virgin Mary*”. Surrounding it with a layer of earth, then replacing it with stronger edifices and with stone or brick walls, and the birth of Oradea Fortress would eventually contribute to the development of many settlements whose unification will lead to modern Oradea. Concretely, the positive role churches have had in the development of the city can be exemplified for instance by the church completed in 1192 (probably inaugurated when Ladislaus I was sanctified) or by the grandiose church built during the diocese of Demetrius, 72 meters high, flanked by two massive towers, which will host the tomb of the holy king mentioned earlier, and of the king-emperor Sigismund de Luxemburg.

On 25th August 1401 Pope Boniface IX will award it a privilege which shall make it comparable to the San Marco Cathedral of Venice or the Santa Maria Portiuncula of Assisi and shall lead to transforming it into an important pilgrimage spot for many believers nearby, but also from Central and Eastern Europe.

The spirit of religious tolerance of the inhabitants of the city was quite high in early times and this statement can easily be tested with the coexistence in the central area, at small distances from one another, of churches belonging to the Orthodox faith, but also the Roman and Greek-Roman, Reformed and Lutheran faiths. To these we can add the presence of three synagogues.

Of different sizes, of a particular elegance and decorative richness, or, on the contrary, of an imposing sobriety, all these buildings as well as the peripheral part of town accumulate an existence which stretches across centuries, as they gathered a rich history which augments their touristic, cultural and spiritual value.

A brief enumeration of the places of worship built within the city on the banks of the Crişul Repede River cannot be complete without its most representative **orthodox churches** such as *the Church of the Assumption* or *the Moon Church*. *the Orthodox Church of the Holy*

Archangels Michael and Gabriel, In this category we might also mention *the Holy Trinity Church*.

The Church of the Assumption (1784-1832)

The style of this church is late-Baroque with marked Classical elements. The interior is confined to the rigid norms of spatial development of the Byzantine style, and it rigorously follows the canons of this church. It is also known as the ‘Moon church’ due to the mechanism installed in the church tower in 1793. The clock and the moon are the masterpiece of a creative mechanic from Oradea, Georg Rueppert. The mechanism that spins the moon is supposed to complete a full rotation around its axis in 28 days, indicating the moon phases, according to the daily cycle marked by the clock mechanism.



The Church of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel (1768-1779)

The Orthodox Church with the patron “St. Archangels Michael and Gabriel” is one of the oldest places of worship of orthodox religion in the city. This church was built on the place of a wooden church, the work being conducted by the Austrian engineer Schultz.



The church was rebuilt after the big fire in 1836. It has a number of 49 icons and three doors with inscriptions in Greek. In the church there are exposed extremely valuable wooden and canvas icons of the 18th century.



The ‘Holy Trinity’ Orthodox Church (1693-1700)

This is one of the many places of worship that were declared historical monuments. Its troubled history had an influence on whom to choose as a patron saint and how its interior developed, since it was used consecutively by priests and believers of three denominations: Roman-Catholic, Greek-Catholic and, at present, Orthodox.



The works started in 1692 when Ottomans no longer ruled in town. The construction was initiated by Roman-Catholic Bishop Ágoston Benkovics. It is a simple church with a nave and a pentagonal altar, counting on a small elevation and a wooden tower at its end. Stylistically speaking, even though it was initially designed in the Baroque style (as suggested by the curved shapes on the gable), its current style is Eclectic, scarce in technical solutions or stylistic artifices. The interior painting, in the ‘al fresco’ technique was done recently, between 1982 and 1985.

To these we may add the **Roman-Catholic places** of worship: *Saint Ladislaus Church, the Premonstratensian Church, The Ascension of Virgin Mary Cathedral, the Roman-Catholic Fortress Church, the Capuchins Church, Saint Ann Church, Church of the Order of Mercy.*

“Saint Ladislaus” Church (1720-1733)



It is considered one of the most important late-Baroque buildings in the area. The construction work started around 1720, under Bishop Csáky Imre, and the inscription above the entrance indicates that it was finished in 1733. In reality, this construction knew several stages and took much longer. For instance, there is concrete evidence that the sacristy and its two chambers were built only in 1739 and the tower, in late-Baroque style, was completed only between 1790 and 1800.

