

Eötvös Loránd University  
Faculty of Humanities

Doctoral Dissertation

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Community Strategies of the Hungarian Intelligentsia in Interwar Prešov and  
Košice (The Biography of János Gömöry and Ferenc Sziklay)

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## PhD Theses

### I. Aims and methods of research

The dissertation deals with the social history of the Hungarian intelligentsia in interwar Czechoslovakia with special attention to the post-1918 biography of János Gömör (1869–1966) from Prešov and Ferenc Sziklay (1883–1943) from Košice. By choosing two personalities, I intend to investigate two community organizing models. The protestant and freemason János Gömör was a member of the liberal Hungarian National Party, while the catholic Ferenc Sziklay, who considered himself a national conservative, was rather sympathizer of the Provincial Christian Socialist Party. Gömör was a history teacher of one of the best protestant schools of historical Hungary in the Evangelical College of Prešov before 1918. Sziklay studied in the gymnasium of the catholic Premonstratensian order, then became a literature teacher in different parts of Hungary before the Great War. Coming from two different political and cultural backgrounds, they became leading personalities of the Hungarian minority community after the creation of Czechoslovakia.

Representing two different ideological interest groups, they worked as cultural leaders in two cities (in Prešov and Košice) in the 1920's. Then, from the beginning of the 1930's they have already lived in Košice where in June 1936 they both became members of the United Hungarian Party and here lived through also the First Vienna Award in 1938.

Their interwar career represent two models, which together with the Communist movement, can be considered the most efficient community-building policies of the Hungarian elite in Czechoslovakia until 1938. On the one hand, in the dissertation I examine the group of progressive, plural, modern-thinking intellectuals, who belonged to the masonic lodges. On the other hand I research the Christian socialist, nationalizing and conservative view of world which was ideologically and institutionally based on the Roman Catholic Church.

The main reason I chose these personalities was because nor their personal legacies preserved in the Hungarian archives, neither their socio-historical context, the social history of interwar Prešov and Košice have not yet been processed by the historiography.

In the dissertation I make an attempt to combine biography and local history, while I am interested in the formation process of the Hungarian minority society in Czechoslovakia. The activity of János Gömör and Ferenc Sziklay between the two world wars is analyzed in two socio-historical frames. Since they both influenced their micro-society, I investigate the self-organizing strategies of the Hungarian intellectuals in Prešov and Košice. I argue that the *city*

was such a milieu for the Hungarian intellectuals which was almost unchanged after the creation of Czechoslovakia and where they were able to continue most of its prewar activities. However, after 1918 the Hungarian intellectuals were involved into the development of a brand new community, the Hungarian minority of Czechoslovakia, witnessed the separation of Hungary and the minority society, while they had to face the lack of regional community traditions and the unique cultural characteristics of urban communities. Therefore, the last chapter of the dissertation analyzes the cultural program of Gömöry and Sziklay, as well as their literary and intellectual debates which aimed to create the new Hungarian intelligentsia of Slovakia.

The end of historical Hungary had a decisive influence on the individual career of János Gömöry and Ferenc Sziklay. They both belonged to the older generation to whom this was mainly a negative experience, in contrast to the younger generation, which has been already socialized in Czechoslovakia. For the elderly, the adaptation to the new circumstances, to the new social frames became a key issue. Since the political parties, the institutions, the newspapers of the two personalities had their antecedents before 1918, I start from the assumption that the community strategies of the intelligentsia have not changed radically after the turn of state, but they were the continuation of the pre-1918 political and cultural programs. In addition, it is also worth considering that their ideological orientation, their perception of nation, but also their relationship network can be traced back to the period before the Great War. That is why in writing their biographies, we cannot ignore their activity before the creation of Czechoslovakia.

## **II. Sources and structure**

In the dissertation I work with three main types of resource. The primary aim was to process the personal legacy of János Gömöry (Evangelical National Archives, Budapest) and Ferenc Sziklay (National Széchényi Library, Budapest). In addition, I used different archival sources from Slovakia and Hungary, as well as the contemporary Hungarian and Slovak press. I tried to systematically explore the documents concerning Hungarian minority in Prešov and Košice in the fonds of Policajné riaditeľstvo v Košiciach 1920–1938, Spravodajská ústredňa pri Policajnom riaditeľstve v Prahe, odbočka v Košiciach 1923–1938, Košická župa 1923–1928, Policajný komisariát v Prešove 1923–1933, Mestský úrad Košice 1923–1938, Mestský úrad v Prešove 1923–1945 and Okresný úrad Prešov 1923–1945. In addition I reviewed the documents of the Hungarian associations and the Evangelical College of Prešov, as well as the personal legacy of Ágost Fischer-Colbrie in the Archiepiscopal Archive of Košice,

documents from the collection of K28 and K64 of the Hungarian National Archives, as well as the legacy of Géza Szüllő from the National Széchényi Library.

The dissertation is thematically structured. The introductory chapter offers a historiographical review on the topic, as well as the methodological and terminological framework of the analysis. In the second and third chapter I investigate the political and cultural self-organizing strategies of the Hungarian intelligentsia. In addition, the fourth chapter deals with the community building attempts of Hungarian intellectuals on a regional level. Together with the summary the dissertation is divided into five chapters.

