Theses

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The Duellist Gentleman
The History of Duelling in Hungary, its Effects on Society from 1867 till 1945

The Theses of the PhD.
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1. The topic and tasks of research: The noble passages of arms (frays) of the 16th century can be looked upon as the predecessors of duels passed off in the period in question. The partakers of these passages of arms already held a brief for their individual honour, while earlier passages had been championed for collective purposes. The characters of judgemental frays felt themselves as being trustees of divine justice, a means in the hands of celestial jurisdiction. If someone had some legal action he could ask the competent law court for a chance to hold a brief for his justice in a judgemental fray. Later on people only had recourse to this means in cases that were more difficult to prove, for example in defamation cases. This was the case in Hungary too, where a separate judicial organization, namely the *curia militaris* was established to order judgemental frays in cases of defamation.

Knights who were fighting in tilting tournaments in medieval times offered their success to a special lady or to the king. Thus an individual victory –through the person of the king- served the glory of the whole community, and - by means of the lady - it also symbolised the duty of a knight to show his veneration before womankind. So it was not individuality that dominated here either, it was rather the scale of values of this age of chivalry that had an effect onto dualists of later times.

The ideal, to which each and every nobleman of later times considered himself to be a hereditary of who wanted to take recompence for his real or imaginary offences, was formed in this very era. One important element of this ideal was the knight’s honour that had to be defended at any cost.

The age of chivalry became a constant point of reference later on, the *chivalrous* settling of an affair meant the same as a fair procedure while *unchivalrous* became a synonym for breaching of norms.

From the beginning of the 16th century judgemental frays ceased to be, thus attacks against one’s honour could not be taken before court in order to request a chance for tilting for the parties involved. The chivalrous scale of values, the nobility considered themselves to be a hereditary of, could not tolerate that offences against honour may be recompensed for with more peaceful means e.g. fines or penalties.

So nobility started to settle their matters of honours in their own way. Duels became individualized and from this time onward they also became illegal. The state power did not like its dependants wanting to do justice independently in certain matters. This was especially true for evolving absolute monarchies. Monarchs forbade duelling in decrees rigorously and repeatedly, but without much success.

Because the ones who did not take on duels were condemned by public opinion as they did not want to defend one of the most important chivalrous virtues, honor that is, so they excluded themselves from the community that was based on these noble-chivalrous values. The dilemma: the antagonism between legal interdict and social pressure accompanied duels until their very last days.

In our country the same course took place with the difference that a new form of fighting, namely the Hungarian-Turkish even combat appeared in the era of Turkish oppression. They rather resembled medieval tournaments as they were also fought because of collective purposes. The valiant soldiers at the border fortresses fought for the honour of the entire valiant order, but in a broader sense for Christianity itself. Of course, individual purposes had also appeared, as the glory achieved could also help ascension on the social ladder. But, what is even more important as regards to our topic is that in those cases the defence of individual honor came to the front too.
The valiant soldier who wished to engage in a combat with someone from the other side sent a letter of a polite tone to his opponent in which he challenged him. If there was no answer sent back then he carried on and wrote another letter this time of a much more abusive tone or sent a present of a similar kind. In this way he damaged the other party’s reputation so he had no other choice but to take up the gauntlet even if it was against the prohibition of the king or the sultan respectively. When Turkish oppression was over in Hungary, the time of individualized duels had come.

In the case of duels the same situation can be observed in our country until the 19th century as in the Northern part of Europe: it was prohibited by absolute monarchs, but even then the nobility chose to defend their honour in this very way. In the 19th century, and especially in its second half, the situation got changed. By that time duel had almost completely disappeared in England and in the Scandinavian countries. In the other countries only some strata, for example, nobility, officers and in the German areas students were involved in duels. As opposed to this, by the end of the century the number of duels had risen in Hungary, and the circles of duellists had also widened.

We can look for the causes of these phenomena in the development of society which differs from the Western type. In Hungary it was the nobility and not the bourgeoisie that prepared the bourgeois transformation, as we did not have a strong bourgeoisie here. Nobility, this stratum of society held a leading role for centuries in our country, it is not surprising, that people who wished to rise strived to gain nobility tried to assimilate to their traditional tenurial scale of values and their ways of life. This effect was so strong that not even bourgeoisie could back out of it.

