



The Hungarian University of Transylvania in the Transitory Post-War Years (1944–1945)

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Abstract. The paper entitled *The Hungarian University of Transylvania in the Transitory Post-War Years (1944–1945)* describes the issues connected to the institutional transformations of the Hungarian university of Cluj starting with the last academic year of 1943/1944, during the Second World War, and getting through to the foundation of the “Bolyai” University. There are presented both the traditional forms of a high-leveled educational process within this institution and the difficult financial and spiritual situation of the university at the end of the Second World War. Besides the immediate consequences of the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 and the losses suffered by the students due to the deportation of the Jews, the study deals with the financial destruction caused by the bombings of Cluj on 2 June 1944, as well as the consequences of the evacuation order issued by the Hungarian authorities. The article describes also the main reasons why the board of directors of the Hungarian University decided to stay in Cluj and continue their educational and scientific activities, as well as the first contacts of the board of Hungarian professors and students with the professors and students of the Romanian University who tried to return from Sibiu in the autumn of 1944. At the same time, the extremely hard financial situation at the beginning of 1945 is also presented. Finally, the study focuses on the structural transformation of the university according to the ideological requirements of the new regime installed in the autumn of 1944, on one hand, and to the problems arising from the division of the university properties between the two universities of Cluj, the Hungarian and the Romanian one, on the other hand.

Keywords: Hungarian University of Cluj, World War II, University at Sibiu, Romanian University, the role of Soviet forces

It is a fact that the Hungarian University of Cluj was the most important scientific institution of the Hungarians in Transylvania. As a state-financed Hungarian culture center in Transylvania, it held together the scientific-cultural activity of the region and stayed in touch with the other universities of the country, thus representing Transylvania in the scientific world. Besides this, it had a tremendous role in

forming the local Hungarian young generations, thus ensuring the continuity of Hungarian cultural and scientific life in Transylvania. Through these processes, the Hungarian University of Cluj played an active part in the development of the European scientific life in general as well as in the enlarging and spreading of European culture. In the critical transitory period after World War II, one of the most important vital questions of the Hungarians of Transylvania was the survival and the reopening of the University of Cluj. It is still valid today as the lack of an important, state-financed Hungarian university is being felt in all respects of cultural and scientific life of the Hungarians in Transylvania.

Franz Joseph University, founded on 10 November 1872 (Faragó, 1999: 11.) was the third, European ranking institution of higher education in Hungary.

The first period of the University of Cluj ended after World War I when the Romanian Army entered the city on 24 December 1918. On 12 May 1919, in the new conditions of power, the invading forces aggressively took over the university. After expelling the Hungarian teaching staff from the main building on Farkas street and from the other university buildings, the new Romanian university started its activity on 3 November the same year. Temporarily, the Hungarian University had to start its activity in Szeged on 26 June 1926. (Lázok-Vincze, 1995: 15–16.)

After the Second Vienna Arbitration, Franz Joseph University almost instantly moved back to Cluj, and opened its gates on 24 October 1940. (Bisztray et al., 1941: 369, 376, 388–392.) In the meantime, the Romanian University named after King Ferdinand I moved to Sibiu.

The reopened Hungarian University of Cluj not only regained its high scientific status but also developed it, which could be seen through its enlarged organizational structure. Instead of the earlier four faculties, it developed its educational supply to five faculties and 85 departments fitting into the latest scientific trends. The newly established Faculty of Economics increased the importance of the University of Cluj, as there had been only one of this type at the Technological University of Budapest. (Csetri, 2009: 55.)

The occupation of Hungary by the Wehrmacht on 19 March 1944 (Ránki, 1984: 131.) created a brand new situation at Cluj. The activity of the University became impossible due to the changing conditions of power. So, it came as no surprise when on 12 April, after being forced to suspend the courses, the Board of Professors had to close the academic year earlier than planned. (Csetri, 2009: 73.) After taking the advanced exams, most of the students were enrolled in the Hungarian army. (Kiss, 2007.)

