

THE POLITICAL PROTECTION OF TRANSDANUBIAN PROTESTANTISM IN THE LIGHT OF MIKLÓS BETHLEN'S PAMPHLETS (1671-1681)

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Introduction

After the Habsburg Empire's victory over the Turks on 1st. August 1664 at Szentgotthárd, Leopold I. tied the Vasvár peace. They didn't expel the Turks from Hungary, they began to build the system of absolutist domination. The Hungarian statesmen were discontent with the policy of the Habsburg court so they began to organize. At the meeting in Murány (Muráó) 23th. October, 1666 they reflected on the idea that Hungary should be under the protectorate of the Sultan. The Porta would guarantee free king election, internal and foreign politics. Vienna became aware of the conspiracy, but didn't interfere for many years. Leopold I. in 1671 swooped down on the conspirators by surprise. Péter Zrínyi, Ferenc Frangepán, and Ferenc Nádasdy were executed. The exiles escaped to Transylvania. Although initially the prosecution was politically motivated, the pretext of punishing the conspirators was particularly suitable to get even definitely with the Hungarian Protestants. The political persecution obtained religious essence.²¹⁹

The conclusions of peace from 1606 in Vienna, 1621 in Linz and 1626 in Nikolsburg which contained the national laws about the Protestants' rights and their religious freedom, were considered null.²²⁰ The Protestant historiography called this period between 1671-1681 „decade of mourning”.²²¹ This name was given because of the aggressive action against the churches and their persecution.²²² The Habsburg court

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²¹⁹ In front of emperor Leopold I. (1640-1705) and his court France of Cardinal Richelieu and Mazarin was an example followed. They have sought to build the absolute power. They wanted to achieve the national constitutional institutions, the National Assembly, the palatine dignity and the abolition of county government. The conspiracy served as the legal basis for against the coronation oath. The emperor-king tried to dismiss himself with the theory “playing the role of law” taken to comply with the Constitution, from the royal oath.

²²⁰ BUCSAY, MIHÁLY: *A protestantizmus története Magyarországon 1521-1945*. Budapest, 1985. p. 116.

²²¹ The “mourning decade” word usage in the protestant interpretation was the most violent period of early modern hungarian history. The Magyar Nagy Lexikon wording: “*In the hungarian legal history by the special delegation of court of law in Bratislava in 1673 and 1674 in respect of high treason sentenced and sent to the galley in context of Protestant pastors fate appeared at the end of 17th century.*”

See Magyar Nagylexikon, VIII. Bp., Magyar Nagylexikon Kiadó, p. 1999

²²² See for details PÉTER, KATALIN: *A magyarországi protestáns prédikátorok és tanítók ellen indított per 1674-ben*, Budapest, 1983 in: *A Ráday Gyűjtemény Évkönyvei*. 35., (ed.) BITSKEY, ISTVÁN: *De Ruyter admirális és a magyar irodalom: négyszáz éve született a magyar gályarabok szabadítója* Debreceni Szemle, 15.évf.2007, pp. 167-173, BITSKEY, ISTVÁN: *Szellemi élet a korájkorban*. In: *Magyar művelődéstörténet*, (ed.) KÓSA, LÁSZLÓ, Budapest, 2001, p. 242. and BENCZÉDI, LÁSZLÓ: *A prédikátor perek történeti háttere*. *Theologiai Szemle*, 7-8. Vol 1975. pp. 199-205. and pp. 264-267.



considered this moment the most suitable to attack the Protestant churches. The main reason of the attacks against the Protestant churches was that the Wesselényi - conspiracy was initiated by the protestant churches and their pastors and teachers.

According to the re-formulated theory in 1670 the protestants lost the right to religious liberty guaranteed by their political movements. The Protestant religions, therefore operate illegally and they had to be banned.²²³ Historian László Benczédi says: “to justify the large counter-attack he mainly blamed the Protestant priests because of the attack of the Hungarian rebels... or even the general staff of the Catholic Church considered that time the most suitable for returning to the ancient Catholic faith, the accomplishment of country with one faith.”²²⁴

Count Miklós Bethlen and the transdanubian protestant pastors's, teachers's case

The embracing of the persecuted Hungarian protestants' case was favourably received in Michael Apafi I., Transylvanian prince's court. During the persecutions on 6th April, 1671 he wrote a letter to Rottal military governor in which he asked his support in the case of the slandered priests. Prince Michael Apafi I. and his councilors decided to notify the foreign protestant monarchs, princes and political elite circles about the Hungarian events and their religious background.²²⁵

Miklós Bethlen, the Transylvanian politician and his circle of intellectuals played a very important role in this. In the pamphlets sent to the kings and princes of western protestant countries the members of the mentioned circle were devoting all their efforts to inform the European public of persecuting religion in Hungarian Kingdom. In the pamphlets the authors revealed the Hungarian counter-reformation, emperor and king Leopold I. attacks and pointed out the great defensive struggle of protestant princes against them. The literature attributed wrongly these political pamphlets to Miklós Bethlen for a long time.