There isn't much information about the constructors of this place of worship in provincial, simple but elegant Baroque style. It is important to highlight that until 1780, when the Roman-Catholic basilica was consecrated, St. Ladislaus church served as a Roman-Catholic cathedral, facilitating the transition between the old cathedral from the Citadel and the present one, from the Baroque Complex. Dedicated to the miracle worker and founder of the settlement, the church develops in its interior, especially across the ceiling, representing the most important events of the saint's life, the legend of the foundation, the legend of his death and burial in the Citadel of Oradea and the moment of his canonization. These motifs are present on the main entrance door, which has recently been restored, where one can observe metal engravings of the same legendary-historical moments. Its interior holds the oldest altar in Oradea, dating back to 1730, still functioning in the same shape to the present day.



The Ursuline Complex (1771-1773)



The Ursuline nuns' convent and 'Saint Anne' Church are two apparently different buildings that share a common historical evolution. Both were erected in 1771 at the initiative of the canon Stephánus Szentzy, who bought the land of an older cloister that had functioned here. The construction of this complex underwent various stages and many architectural solutions were employed here. Thus, built in the shape of the letter L, the complex forming the church and the convent holds both Baroque elements (mostly in its interior) and also Romantic with Neo-Gothic influences (visible especially at the frames of doors and windows). The construction seems to have been finished



in 1877, when a new aisle was added. The church of 'Saint Anne' is the historical witness of a natural calamity that struck the town of Oradea. On the main façade one can see the inscription indicating the water level during the flood in August 1851.

The Roman-Catholic church 'The Descent of the Holy Spirit' (1787-1901)



This building hides an old and relatively troubled history. Initially, this place had been a monastery of Franciscan monks, but the dismantling of this order by Emperor Joseph II led to this area and building to pass to the Roman-Catholic church from 1787. Hence, a new tower (53 m) that split the main façade in three parts was added to the initial old ecclesiastical building, where some elements are still preserved today (the lateral altars from the chapels, the crypt). Engineer Knapp Ferencz is the man behind the construction of the tower, who reached the outstanding performance for that period to erect it in just four months. In the year 1891, a true curse was cast on the church. It is the moment when the construction revealed its weaknesses between the nave and the tower, where a split was noticed. It was adamant that the structure be rebuilt as soon as possible. Nonetheless, a new split emerged on the dome of the church, a century later in 1901. Restoration solutions were no longer in sight, so that the church was closed and the nave was demolished. The restoration mission was handed to architect Rimanóczy Kálmán-jr. He was the one to give the building a pseudo-Baroque style or, according to other experts in the history of architecture, a Mannerist one.



The Ascension of Virgin Mary Cathedral (1752-1780)



The Roman-Catholic Cathedral 'The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary' is located inside the Baroque Complex Park, where one can also find the Roman-Catholic Bishopric Palace and it represents the fourth Diocese of the Roman-Catholic denomination in Oradea. Access to this house of worship is either through the main gate of the Baroque Complex, or through the gate that leads to the nave of the church. The building is the work of Franz Anton Hillebrandt, an architect from Vienna who accepted the proposal of bishop Paulus Forgács to design it. What is interesting to mention is that from 1750 until 1st May 1752 when the foundation was laid, the Austrian architect's name was ubiquitous, but from this moment on, it disappeared only to be replaced by that of Italian constructor Giovanni Battista Ricca.

Some sort of bad omen hung above those names linked to this place of worship, since the Italian artist died in 1756. The arrival of a new bishop, Ádám Patachich, gave a new stimulus for the construction.



He settled things in such a way that, parallel with the construction of the Baroque Palace, the same Franz Anton Hillebrandt, who in the meantime became chief-



architect for the Imperial Court, would be the supervisor of the cathedral's construction by Austrian Johann Michael Neumann. From 1761, Ricca's plans were revised and replaced, so that instead of a North-Italian Baroque style basilica, the building would be erected in

the late-Austrian Baroque style. After several amendments to the plan and after construction stalemates, works ended in the summer of 1779. The consecration of the church was done a year later, on 25th June, 1780.