The German occupation also had other, more serious consequences. Soon, the confinement to ghettos of the Jewish inhabitants started, followed by their deportation to Auschwitz. (Braham, 2008: 157–162.) We can find among them several professors and students from Franz Joseph University. The tribulations

of Cluj and the Hungarian University in 1944 did not come to an end by any means. The city of Cluj suffered a serious air strike on 2 June. (M. Szabó, 1999: 239–240.) Many students from the university fell victims to this attack. The institution also suffered material losses. One of the locations of practice for medical students, the Reformed Hospital on Miklós Horthy street was totally destroyed, while the Orthopedic Clinic on Zápolya street belonging to the Faculty of Medicine was also hit, and its southwest wing was totally destroyed. (Kolozsvári Szemle, 1944. 06. 15: 153.)

Romania's changing sides to the Allies on 23 August 1944 also had negative effects on the university as many students were enrolled to fighting units and sent to the battle-line. (Csetri, 2009: 73.) Many Hungarian students were killed, seriously wounded or taken prisoner of war by the Soviets or Romanians in the fights near Turda, which lasted until 8 October. (Bús, 2004: 20.)

At the same time, the procedural evacuation of Northern Transylvania started – commanded from Budapest –, which first of all applied to state institutions. The Rector's Office of the Hungarian University of Cluj arranged for the transportation of the university archives and for the most part of the teaching and scientific equipment in compliance with the infamous evacuation order of the Ministry of Defense issued on 2 September 1944. The assets needing protection were supposed to be taken to Germany. (Lázok–Vincze 1995: 18–19.) The valuable consignment belonging to the university could only be taken to Keszthely. Most of the archives and the scientific equipment was destroyed or lost in the cellars of the Festetics Castle. (Gaal, 2002: 124.)

In the evacuation process of Franz Joseph University, the personal evacuation meant the biggest loss, since as early as 1944 most of the remaining students and 80% of the teaching staff fled to Budapest and the western parts of the country. Although most of the students came back later, 20% of the teaching staff never returned. (ÁLKv. Kristóf 1945:1)

Due to the imminent arrival of the battle-line and regime change, the issue of Franz Joseph University remaining in Cluj, as opposed to the situation in 1919, had arisen more and more frequently, as it was quite clear that the existence of a full-time higher education in Hungarian language operating within an autonomous institution was essential for preserving the spiritual life of the Hungarian population of Transylvania. Accordingly, a group of intellectuals from Cluj turned to the then rector Dr. Dezső Miskolczy with a memorandum concerning this issue as early as 14 September 1944. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 19–20.) The students who had no desire to leave had the same request, which they presented officially to the management through a students' delegation in mid-September. (Katona Szabó, 1990: 24–25.)

However, the affirmative decision of the Rector's Council concerning this essential issue was not based on these petitions, but primarily on the reassurance

that, after the Soviet–Romanian troops would have entered the city, the Hungarian university was to be allowed to operate unhindered, given by the local leaders of the communists (Edgár Balogh) and social democrats (Lajos Jordáky) as well as by union leader Gheorghe Timofi acting as a representative of the Romanian population of Cluj, who were ready to take over the city after its imminent fall. (Balogh, 1992: 111.)

So, these were the circumstances which led to the Rector's Council's decision of great consequences adopted at the meeting of 15 September 1944 concerning the issue of the Franz Joseph University remaining in Cluj. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 120–121.)

In anticipation of the possible objections raised by Budapest due to such refusal to comply with the evacuation order, the management of Franz Joseph University held its opening ceremony in Cluj for the academic year 1944–1945 as early as 17 September 1944. (ÁLKv. Kelemen 1944: 1144.) According to the tradition, the ceremony should have taken place in the aula of the main building on Farkas street, but due to an air raid alarm it had to be held at a bomb shelter, with much fewer participants than usual. (Gaal, 2002: 124–125.) The classes and scientific activities, however, had to be suspended even before they started due to the on-going fights near the city.

Even before the city fell, on 28 September, the Rector's Office had received from Iván Rakovszky, the Hungarian Minister for Religion and Public Education, the approval for the university to remain in Cluj. Moreover, the minister also granted full authority to the Rector's Council to further manage the institution. (Katona Szabó, 1999: 6–7.) This decision removed one important obstacle that could have prevented Franz Joseph University from operating on a permanent basis in Cluj, and the circumstances for the Rector's Council to face the new regime following the arrival of the Soviet troops with a *fait accompli*.