With the appearance of the capitalist relations a new kind of bourgeoisie grew up, that was greatly of Jewish and German origin. This stratum had only very limited social influence compared to its economical strength. In its scale of values and political views it went on complying with the nobility, the most of whom had to take state jobs as they had already lost their estates, but still kept their leading role in society. This process of assimilation went even easier as a new category was in the middle of evolution, namely the category of the gentleman. In order to become a gentleman one did not need a noble origin but he had to take the traditionally noble scale of values. Duelling was a part of them. What is more, the most important characteristic feature of a gentleman was being able to duel, the recognition of which meant an entrance into this community.

One of the aims of my work is to analyse this issue thoroughly, as no books on manners and common courtesies, codexes of duelling or regulations of casinos identified who belonged into the category of the gentleman. Schooling, qualification, wealth and career were important but not exclusive. A peasant farmer was not considered a gentleman even if he alone was wealthier than all the officers in his county together. Qualifications also counted a lot, from this point of view secondary school leaving exam was often a watershed, but one could be a gentleman without it. For example nobody dared to ask a count to show his school leaving exam certificate, but one could be excluded from circles of gentlemen if he earned his money in a job below the line even if he had high qualifications.

In my work I would like to examine this issue through a couple of examples. The number of duels and duellists had risen by the end of the century as a consequence of the previously mentioned issues, and I would like to analyse the reasons of this phenomenon too.
Primarily, what tendencies urged this rise. From this point of view the examples of aristocracy, politicians and other celebrities like writers or journalists significant.

The Press, casinos at last but not least the army played an important role in the spreading of duels.

Finally, I am going to try to find the reasons of the decrease in the number of duels, as this number clearly showed a decreasing tendency in Hungary, between the two World Wars. This can be explained with the social, economic and political milieu.

Viewpoints of research, sources: I will talk about the history of duels abroad in the first part of my work, for this I gathered the most information from The Duel in European History, Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy by V.G.Kiernan. Unfortunately there has no similar monography been written on the history of duels in Hungary. Only a couple of exigent scientific studies dealt with this issue e.g. Vilmos Clair and the duel by György Ságvári that was written as a preface to the jointly reprinted versions of the Duel Codex and Hungarian duels by Vilmos Clair. When I elaborated some areas the books and articles what I found the most useful were the following: -on the scale of values of knights: The Culture of Chivalry in Hungary in the 13th-14th Centuries by Ágnes Kurcz -on judgemental frays: The History of Judgemental Frays in Hungary by Frigyes Pesty -on twin combats during the Turkish oppression Hungarians in Combat by Sándor Takáts. -on duels and ways of life of army officers: There Once Was a Staff of Officers by István Deák and The Staff of Officers and the Middle Class. by Tibor Hajdú.

Besides the above mentioned there are several monographies that deal with certain duels, or the relation of certain strata to duels, e.g. the articles and works by Adrienn Tengely, Avigdor Löwenheim and András Lengyel.

2. The second important group of sources are the writings that have been available in several records. As duels were culpable acts, the records of court cases can provide a lot of information on duellists. In most cases the qualifications, faith, jobs of the duellists were recorded in the files. The bearings of cases were more or less exposed. I have met records in which the case was only summarized in a couple of lines but also ones where the summary was of several pages. We can learn from the justification of verdicts, though these were rarely attached, how certain courts related to duels. In the Archives of the Capital City of Budapest the records of the area offices of justice administration can be found in the 7th fond.

The materials have been sorted out several times that is why they are not complete. What is more, as the High Court of Justice was a secondary or tertiary court of appeal, so the basic records were sent back to the primary courts. The records that were left there only contained verdicts.

The records of disciplinary and honorary cases of the army can be found in the Military Archives (the similar documents of the joint army are stored in Vienna). These documents are more informative ones as whenever a committee was summoned in an officer’s honorary case then all its documents, records and verdicts were collected together in one file. From this, besides the data and the short bearings of the case, the opinion of both parties and the portrayals of characters could be read clearly, together with the justification of the committee’s verdict. From the references and commands of the captaincy the relation of the military management to duels and honorary cases becomes evident. All
these can be found among the records of the presidential files of the Military General Headquarters (Hfp./eln.)