Very well preserved, both inside and outside, the building is remarkable through its exterior monumentality and through the intelligent exploitation of the interior. The exquisite chromatic scale, pictorial composition and the heavenly acoustics are elements



that make Basilica Minor profoundly attractive. Among the valuable objects it possesses we remind: Gothic and Renaissance style tombstones of the old cathedral in the Citadel of Oradea and the chest with the relics of Saint Ladislaus I, the miracle worker.

The Premonstratensian Complex (1741-1766)



At present a Roman-Catholic church, 'The Bereaved Mother of God' used to function as a Pauline monks' church and later as a house of worship for the Premonstratens order. It was built between 1741 and 1766, after Bishop Nicolaus Csáki from Oradea donated the land on

which the building stands to the Pauline order in 1740. The architect and, it seems, the executor of the church is a Pauline monk named Vépi Máte. The church facade gives the impression of massiveness, highlighted by the two corner towers. It is divided into three horizontal axes and



three vertical registers. In the central register there is a portal ending with a gable. Above it there is a window in the central axis, typical of Baroque churches. As a whole, this church is Baroque-style with Neo-Classical elements.

The Roman-Catholic Church from the Fortress (1775)



The Church is located within the Fortress of Oradea.

According to documents and other historical testimonies, its construction was finished in 1775. The style is Baroque with numerous provincial artistic elements. The 1836 fire, that destroyed some parts of the town, affected this church as well. The roof of the tower, initially in Baroque-style, would become a simple low pyramid with tiles after the restoration (currently covered with sheet-metal). In 1992 the church was renovated and nowadays it serves as a house of prayer for Roman-Catholic Slovaks living in Oradea.



The Capuchins Complex (1734-1838)



The Capuchin Complex consists of a church and a monastery and it is a living proof of the prevalent Neoclassical style in Oradea at that time. It was initially designed as a Baroque construction between 1734 and 1742, but the fire from 1836 destroyed it completely. The reconstruction of the complex was performed in Neo-classical style,

very fashionable then, and was completed in 1838 by master builder Barthel György. The church interior is simple and the relatively small nave is partially painted, with images appearing on the ceiling only. The pictorial images, inspired artistically by Western influences, are remarkable through their simplicity and strong lay elements. It is known today under the name of the Roman-Catholic Church of “the Visit of Holy Virgin Mary to Saint Elisabeth”.



Church of the Order of Mercy, Miseri church or Guardian Angel church



These three names refer to a small 18th century church, the building of which started around 1754. The painting on the elliptic dome, which is rather rare in Transylvania, was made by I. A. Rupp in 1869. The wood-carvings are also magnificent. The

group of statues over the main altar represents the Holy Trinity. On the pulpit one can see the symbols representing the four evangelists. A winged lad represents Saint Matthew, an ox head stands for Saint Lukas, a lion head for Saint Mark and an eagle with spread wings represents Saint John. There are also many large wood statues, which used to be on the basilica’s main altar. They got here after the marble altar was erected in the basilica. The name of the artist who made these remarkably well carved wood statues is unknown. In the vault they buried



noblemen, but the founder of the church, György Gyöngyösi, is also buried here. It was him who built the order's house, the hospital and the apothecary.



The Roman-Greek faith also has churches of an interesting history and a high touristic potential.

The church of 'Saint Nicholas' (1800-1810)



The church of 'Saint Nicholas' – the Greek-Catholic cathedral, in relative extension to the bishopric, was built between 1800 and 1810. Its architect and constructor are unknown, but the style is well defined, representing classical Baroque. The interior decoration is Byzantine. The building fell to the fire in 1836 and it was rebuilt with great efforts and spending until 1870. In the same period the Byzantine pinnacle was added to the tower. A new fire affected the tower in 1907. Its restoration was carried out between 1910 and 1912, when the sumptuous Baroque pinnacle was added, still visible today.