Eventually, the Soviet forces arrived in Cluj on 11 October 1944, after breaking through the front line at Turda (Nagy–Vincze, 2000: 101.) In the days that followed, Russian patrols have taken prisoner around five thousand Hungarian male civilians in Cluj, and deported them to the Soviet Union. (Murádin, 2004: 57–58.) Several professors and many students of the university fell victims to these deportations. (Murádin, 2009: 305.)

Given this dramatic start, the prospects for the university to keep on operating in the new situation determined by the Soviet takeover were far from bright, since, first and foremost, this had to be approved by the newly appointed Russian commander of the city, guards major Simchik, who, much to everyone's astonishment, did exactly that.¹ Thus, at least in the transition period, the Franz Joseph University was allowed to operate in Cluj.

But in the days following the regime change, the university faced a new, even more difficult challenge. Together with the Romanian army that entered the

1 MOL KÜM XIX-J-1-j. 18. d. 16/b cs.: Kolozsvári Magyar Tudományegyetem: 690.

city shortly after the Red Army, a few employees of King Ferdinand University showed up as early as 12 October 1944, keen on preparing the return of their institution, even by force, if necessary.² Two days later, the management of the Romanian university followed up by officially submitting its request to rector Dezső Miskolczy to have all the buildings and scientific–didactic equipment owned by the Hungarian university in Cluj handed over to them. Mr. Miskolczy categorically rejected this demand, of course. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 21.)

As a response, on 16 October, the entire staff of the surgical clinic of the Romanian university from Sibiu arrived in Cluj, and attempted to take over by force all the clinics of the Faculty of Medicine. In their attempt to enforce these demands, they even used weapons. (Nagy–Vincze, 2000: 104–105.) But this was more than the Soviet leadership of the city could tolerate; so, in order to prevent the conflict to degenerate into a bloody fight, guards major Simchik has given the employees of the Romanian university staying in Cluj, the Romanian administration preparing to move in and the Romanian armed forces an ultimatum-like order to leave the city in three hours. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 22.)

This decision was in concordance with the order issued later, on 14 November 1944, by field marshal Malinovsky, by which he banished all representatives of the interim Romanian military administration from Northern Transylvania starting with 25 October. (Monitorul Oficial 25.10.1944: 6854.) It was decided to appoint an interim Soviet military administration to govern this disputed area.³ This marked the beginning of a transition period of roughly five months that ended on 13 March 1945. This was a period of great importance in the history of the Hungarian university because, thanks to the Russian police forces, Franz Joseph University gained some breathing space and managed to survive the confusion that followed the passage of the front line. At the same time, it had time to strengthen the institution and to resume the scientific and academic activity. All this came at one price: it was forced to change its name. The name of emperor Franz Joseph had to be removed from its name, and it continued as the Hungarian University of Cluj. (Balázs, 2009: 75.)

Albeit with a delay of a few months, but eventually classes started at all faculties on 1 December 1944. (*Világosság*, 29.11.1944: 3.) At the passage between 1944 and 1945, there were only 15 professors teaching a total of merely 628 students. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 127–128.) Thus, the professors had to work under extreme stress. Most of them had to give four or five lectures a day, in freezing temperatures due to the drastic fuel shortage. The scarcity of the boarding schools and the permanent food shortage of the university canteen made life very hard for the students. And what is more, these problems worsened as the academic year progressed, as by the spring of 1945 more and more students, who were deported or fled earlier, had returned to the university.

2 MOL KÜM XIX-J-1-j. 18. d. 16/b cs.: Kolozsvári Magyar Tudományegyetem: 688–689.

3 MOL KÜM TŰK XIX-J-1-j. 60. d. IV–132.

Furthermore, the activity of the Hungarian University of Cluj in 1944/1945 faced from its start political obstructions, as one of the first actions of the new regime that took over in the fall of 1944 was to politically review and assess the employees working in public institutions. These actions of the infamous cleansing committees affected the university, as well.

On 8 January 1945, at the meeting of the cleansing committee set up specifically for this university – which consisted predominantly of Romanian members –, they decided to exclude or to prevent the return of no less than 29 “antidemocratic and fascist” Hungarian professors.⁴

The management of the university had an almost natural reaction to this situation and tried to meet the expectations. To this end, in early 1945, several well-known left-wing intellectuals were added to the staff. This is how the likes of attorney at law István Sáry, secretary of the Cluj branch of the left-wing political organisation of the Hungarians from Romania, the Hungarian Popular Alliance, Lajos Jordáky, member of the Cluj County council of the Romanian Communist Party, lawyer János Demeter, deputy mayor of Cluj, or writer and publicist Edgár Balogh, well-known for his left-wing views, became professors here. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 26, 28.)

