

**Change and Continuity**  
**The new understanding of the historic past presented by the example of Mikes Estate, Zabola**

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**Introduction**

Park landscapes can be regarded as a means of cultural expression. The Mikes Estate from Zabola (Zabala-Romania) shows - through its creation, its history and through the present situation and management of the estate - how the cultural landscape embodied many of the ideals and needs of the local society. These ideals reflected new reverence for the environment, new approaches to the conservation of natural resources, and a new sense of the historic past.

The studied site is located in the central region of Romania, in the eastern side of Transylvania, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains.

**Aims**

- to demonstrate the importance of traditional land use in historical-economic context, and in nowadays land management;
- to emphasize the role of historical gardens and manors in the scenery and to propose continuous sustainable development for the Mikes Estate.

**Methods**

*Historical survey and analysis*

Part one of the study presents the history of the Mikes Estate, giving the context for the study of landscape development and management in the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> - 20 centuries.

Short presentation of the economical potential of the Mikes family at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

The Mikes Estate in Zabola is a classic example among Székelyland's large estates. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Ármin Mikes owned 4254 cadastral acres of forest in Zabola. He ordered the construction of light railways, cables and water canals in the hills towering over the village. Tracks were laid from the station of Zabola, lying on the Sepsiszentgyörgy – Kézdivásárhely railway line, through the vicinities of Haraly and Gelence, all the way to the foot of Zernye peak, where a wood-mill and a match factory were established. Count Ármin Mikes' wood factory of Zernye opened its gates in 1893, running six hundred railway carts a year, loaded with pine beams and planks, to the wood-mill at the main station.

The Mikes family had a glass factory built already in 1763 on their wooded estate at the border of Bükszád village along the Olt river. German and Czech workers were settled here.

The noble family of Zabola had an important role in the redistribution of farm plots in 1901, during which the previously dispersed lands belonging to one family were drawn together in a single parcel. The Mikes family had relatively little grassland, thus they cultivated 81 cadastral acres on the Meadow along the Feketeügy river with the most up-to-date techniques. Canals and drains ensured that the land would always get enough water without the frequent floods inundating it. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were cultivating just about 400 cadastral acres of plough-land with agricultural drains. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an orchard was planted in Hegymege, the north part of the village, which is unexposed to winds, while a market garden was created on 52 acres next to the castle garden.

It was primarily Ármin Mikes who took great care of breeding the local horse-stock. He purchased more than ten pure-bred mares from abroad and raised racehorses famous throughout Europe. He had a marble-floored stall built in his yard for his most beautiful steeds, visited by several foreigners. During the summers, his admired herd was kept over the village in the slopes of Zernye hill next to the game reserve. His living room in the old castle was decorated with hunting trophies.



**Figure 1. Skid-row and trunk lift, belonging to the Mikes Estate**  
 (Source: *The Archives of Mikes-Chowdhury Family, Zabola*)

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the count's country-house was extended into a castle by Italian stonemasons, while its garden was beautified by German gardeners. Between 1910 and 1912 the family had a new two-storey castle built south of the old mansion. This housed the offices for the family's various factories and enterprises, and also provided comfortable spaces for foreign guests. The two buildings were connected by a tunnel, through which food was transferred from the kitchen of the lower house to the dining room of the old mansion.

The Mikes family estates in 1890 comprised of the following: plough-land 258 acres, orchard 52, grassland and meadow 81, forest 4254, non taxable spaces 11, in total 4656 cadastral acres, which were cultivated with the help of 16 draught animals, 19 ploughs, eight harrows, three rollers, two sowing-machines and one

chopping-machine. The family owned 54 cattle, 40 horses and 28 pigs. The inventory does not mention any sheep.

The research pays close attention to family historic data, as in many cases they can directly be tied to the formation or remaking of the castle/park/estate parts or elements.

The historical analysis of the Mikes Estate includes the description of the built elements and the landscape features, offering an interpretation of the estates landscape history, as a means of cultural expression (including some considerations also about the actual situation and management of the estate).

### *Description of the actual situation*

Through the selective preservation and an excellent management of the land, the owners created a continuously sustainable landscape - a mixture of natural, agricultural and forestry landscape with considerable esthetical values. Land use survey, landscape-aesthetical analysis and garden historical evaluation (through aerial photos, geodesic survey and field-work) represent the basic elements of the survey. Through these methods the existing historical landscape features can be identified in the estate. The inventory and the discussion of landscape features illustrate what kind of elements of past landscapes - and how – have been preserved in the estate.



**Figure 2. Haycocks – results of traditional mowing at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century and nowadays** (Source: *The Archives Hungarian Ethnographical Museum and author's own photo, 2009*)

Comparative research to other manors or estates demonstrates how the landscape of Mikes Estate is reflective of regional, national, and international trends.

The landscape garden around the Mikes castle was established from the late-1870's, with contribution of several famous gardeners at that times. For example, the recognized French gardener, Achille Duchene was a collaborator in the design of the castle park. The park – with its over 36 ha green surfaces, dendrological curiosities, various habitats and their historical values and cultural expression – is a significant appeal of the region.





**Figure 4-5.** The aerial photo of the region shows us very expressively the landscape character formed in principles by the traditional land use methods. A transition from the small, individual, regularly shaped agricultural lots (see photo no. 5), through the grass lands situated over the villages, up to the wooded areas can be easily observed. (Source: Google Earth Map and author's own photo, 2008)

- The research shows the importance of the proprietor family, as this carries that conceptual and cultural background, which is essential for the formation of the genius loci and the identity of the site, as well as for the creation of the residence gardens and of the economic and human background of the estate-development. A model is created that is applicable on other estates.
- The protection, care and maintenance of the cultural landscape cannot merely consist of the conservation of the inherited landscape and its characteristic elements, rather the potential for their development should be dealt with.
- Often, the traditional agricultural forms keep alive landscape patterns, whose natural and ecological values are also of high significance (hedges, ridges, alleys as ecological corridors etc.)



**Figure 5. Well-kept grassland on the Mikes Estate** (*Source: author's own photo, 2008.*)

- The former estate's morphological elements are important from a landscape aesthetic consideration, they characteristically shape the cultural landscape as anthropogenic surface morphological values (steps created by animal trampling, deep roads, timber-slides, hay-hauling troughs etc.). Artificial elements in the landscape, resulting from traditional agricultural activity, are also considerable.
- The historical garden was not a simple ornamental garden, but rather an inseparable part of the complex, cultural-historic, ecologic and perhaps most importantly economic (estate) system. It is exactly due to this that the garden was operable and sustainable. Thus I am studying an ecological-technical system with significant historic and artistic content, which can only be interpreted in its entirety.

## Summary

The cultural landscape formed in the Mikes Estate and around them, could be defined as a series composed of varied landscape elements shaped by historical and geographical forces. This interaction is still active today, crafting a cultural landscape, which is truly unique in Europe. Sustainable development and circumspect preservation are necessary to keep it for the next generations.

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