3. To get acquainted with the history of duels, works published on the topic in this period as an important source, e.g. Famous Hungarian Duels by Géza Kacziány or Hungarian Duels by Vilmos Clair. Both authors intended to write colourful accounts of the more important honorary cases. Both of the authors being journalists, they had wide systems of connections and often got their pieces of information from personal reports. But this fact also offered free play to their prejudice. It could especially be observed in Clair’s case as he formed the description of the story according to his own taste or that of his readers. So I handled these descriptions with the necessary criticism, and only quoted from them when I met the case in question in other sources too.

Another rich, abundant source of information of the period is the Press itself. Newspapers published several duel cases in varying sizes and coverage, ranging from short, brief reports where the parties were named only with their monograms to lengthy, detailed accounts of several pages. These latter ones naturally reported on cases of celebrities, especially politicians. In their cases caution was essential as diversification of contemporary press was notable. So newspapers tried to show the politicians with whom they took sides in their best advantage, while did their best to discredit the ones of the opposing camp. Numerous pamphlets were published in the period in question, some of them dealt with duels. Especially the opposers of duels were active in this field. One can learn the hang of their arguments so often proclaimed and their suggestions for solutions from these pamphlets. The partisans of duels took up arms more easily than pens, so they wrote much less on the topic, though we can name some who did.

Good sources were duel codexes, some of which amounted to only a couple of pages, while others were thick, comprehensive collections of rules and regulations. Certain branches of arms and types of duels completely disappeared from them later on, which meant the refinement of duelling rules and showed the effort to make duels less bloody.

3. The summary of the results of research:

In the introductory part of my work I write about the antecedents of duels, the chivalrous tournaments, the judgemental frays, and in the case of Hungary, the Turkish-Hungarian combats. Then I follow the way they turned into duels of the period in question, from the combats of the 16th century to the ones that served as a remedy of personal injuries. Besides, the number of people who were entitled to duel decreased, as it was only noblemen who could give or take satisfaction with arms. The antagonism of the prohibition of monarchs who objected to the individual jurisdiction of their dependants and the opinion of society was maintained until duels were fought. In Hungary in the 19th century, both the number of duels and duellists increased. This tendency got stronger from especially the middle of the century so that by the end of it everybody could talk about „duel mania”. In my work I am trying to highlight the reasons for this. It can be observed, even in the first part of the century, that new elements appeared in the mentality of nobility. The spreading of sports, and principally fencing, had the consequence that fair play became a factor in duels too. The appearance of the first duel codexes strengthened this process of getting civilized. It is also important that new ideals got formed, Wesselényi and his circle embodied a new ideal of manhood. Beside the traditional chivalric-noble characteristic features of a man who is proud of his honour and defends it by all means, fair play and self-discipline added new colours. This resulted in the fact that to recompense injuries did not have to take
place on the spot but could be settled in more civilized framework of a previously arranged duel. The endeavours for judiciary equalization launched from above favoured the procedure in which the young who did not have noble ancestors but had excellent qualities could ascend into the governing strata. This went together with the acceptance of noble values such as defending one’s honour with arms too. All these helped all contemporary young men in wanting to resemble the ideal that was embodied in the emblematic figure of Count Wesselényi. Naturally this widened the social foundation of duellists. But, in my opinion, the real and basic reason for the spreading of duels in Hungary in the second part of the century was the heterogeneous development of bourgeois mentality and status. I tried to expound this in broad lines in the chapter on the development of society. Nobility that considered themselves to be the backbone of society, the historically class, gradually lost from their economic strength. Its basis was farmstead, but the majority of them lost its inherited estates in the capitalizing world. This stratum, the gentry, in order to keep its living standards, took on county or state jobs. But in society they kept their leading positions. Bourgeoisy that became stronger conformed to the noble scale of values, tried to imitate their customs, and for a long time they did not represent their opinion in politics either. The new category that was in the making, that of the gentleman, made this procedure of assimilation much easier, as noble origin was not demanded any longer, only the acceptance of noble scale of values. The central topic of my work is the examination of the factors, who was considered a gentleman by contemporaries. What requirements and specifications he had to meet to ascend to be one. From several viewpoints I naturally chose the ability to duel. I tried to demonstrate what groups of society fought in duels, for this I used typical examples of the period. I also tried to highlight the fact that these duels could also helped the ascension in society. The category of gentlemen was not precisely regulated. We can say, it was rather like a pyramid open from the bottom – on the top of which stood the ones whose status of being gentlemen could not be questioned. They were the members of the aristocracy of course, and then, widening gradually, came the other groups of society. As the bottom line of this imaginary pyramid was not drawn precisely, it could happen that someone could ascend from the the upper parts of bottom strata. For this, it was enough to fight a duel with the proper people - but the matter was not so easy. In order to become able to duel - in other words to become a gentleman - one had to meet several criteria. The most important of them were: proper education and a proper job. The latter had to mean that the person in question must not be a manual labourer, which was an essential expulsive factor. If some doubts arose about someone’s ability to duel, a committee of honour was summoned together to clear up the issue. Ascension in society could not only take place at an individual level. The most characteristic example for this was the striving of the Jews to be considered equal to the rest of society. For this, duels were an adequate means, that is why I showed some cases in which Jews had duels. The ever livelier activity of the Press also contributed to the increase in the number of duels. Journalists themselves had often duelled because of certain articles, but it was even more important that they wrote detailed accounts of duel cases and gave publicity to insulting statements. As a demonstration for the lives of journalists and their behaviour as regards to duels, I used the example of young Endre Ady and his duel cases. Beside the Press several circles and casinos played an important role as hotbeds of duelling. Casinos often made decisions in which they excluded people from among their members who did not take on duelling. It was a practice among contemporaries that they could decide on a
death-sentence of somebody who insulted the casino by appointing their best shooter or fencer to provoke a duel against him. I tried to demonstrate this issue with examples from the life of the National Casino.