### **III. Conclusion**

In the dissertation I examined the post-WWI activity of two secondary school teachers who experienced the establishment of the first Czechoslovak Republic which resulted in the creation of a new political community, the Hungarian minority of Czechoslovakia. Through the analysis of the ethnic composition and the political behavior of the population of Prešov and Košice it became clear that the Hungarian community cannot be defined only by the statistical data, and the ethnic boundaries became often blurred within such urban societies. Although the Hungarian, later the (Czechoslovak) national politics seek to treat Prešov and Košice as a nationally homogeneous spaces, and from 1930 the proportion of the population of Hungarian nationality dropped below 20% in both cities, the Hungarian party votes, the multilingualism of the associational life and the everyday language showed a completely different picture. Therefore, I must conclude, and I tried to prove it with concrete data, that both cities were linguistically and religiously diverse social environment in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and mainly also before. Neither Prešov, nor Košice cannot be considered a homogeneous Slovak or Hungarian town. Thus, the two investigated biographies are positioned in such a multiethnic environment.

As for the investigation of the associational life, I can conclude that the Hungarian intelligentsia have participated in the work of different associations according to their professional and religious affiliation, rather than for ethnic reasons. What is more, the ethnic identification of the organizations in most of the cases is not possible, thus ethnicity was not the most main criteria in the self-organizing process of the city associations. All this proves that the Hungarian minority did not constitute a separate unit within the society of contemporary Czechoslovakia. The community strategies of the Hungarian intelligentsia were depending mainly on its task within the community, whether professional or other, not only on the consciousness of belonging to an ethnic minority. That was one of the reason why the

Hungarians living in the cities were members of several organizations which were not affiliated to the network of Hungarian opposition minority parties.

As for the local politics of the Hungarian minority parties, it can be concluded that in the Slovakian cities where the percentage of the ethnic minority fell below 20%, the Hungarian elite maintained its political and economic power to a much greater extent than in the Czechoslovak parliament at a countrywide level, where the Hungarian minority was characterized by continuous political and economic position loss. Both in the case of Prešov, as well as in Košice the Hungarian political parties were more popular than the Czechoslovak pro-governmental parties, the representatives of the Hungarian parties were members of the City Councils and the City Assemblies.

The Christian Socialist Party have enjoyed a massive popular support in both cities. Its policy has won the trust of ethnic Slovak voters too, since even the strongest Slovak political party, the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party was not able to compete the popularity of the Christian Socialist ideology until the mid-1930. However, the so-called local city parties, mainly the interest group of Károly Flórián and that of Béla Blanár both represented the Hungarian liberal middle classes who were not able to identify with the politics of the big parliamentary parties, the Communist and Catholic movement. I proved also that such local parties were also the core of the intellectual group which in cooperation with the smallholder forces established the Hungarian National Party in 1925.

After all this it is possible to contextualize the post-1918 career of Ferenc Sziklay and János Gömöry. For Gömöry was decisive mainly the teaching and community building experience gained in Prešov before 1918. He used these experiences after the creation of Czechoslovakia. On the one hand, in his conception one of the models was the 19<sup>th</sup>-century city association as classical form of local community building. On the other hand, he was inspired also by the community development strategies of the Masonic lodge. Gömöry emphasized the importance of peaceful co-living of different ethnic groups in the regional context of Šariš. Later he considered important also the cooperation of ethnic groups in Czechoslovakia. The frequently mentioned and idealized Šariš identity has been transformed into the concept of the Hungarian soul in Slovakia in the philosophical works of Gömöry. What is more, Gömöry seek to maintain the community framework of the Hungarian intelligentsia after 1938 too. His attitude to the minority political leaders at the beginning was relatively uncertain, and only after the formation of the Hungarian National Party changed, when he became a political representative of this party. Despite all this, he was mainly interested in the local city politics, therefore he was member of the city assembly in Prešov before 1918, as well as in Košice

during the interwar period. However he was far from considering himself a politician. As he was a highly respected pedagogue who was able to integrate different segments of the Hungarian intelligentsia his personality became crucial for the Hungarian opposition parties.

In the case of Ferenc Sziklay, I investigated the activity of a literature teacher who after 1918 became a bureaucrat. In the interwar years he was the leader of the Cultural Office created by the Hungarian minority parties. He was responsible for cultural and school affairs. Although it was a political position and he was the one of the most important background figures of Hungarian politics in Czechoslovakia, he did not see himself as a politician, but as the organizer of the cultural and literary life. Based on archival sources I concluded that the idealized image in the memoirs and scientific works which present him as some kind of independent intellectual, is fundamentally untrue. He was a highly educated, conservative values declaring personality who was disappointed in the post-1938 Hungarian policy, but was far from acting independently from the Hungarian opposition parties. His program about decentralizing the Hungarian cultural life, as well as the idea of building a Hungarian cultural framework within Czechoslovakia in the interwar period, has disappeared after 1938. It means that his plan to reorganize the Hungarian community into a separate regional society detached from Hungary was relevant only in respect of the first Czechoslovak Republic, and was overwritten after the realization of the territorial revision..

Consequently, János Gömöröy and Ferenc Sziklay well represent the two community organizing model, which was investigated in the two biographies. Two persons whose values remained unchanged, but the world has transformed around them. Through the Hungarian cultural and literary debates it can be concluded that the conception of Gömöröy about the Hungarian soul of Slovakia was only theoretical, so did not lead to friction within the intelligentsia. Sziklay provided much more practical solutions of how to organize the Hungarian writers, thus as a man of action obviously was much more criticized by the others than Gömöröy. Sziklay thought that the independent Hungarian literature in Slovakia is needed for a long-term survival of the ethnic community. And for the 1930s also Gömöröy concluded basically the same, even though he considered it feasible not through the literature, but rather by organizing social forums and public debates. All this means that not only the younger generation of the Hungarian population, but also a significant part of older elite was looking for a long-term strategy within the Czechoslovak Republic.