But it was not enough to satisfy the local leaders of the Romanian left-wing that the Hungarian university followed the “proper political line”. The failed attempt of the Romanian university to return in the fall of 1944 only intensified the animosity of the Romanian population of Cluj and particularly of the local Romanian intellectuals and the political circles towards the Hungarian university.

The return of King Ferdinand University from Sibiu to Cluj became an issue with an ever growing importance for the local Romanian community by early 1945. Moreover, this idea was supported by the central administration in Bucharest, and the Romanian government turned it into a priority in the field of culture. It was obvious that this issue had to be addressed urgently. Initially, three possible solutions arose. The first was to move the Romanian university back from Sibiu, and to hand them over every building of the university in Cluj, while the Hungarian university was to be closed and Hungarian faculties had to be established within the Romanian university. The second possibility was to establish a new bilingual Romanian–Hungarian university. Finally, the third idea was to have two separate universities operating in Cluj. (B. Kovács, 1997: 148.) In the eyes of the Hungarian community in Cluj and the management of the Hungarian university, the latter seemed to be the best solution.

After long discussions, the two parties managed to reach a compromise, resulting in the decree issued by the Prefecture’s Office of Cluj County as of 9 March 1945. This stipulated the creation of the “university block of Cluj,” with three independent elements: a Romanian and a Hungarian university, as well as a

4 ÁLKv. Kolozsvár 3050/1944

bilingual polytechnic university. (Erdélyi Szikra, 1945. 03. 15.: 3.) Unfortunately, one of the first measures of the new Romanian government led by Dr. Petru Groza was to reject this project. Instead, the Romanian administration, which returned on 13 March, pursued an ever intensifying campaign to have King Ferdinand University moved back to Cluj.

As early as 11 April 1945, this idea turned more and more into a political issue, the Romanian authorities made the first step in putting it into place. On this day, the official delegation of the Romanian university led by its rector, Dr. Emil Petrovici, arrived in Cluj, and initiated talks with the management of the Hungarian University of Cluj. (Gaal, 2002: 127.) In the end, the parties decided to address this complex and compound issue by setting up a common committee dedicated to solving it. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 30.) However, Dr. Dezső Miskolczy, the rector, and Dr. László Buza prorector were excluded from the start from this committee by reason of having Hungarian citizenship, the Romanian party arguing that this is a strictly Transylvanian issue that should be solved by Transylvanians...⁵ Thus, the Hungarian university was represented at these vital talks by the only member of the Rector's Council of Transylvanian origin, Dr. Ernő Balogh, professor of geology, vice-dean of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences. Beside him, the interests of the Hungarian party were represented by "politically trustworthy" people: Dr. László Luka, secretary general of the National Democratic Front (ODA), Dr. Lajos Csőgör, sub-prefect of Cluj County, as well as Géza Pásztai and Lajos Jordáky, social democrat politicians. In contrast, the Romanian party was represented by Mr. Petrovici, the rector, Dr. Aurel Potop, state secretary at the Ministry for National Education, Teofil Vescan, one of the presidents of the Northern-Transylvanian branch of ODA, as well as Dr. David Prodan, Dr. Constantin Daicoviciu and Dr. Alexandru Roșca, university professors of high influence. (*A romániai magyar főiskolai oktatás*, 1990: 9.) Following the two-day discussions of the common committee, which took place on 16 and 17 April 1945, the two parties only managed to agree in principle on the return of the Romanian university and the further operation of the Hungarian university. However, they failed to reach an agreement on the highly important issue concerning the distribution of the fixed properties owned by the university, and the discussions had to be suspended. (*Világosság*, 18.04.1945: 1.; Gaal, 2002: 128.)

