

# Malancrav

16 September

At dawn I took my place on the bench in front of my Viscri village guesthouse to watch the cattle, horses, goats and geese being driven out of the village to pasture. The exodus is reversed every evening, the cows peeling off from the herd to be milked and each finding her own way home. A little later RFS members emerged from their guesthouses to gather for the communal breakfast in the open-sided barn behind No. 15.

These traditional breakfasts were one of the highlights of our stay in Viscri. At long benches and trestle tables, covered in freshly laundered handwoven white linen cloths we were offered a selection of freshly baked bread, goat's butter, vegetable patés, goat and ewe's milk cheese, tomatoes and pickles, fried eggs, and a choice of apricot, plum and blackberry preserves, all produced by the village community and served on hand-decorated blue and white pottery. After making our farewell thanks to Caroline and Gerhilde Fernolend, we departed for the village of Malancrav.

Although just over the hill in the next valley, the setting is quite different from the bare plateau surrounding Viscri. The steep-sided valley at Malancrav is densely wooded - the gaps in the trees revealing crop terraces, created two thousand years ago by the Dacians. Malancrav retains a

larger proportion of Saxons than any other Transylvanian village. The orchards, retaining many traditional German apple varieties, now produce organic apple juice sold throughout Romania, following the donation of modern pressing equipment by the British Embassy.

We climbed a long flight of broad stone steps, each carved with its date of placement or replacement (the orderly Saxons like to date furniture and buildings, including every renovation), to find an immaculately restored stone-built 14th century church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, built as a court church by the Apafi family and which, apart from its distinctive tower topped with wooden gallery and 15th century low defensive walls, could almost have been plucked out of Surrey. From within, the sounds of Lutheran evangelical hymns told us the Sunday service was still under way. Shortly, Father Lorenz, who has recently moved to the village from eastern Germany with his young family, emerged to shake hands with the small departing congregation.

On entering, we were immediately struck by the remarkable surviving wall paintings in gothic narrative linear style, c.1350, covering the entire arcaded north wall of the nave - the most important in Transylvania. Five tiers of closely spaced scenes, the top row from Genesis, the remaining images from the New Testament, still retaining traces of the limewash applied in 1792, when the ruling

Detail of painted ceiling, Malancrav



Apafi Manor and church

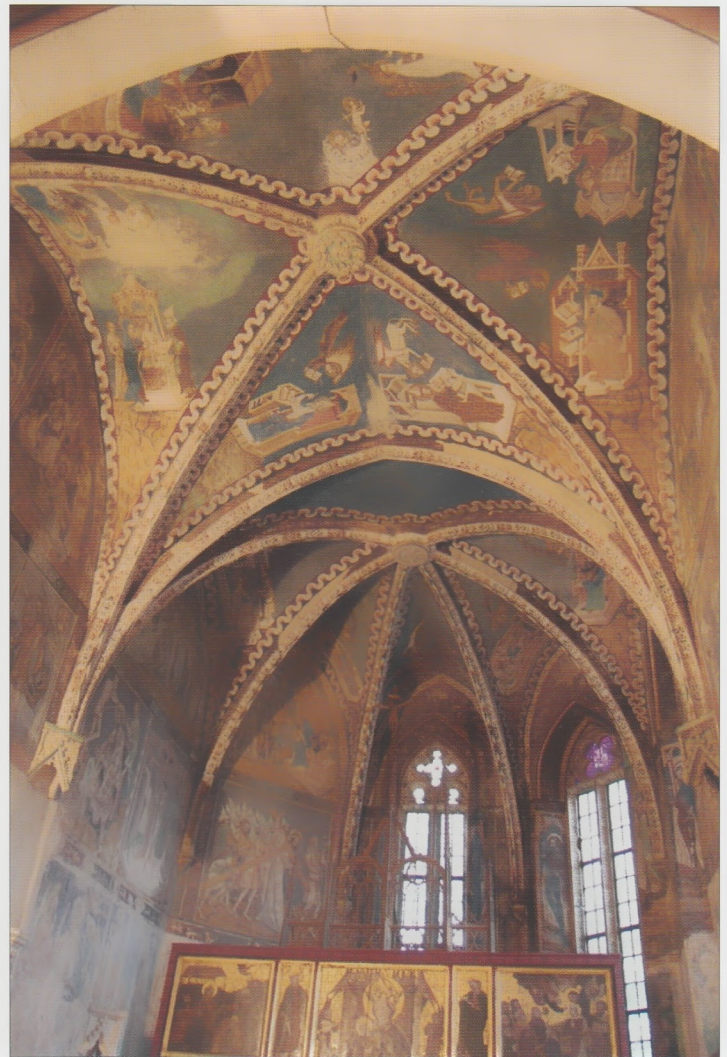


Apafi family died out. The frescos were rediscovered in 1914 and restored in the 1920s. The recently restored painted decoration to the apsed and vaulted choir is in the slightly later 'international' gothic style of c.1400, and demonstrates the transition from gothic towards renaissance imagery in this part of Europe. With the expert help of Ishbel Barnes we enjoyed indentifying the images of the prophets depicted on medieval wooden thrones placed in italianate rocky landscapes. A further wonderful survival is the c.1520 polyptic altarpiece in oils on board, the oldest in Transylvania still in its original location. How fortunate that the church remained in the control of the Apafi family for nearly 500 years, escaping the destructive iconoclasm of northern Europe!



Lunch at Malancrav

Painted ceiling at Malancrav



Within sight of the church is Apafi Manor, built in the 15th century, but rebuilt in the 17th century. A rare Hungarian manor in a Saxon village, the house was rescued in parlous condition by the Mihai Eminescu Trust in 2004 and restored to its 18th century form with the help of British interior decorator of Hungarian descent, David Mlinaric. Uniquely, 15 inventories dating from 1680-1780 came to light in Budapest, detailing alterations to the estate buildings, their decoration, tools, furniture and even details of the wall paintings and door locks. Today Apafi Manor is let as an elegant guesthouse. We were allowed to wander through the enfilade of kitchen, reception hall and library linked by centrally placed double doors - a complete contrast to the modest village homesteads we had been occupying for the last few days.

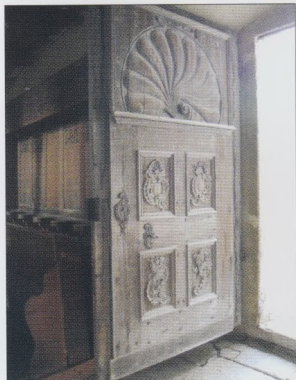
A short walk to the centre of Malancrav took us to a comfortably familiar Saxon village guest house, where entering through the gate and greeted by our smiling hosts, the soup, which was to start our final Transylvanian country lunch, was

A carved pew-front showing carpenters' tools, Biertan

Stalls, Biertan



Door, Biertan



The RFS party in Biertan, our last treat



appetisingly bubbling in an iron cauldron over an open wood fire. Facing us at the end of the yard, within the recently restored open timber barn, a huge table, centred by vases of country flowers and jugs of homemade lemonade, welcomed us.

*Jeremy Bate*