Literary historian József Jankovics, the excellent expert in Miklós Bethlen's life and work contradicted this fact in his researches.²²⁶ But it is certain that Miklós Bethlen's influence can be felt concerning the

²²³ NÉMETHY, SÁNDOR: *Delegatum Judicium Extraordinarium Posoniens anno 1674 története és jogászai kritikája*, in: *Theologiai Szemle* Vol6. 1980. pp. 331-334. 1981. pp. 162-163., 1981. pp. 219-224. 1981 pp. 295-300. 1982. pp. 99-105. 1983. pp. 234-244. 1983. pp. 276-286, 1984 pp. 97-102.

²²⁴ BENCZÉDI, LÁSZLÓ: 1975, 9-10. sz. 266. p.

²²⁵ POKOLY, JÓZSEF: *Az erdélyi református egyház története. II. kötet, (1605-1690)*, Budapest, 1904. 266. p.

²²⁶ The first pamphlet of *Austeritas Austriaca* (1671), the second *Austriacae Austeritas continuatio*, a third of the pamphlet *Austriacae Austeritatis, eiusdemque Continuationis Confirmation* was. The works were published pseudonym. The identity of the author of works literary scholar JANKOVICS, JÓZSEF revealed that BETHLEN, MIKLÓS is not the author. Bethlen himself did not know the author.

See JANKOVICS, JÓZSEF: *Bethlen Miklós levelei*. Budapest, 1987. I. köt. 38-43. p., R. VÁRKONYI, ÁGNES: *Erdélyi változások*. Budapest, 1984. 143. p.

background of the formation of the pamphlets. Around the formation of the pamphlets a small circle of intellectuals has to be seen. This literary and intellectual circle functioned under Miklós Bethlen's leadership. Among the members of this literary and intellectual circle were: Pósa-házi János, Michael Szatmárnémethi, Peter Fajgel and Eszéki István.²²⁷

Count Miklós Bethlen, the Transylvanian politician embraced the case of persecuted protestant pastors and teachers through international diplomatic channels. On behalf of Mihály Apafi I., prince of Transylvania and his Councillors in letters he appealed to the kings of the Protestant western countries and university professors. He requested for their support in the case of the persecuted Hungarian Protestant pastors and teachers. He was assisted by Péter Kovásznai Transylvanian reformed bishop, Istvan Pataki professor from Kolozsvár and István Adami Transylvanian saxon lutheran bishop.²²⁸ Miklós Bethlen in 1672 sent these well-drafted and edited letters with a German lutheran officer to Kövár. His plan was that the letters travelling through Poland should arrive in Berlin and Heidelberg. The sending out of some of these letters were impeded by councillor Teleki Mihály. The assumption is that political considerations led Teleki to confiscate the letters.

Some of the letters got into the hands of the archbishop György Szelepcsényi, which letters became important documents against those priests who were summoned to appear before the court in Bratislava.²²⁹ The prosecutor of the court of law established in 1674 in Bratislava convicted the protestant pastors and teachers on trumped-up charges.²³⁰ According to the charge István Vittnyédi, Miklós Bethlen, Ambrus Ketzer corresponding to each other and the transdanubian protestant pastors.²³¹ According to the data found in minutes the defendants' letters were very strongly political coloured.²³² John Burius Krupina pastor has rejected the accusation that the ministers and above mentioned persons would have something to do with them. The lawyer appointed by the court of law in Bratislava, Heussler Ferdinand was also on the pastors and teachers' side. He firmly maintained and proved that the letters presented as evidence are false and have nothing to do with the defendants.

One of the documents against the convicted pastors was the "Vittnyédi letter". This letter was written by István Vittnyédi in Eperjes and addressed to Bethlen Miklós on 10th May, 1669.²³³ There are many different

²²⁷ *Diarium theologicum...* Kolozsvár, 1675. RMK I. 1359.

²²⁸ POKOLY: *ibid.*, 269. p.

²²⁹ NAGY, GÉZA: *A református egyház története (1608-1715). Vol. I-II.*, Máriabesnyő-Gödöllő, 2008. p. 508.

²³⁰ 'The protocol of 1674's galley prisoner sentencing can be found in Esztergom Primate Archives in . S. Varga Katalin (ed): „Vitének ítélőszékre... Az 1674-es gályarabper jegyzőkönyve” Bratislava, 2002, 344. p.