Eventually, the parties met again on April 25 to settle this increasingly critical issue, but this happened in Bucharest and in a different composition. The Hungarian party was now represented by politicians like Dr. Lajos Jordáky and Dr. János Demeter, sociologist Dr. József Vencel and literature historian Dr. Géza Nagy. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 31.) But they, too, were unable to reach an agreement with the representatives of the Romanian university because, this time, the latter – in addition to their demand for the university buildings to be handed over – also

5 MOL KÜM XIX-J-1-j. 18. d. 16/b cs.: Kolozsvári Magyar Tudományegyetem: 695.

raised the issue of the professors of Hungarian nationality to be allowed to stay only if they were compelled to be nationalised. But this was unacceptable to the Hungarian party, and the discussions reached a dead-lock again. (Gaal, 2002: 128.)

In the end, the Gordian knot of the collaboration between the two universities was cut by the Romanian government with an unexpected decision. On 29 May 1945, a royal decree was published in the Official Gazette, signed by the ruler. The first decree, bearing no. 406/1945, stipulated that King Ferdinand I University shall return to Cluj, and all university estates shall be handed over to it. On the other hand, the second decree, bearing no. 407/1945, stipulated that a new Hungarian university was to be established to replace the existing one in the spiritual capital of Transylvania. (*Monitorul Oficial*, 1945. 05. 29.: 4423–4424.)

This basically meant that the new Romanian regime that moved in Northern Transylvania refused to recognise the legal continuity of the Hungarian University of Cluj, an institution with a centuries-old tradition, and decided to replace it with an entirely new university, allowing them to shape its spirituality and internal structure at will. This unjust decree was probably the most telling sign of the fate that awaited the Hungarian community in the region as a minority.

Only a few days after the publication of the two royal decrees, on 1 June 1945, King Ferdinand University returned to Cluj. At the same time, the Rector's Council of the former Hungarian university, closed indirectly by decree, presented its resignation on 3 June, effective from 1 June. (Gaal, 2002: 128–129.) In its place, the management of the new university was taken over, on basis of decree no. 137.851/1945 as of 4 June, by an interim managing board consisting of three members: Dr. Lajos Csögör, who was to become later the rector, Dr. János Demeter and Dr. Elemér Jancsó. (B. Kovács 1997: 152.)

This body was designated to hand over the main building on Farkas street, along with other 46 estates to the Romanian university on 5 June.⁶ At the same time, the Hungarian university was forced to move into the building of the former De Gerando girls' grammar school, further away from downtown, whose indoor space usable for classes was merely 60% of the capacity of the main building. (Gaal, 2002: 128.)

Due to the sudden lack of space, but in concordance with the provisions of royal decree no. 407/1945, the Legal and Political Science Faculty and the Economics Faculty had to be merged, and the Hungarian university returned to being an institution with four faculties. Moreover, after being banished from the clinics of Cluj, the Faculty of Medicine was rendered inoperative, and after several months of protraction it moved to Târgu Mureş, where it was accommodated in the large but worn down building of the former Royal Hungarian "Csaba Királyfi" Cadet School. (Marosi, 1978: 31.) The faculty, which by then had increasingly weaker

6 MOL KÜM XIX-J-1-j. 18. d. 16/b cs.: Feljegyzés a volt Ferenc József Tudományegyetem épületeinek átadásáról és az újonnan létrehozott egyetem karainak elhelyezéséről: 596.

ties to Cluj, resumed its activity on 1 October 1945 as an institution that gradually gained its independence. (Lázok–Vincze, 1995: 30.)

The Hungarian university that gained its official name after mathematician János Bolyai on 9 February 1946 (B. Kovács, 1997: 132.) managed to preserve the traditions of the autonomous Hungarian higher education in Cluj for one and a half decade until it was forcibly closed in 1959.

After the merger of the universities, the issue of a missing autonomous Hungarian university has risen again, and suddenly broke to the surface after the regime change in 1989. I believe the model applied in 1945, as awkward as it was, would be a way to approach this unresolved and increasingly critical issue, since in recent years the lack of a state-funded Hungarian university in Transylvania led to a state of confusion, which the government tried to address by partial solutions (establishment of autonomous Hungarian departments at so-called multicultural universities according to the new law on education), while, on the other hand, the Hungarian minority looked for alternate ways to remove this dead-lock by establishing and operating private Hungarian universities (Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Christian University of Partium). But they are in no way a substitute for a state-funded Hungarian university. The former solution was difficult to implement (see the unfortunate situation of the Medical and Pharmaceutical University of Târgu Mureş), while the latter one is, for the time being, inadequate, since the scarcity of their funds prevents them from meeting all the needs of the community.

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