The interior decoration is rich and masterly. The painting follows to a great extent the typical strictness imposed by Byzantine Greek-Orthodox



religious art, especially around the iconostasis. It is remarkable that the church inventory houses several adornments and liturgical objects received as a gift by Greek-Catholic clergymen from emperors of the Habsburg Empire, Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Among these are the two gold-plated monumental tripods that outflank the altar.



The reformed cult is represented in its turn by several representative monument-churches. Of these we may remark upon *the Calvinist Reformed Church* and *the New Town Reformed Church*. We must also make a point of mentioning *the Lutheran Church*, which replaces a chapel of modest size in which service was performed since 1802.

The Reformed Calvinist Church (1784-1787)

The church is situated, close to the right bank of the Crişul Repede River. Its construction began parallel with the construction of the Moon Church. In just three years, between 1784 and 1787, the building was erected in Neo-Classical Baroque style. This is visible both on the exterior, on the



facades, and on the inside, through the typical elements of the style (visible at the church pulpit and the interior furnishings). However, these elements are not

ubiquitous in the Reformed Calvinist style.



The New Town Reformed Church (1835-1853)

The church was built on a place where previously there was a granary transformed in house of prayer for the Protestants of Calvinist confession. The cornerstone was laid 14th April 1835 in Neo-Classical style. The construction works are spread over a period of 18 years, until 1853, being repeatedly disrupted by



unfavourable events and lack of funds. The elevation of the two symmetric and imposing towers takes place later, between 1870 and 1871. The largest reformed church of Oradea, build of brick, is characterized by the sober, simple, symmetrical architectural style, with a



rectangular plan without hall type sanctuary. The two bell-towers that reach a height of 45 m give the building a monumental aspect. Until the construction of the palace where today is found the Oradea City Hall, the tower of the Reformed Church served as lookout place over

the city. From here, the fire fighters warned about the danger of starting and spreading a fire in the city. The towers are covered by the dome shaped helmets. The interior of the Church respects the Classicist style, through sobriety and lack of decorations. At the two ends are placed some balconies, one for the organ (choir loft), and the other one for the church choir.

The Lutheran Evangelical Church (1902-1903)

The Reformed Lutheran church was built at the beginning of the 20th century between 1902 and 1903. It is the work of the renowned and industrious architect-builder from Oradea Rimanóczy Kálmán Junior



and it conveys an Eclectic style. The main

visual elements are the Neo-Gothic insertions on the door and window frames, the buttresses and the towers from the main facade, towers

covered with tiles and enamel ceramic.



The places of worship belonging to **the Jewish community** deserve a special mention, as their contribution to the urban development of Oradea was huge. The most representative and full of history to this date are *the Neolog Synagogue* and *the Orthodox Synagogue*.

The Neolog Synagogue ‘Zion’ (1878)



The Neolog Synagogue ‘Zion’ was built after the division of the Jewish community of Oradea into Orthodox Jews and Neolog and in 1878 it was finally standing in the town of Oradea. The Zion Synagogue was designed by David Busch, at the time the town’s chief municipal architect. It has a square plan, marked by tall windows and a huge, soaring dome. The exterior and interior adornments are Moorish. The Neolog temple stands out through massiveness, monumentality, and ideal location.



The Orthodox Synagogue (1890)



The Orthodox Synagogue is a still active centre for the Jewish community of Oradea. However, when the construction work started, the Jewish community here was one of the most significant groups from an economic and demographic perspective. Thus, given their cultural and religious tradition, but also their economic power, the building had to be emblematic.

It was erected in 1890 by builder Knápp Ferenc, who followed the plans drawn by architect Bách Nándor. Its style is Eclectic, with strong Moorish adornments on the friezes, still visible today.

At present, this is the only functioning synagogue in Oradea, as the number of Jews in Oradea dropped significantly when the majority was deported during the Second World War, and during the communist regime, when they emigrated either to Israel, Western Europe or the United States.