²³¹ See S. VARGA, KATALIN: *ibid.*, 30. p.

²³² *Op.cit.* 30. p.

²³³ 'The judges of the court of law in Bratislava showed up two letters. One of them was addressed to Miklós Bethlen, and the other one to Ketzer Ambrus. See RÁCZ, KÁROLY: *A pozsonyi vértörvényszék áldozatai 1674-ben*, Sárospatak, 1874. 239. p.

counter-arguments which prove that the letter is not authentic.²³⁴ 1. Miklós Bethlen wasn't the captain of the Hajdúság and the Partium territory but of the szekler army. This was well known by István Vitnyédi. 2. Miklós Bethlen and transylvanians usually didn't have any contact with Ferenc Rákóczi II. 3. The letter sent to Bethlen, on 19th June, 1668²³⁵ by Vitnyédi caused a serious disagreement between the two parties, so they never corresponded afterwards. This was confirmed by Miklós Bethlen himself. 4. Vitnyédi wasn't in Eperjes that time when the letter was written. 5. There are a few question related to the authenticity of the letter addressed to Bethlen: The original letter or a copy of it was discovered and which version was Bethlen holding in his hands? The answer can be find in Bethlen's letter to the galley slave - pastors: "But I never see God's face if I saw something like this! ..." ²³⁶ 6. Bethlen claimed that in 1669 Witnyédi was no longer alive.²³⁷ The false letter came to light had another important message concerning Miklós Bethlen's person. Miklós Bethlen was a very good politician with an outstanding personality. He had an extensive political connection to different countries. In Vienna and Bratislava he was kept in evidence and used in connection with charges. The case of the galley protestant pastors caused a great indignation in the whole Europe. Many people came to help them.

Politicians, diplomats, professors, wealthy people did everything they could to rescue the Hungarian protestant pastors.²³⁸ Five years passed however, when finally the Protestant powers through diplomatic channels could do something in their favour. Miklós Bethlen in the letter „Epistola Nicolai Bethlen ad Ministros Exules ..." ²³⁹ written on 4th January, 1675 cleared himself from the accusations. He proved the innocence of the slandered, and convicted protestant pastors, teachers, and that the accusations against them were unfounded. He asked for the political support of the western protestant states in order to prevent the religion persecution what he finally achieved in the future. At the end of his letter he encouraged the galley prisoner pastors to persist and remain devoted to their faith.²⁴⁰ The *Apologia Ministrorum Evangelicorum Hungaricae* (The Protection of the Hungarian Evangelical Pastors) pamphlet appeared two years later.²⁴¹

²³⁴ See RÁCZ ibid., 235. p. — Sárospataki Füzetek Vol. 557 1863, PAYR, SÁNDOR (ed): *Egyháztörténeti Emlékek. Forrásgyűjtemény a Dunántúli Ágostai Hitvallású Evangélikus Egyházkerület történetéhez. I. kötet*, Sopron, 1910. pp. 236-237.

²³⁵ Sárospataki Füzetek 1868. évf. 921. p.

²³⁶ See for details Bethlen Miklós levele az elítélt prédikátorokhoz. Jan. 4. 1675. MOL.

²³⁷ See for details in „*Geschichte der evangelischen Kirche in Ungarn von Ungarn von Anfang der Reformation bis 1850*“ Berlin. 1854. p. 225.

²³⁸ PAYR, SÁNDOR: *A magyar protestáns gályarabok*, Budapest, 1928. p. 75., RÉVÉSZ, IMRE: *A gályarabok lelke*, Debrecen, 1936, p. 85. THIURY, ETELE: *Gályarabjaink megszabadítása*, Protestáns Szemle, 1909.

THIURY, ETELE: *A Dunántúli Református Egyházkerület története*, Pozsony, 1998. pp. 72-98.

²³⁹ SZABÓ KÁROLY: *Régi magyar könyvtár I. (1531—1711. megjelent magyar nyomtatványok) — II (1473—1711. megjelent nem magyar nyelvű hazai nyomtatványok)*, Budapest, 1879-1885. p. 1313

²⁴⁰ Miklós Bethlen's letter to the exiled protestant preachers Miklós Bethlen's letters (1699-1716) has collected, organized by newspaper, an introductory essay and commentary written by the József Jankovics.

JANKOVICS, JÓZSEF: *Régi Magyar Prózái Emlékek*, Budapest, 1987. pp. 1159-1180.