Speaking of duels one can not avoid the role of the army as together with the introduction of compulsory military service the system of reserve officers also appeared. The same honorary regulations applied to reserve officers as to active ones, so certain matters had to be settled by duelling. What is more, gentlemanhood of reserve officers could not be questioned, which also increased the number of possible duellists. According to my observations, the prestige of staff of officers was so high that a lot of people used it for duels that helped them to climb up the social ladder. If a person of dubious status sent civilians as his seconds to his opponents they could easily be turned down, but if he sent officers to settle his case success was sure.

In issues regarding the army I studied the factor how supreme command reacted to the appearance of anti-duel movements. Usually they prohibited the entry for even reserve officers, which tells a lot about their relation to duels.

Writings against duelling appeared earlier too, but opposers were organized into a movement only in the beginning of the 20th century.

It can be observed that anti-duel activities always got new impetus when public opinion got irritated by certain tragic duels. Opposers of duelling gave publicity to their opinion in several pamphlets and publications.

There are a lot of recurring motifs in their system of arguments that also appeared in the parliamentary debate of criminal code. Making a short detour, I also alluded to American duels. Even though, strictly speaking, they do not belong to my topic, as almost all duel codexes disapproved them, and did not consider them duels, but still, they occurred in this period.

As I could see, mainly people who were excluded from the world of well-regulated duels used this as a means.

Finally I dealt with the state of affairs between the two World Wars when a decrease could be observed in the number of duels. This, again, could be explained with social processes. In this period the effect of nobility could still be felt, even the concept of gentleman was maintained and bourgeoisie was still not as strong as in Western societies. However, besides all these factors, some kind of development in bourgeois status could be seen that ran parallel to all the previously mentioned tendencies. The violent settlement of problems had completely disappear from the means of certain strata. Moreover, mass movements and mass parties had already appeared in world politics. Politics was not the privilege of a few gentlemen any longer, not even in Hungary. Considering these tendencies I am of the stong opinion, that duels would have ceased to by by themselves even without the shock of change after the World War.

Publications:

Samuel P. Huntington, A civilizációk összecsapása és az új világrend, Protestáns Szemle, 2000/6.