²⁴¹ *Apologia Ministrorum Evangelicorum Hungaricae ad innocentiam suam Orbi Christiano declarandam, opposita Iudicio Tribunalis Posoniensis, a quo Perduellionis crimine contra Regiam Majestatem iniquissime accusati et condemnati, non modo toto*

In this pamphlet he defended the persecuted Hungarian protestant pastors and pointed to the causes of dissatisfactions in Hungary. He was arguing with János Lapsánszky, the Secretary of lawcourt in Pozsony, refusing the alleged relationship between the rebellion and the protestant pastors. Miklós Bethlen strongly argued that the persecution of the protestants in Hungary had religious reasons.²⁴²

The *Epistola ad Ministros Exules* letter appeared in print in Cluj as Appendix of this pamphlet. Miklós Bethlen with this dual work intended to inform the transylvanian and the foreign public. He managed to achieve this in the

future. A letter from Miklós Bethlen addressed to exiled preachers was printed in the Netherlands.²⁴³ It is considered Miklós Bethlen's diplomatic success that almost at the same time Gerard van Hamel Bruininx (Bruininx) Dutch Ambassador of Netherlands in Viena and Bergt Gabrielson Oxenstierna Ambassador of Swedish Government presented a submission. In these presentations both of them support the defense of Protestantism in Hungary.²⁴⁴

The „Onschuld Vereenigde der Nederlander, vertoont aan den Rooms Keiser Leopoldus I. but Door der selver Resident de Hr. Hamel Bruininx. Door der selver Resident de Hamel Bruininx Hr. In den Jaare 1675. In den Jaar 1675th Tot Weene „memorandum submitted by the Hammel Gerard Brunininx to the emperor contains the Dutch allies Estate's attitude towards the persecution in Hungary. The allies Estate considered the pastors and teachers innocent. They emphasized that in Hungary the case wasn't against the rebellion, but there was a religious persecution, which was considered damaging to the entirely Christian world.²⁴⁵ These letters were precious documents of the international diplomatic intervention and political pressure on Habsburg Court in Vienna. The Latin and French letters came from Gerard van Brunigh Hammel, Dutch diplomat in Vienna.²⁴⁶ These letters are good evidences of the Dutch diplomatic efforts that had been made to the Protestants in Hungary.²⁴⁷ Miklós Bethlen's intellectual excellence provided him leading role in the political life of Transylvania, international politics, the Protestantism in Transylvania, education, culture as

Regno proscripti sunt, sed exemplo a Pietate et Mansuetudine Christiana prorsus alieno, magnam partem ad Trirames Hispanicas damnati. Anno Patientiae Sanctorum, MDC. LXXVII. Ultrajecti, Ex Officina Guilielmi ... Typograph. Ao: 1678. Leírása SZABÓ KÁROLY: *Régi magyar könyvtár I. (1531—1711. megjelent magyar nyomtatványok) — II (1473—1711. megjelent nem magyar nyelvű hazai nyomtatványok)*. Bp. 1879-1885. II. 384.p.

²⁴² LUKINICH, IMRE: „A bethleni Gróf Bethlen-család története,” Budapest 1927, p. 389.

²⁴³ SZABÓ KÁROLY: „*Régi magyar könyvtár I. (1531—1711. megjelent magyar nyomtatványok) — II (1473—1711. megjelent nem magyar nyelvű hazai nyomtatványok)*” Budapest 1879-1885. p. 1400., JANKOVICS JÓZSEF (ed.): „Bethlen Miklós levelei”, Budapest, 1987. I. p. 89. II. pp. 1159-1180.

²⁴⁴ Introductory essay written by László Makkai in: MAKKAI, LÁSZLÓ: „A magyarországi gályarab prédikátorok emlékezete,” Magyar Helikon, 1976. 20-23. p.

²⁴⁵ RÁCZ, ibid, pp. 28-249.

²⁴⁶ TÓTH, ENDRE: „Hamel Bruininx a soproni országgyűlésen.” ThSz. 1926. pp. 678-707.

²⁴⁷ HHStA. Ungarische Akten, Miscellanae, Fasc. 427. 6566., 6768.

well as concerning the inflow of foreign intellectual capital. His vocation and mission was to resolve political, social, cultural and religious problems in Transylvania and the Hungarian Kingdom.

Completion

Miklós Bethlen undertook to resolve such a problem that time when the protestant pastors and teachers were persecuted. He was the promoter of resettlement in Alba Iulia of the expelled Reformed College in Sarospatak, protector of the persecuted protestants in Hungarian Kingdom. As he was a brilliant statesman he was worthy placed in the Transylvanian and Hungarian political, cultural and church history life in the 17-18th century. The message of his life-work is: you must build during difficult, turbulent times, too, stop the decline and awaken hope for people in hopeless situations. God, Christian Church and Hungarian State must be served with firm loyalty