



Lajos Takács: A Hungarian Lawyer's Life in 20th-Century Transylvania

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Abstract: Lajos Takács was born in Transylvania, a multi-ethnic region, at the time (before 1918/20) part of Kingdom of Hungary and later part of Romania. He finished his studies in law in what was by that time Romania, given that the university centre of Transylvania, Cluj, had become part of Romania. He was a young lawyer of good ability, gifted with political and social sensitivity. After 1945, he found himself in the service of the emerging dictatorship because he certainly believed that the time had come for a solution to the question of nationalities, for reconciliation, equality, cooperation, and friendship between Romanians and Hungarians. In this capacity, however, he contributed to the dismantling of Hungarian institutions and organizations, most notably – as rector – to the forced merger of Bolyai University into Victor Babeş University. Instead of reconciliation, the system was characterized by the oppression of minorities. Takács, in his old age, realizing his mistakes, became an opponent of the regime and of Ceauşescu. In the 1980s, during the darkest period of the dictatorship, he died without the hope that some of his former dreams would come true.

Keywords: Romania, Hungarian minority, Bolyai University, Soviet-type dictatorship, opposition to the dictatorship

Lajos Takács was born in 1908 in Vízakna (today Ocna Sibiului, Romania), near Nagyszeben (today Sibiu, Romania), where salt had been mined since the Middle Ages and which was a spa town during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In February 1849, the battle of Vízakna took place there, one of General Bem's bloodiest battle losses. Hundreds of dead soldiers were buried in one of the mine shafts because it was impossible to dig graves in the frozen ground. In 1890, it caused a national sensation when, after a heavy rainfall, seven bodies – preserved by the brine – turned up almost intact on the surface of a lake. They were buried, but their memorial cross disappeared after the change of sovereignty in 1918–1920.

At the time of Lajos Takács' birth, the village had a Romanian majority (2,649 people). However, there was also a significant Hungarian population (1,232 people), most of them Calvinists (today, there are about 400 Hungarians and 4,000 Romanians). His grandfather was a national guardsman in the 1848/49 revolution and then a Calvinist pastor and schoolmaster. Lajos Takács remembered his father as follows. 'My father was the sixth of twelve children. He worked as a commercial clerk in several Transylvanian towns. After a brief and bankrupt self-employment, he took over the local Hangya (Ant) Cooperative business as a manager.'¹

Lajos Takács completed his secondary schooling at Bethlen College in Nagyenyed (today Aiud, Romania). Later, he studied law at the Romanian University of Cluj, named after King Ferdinand I (the Hungarian university was first removed to Budapest and then finally settled in Szeged when Transylvania was annexed to Romania). He did not live permanently in Cluj, often only appearing for exams. However, both in secondary school and at university, he was a student of exceptional aptitude. He said of his career choice:

I took stock of my situation. My father's limited financial resources would not have allowed me to pursue careers that required a permanent university presence such as medicine or engineering. But I soon developed a unique attraction to the legal profession. In my father's meagre library was a hefty tome, *A magyar család aranykönyve* [The Golden Book of the Hungarian Family], which presented in its chapter on career choice the legal profession as one in which one *becomes the embodiment of justice*. True, this book meant this statement for the judiciary, and the judicial career was – at that time – inaccessible to the Hungarian minority.²

He finished university in 1930. Between 1930 and 1932, he was a trainee lawyer in his hometown. In 1932–33, he served his military service as a lieutenant. He continued to practise as a lawyer in Ocna Sibiului until 1938, when he moved to Timișoara (before 1920, in Hungarian, Temesvár), where the big city offered greater career opportunities. He was involved in the life of the local Hungarian community in both places, and in Timișoara he was elected Calvinist presbyter.

From September 1940, the Second Vienna Award returned Northern Transylvania to Hungary. Takács, however, remained in Timișoara, Romania, where, in addition to his work as a lawyer, he was active in the Hungarian People's Association of Romania (*Romániai Magyar Népközösség*) as secretary-general of the Banatian chapter.

1 Beke 1983. 8.

2 Beke 2002. 18. Translation by the author. All translations are by the author.

[In the] villages of the Banat (*Bánság*) region, Hungarian farmers' houses, livestock, and farm equipment were confiscated one after another, without any legal basis. The relevant law only provided for the confiscation of abandoned property. Even if the head of the family had left and escaped from military service, especially from labour service, the family members continued to cultivate the land. Hundreds of applications were submitted to the court, but the two chambers often rejected them, often without any grounds. The Hungarian People's Community of Banat sought to help and protect the families of those who had worked in miserable conditions in the labour service. It was typical of the situation at the time that while Romanian labour servicemen – if they were called up at all – only worked for two months and were then discharged anyway, Hungarians were called up for an indefinite period. In addition to helping family members, we also provided food and clothing to those who were languishing in the camps. In these actions, the Hungarian people's sense of responsibility and self-consciousness was brilliantly demonstrated. A large amount of money was collected in our winter aid campaign and delivered to the needy. The Hungarian churches also participated in these actions. For example, Bishop Áron Márton personally visited the labour camps several times, where he distributed clothes and food... We did everything we could to help the Hungarian masses in South Transylvania to save their lives...³

In 1941, the Romanian Royal Secret Police – the *Siguranța* – court-martialled the thirty-three-year-old Lajos Takács. The proceedings may have been triggered by the fact that, as a lawyer, he had called on local entrepreneurs who had illegally dismissed Hungarian workers, in all likelihood on the orders of the police, to remedy the situation. The criminal proceedings were brought for sedition. The case was not finally decided and was closed after the war. However, he may have been under surveillance by the Royal Secret Police, as he was recorded as having maintained contact with the Hungarian consulate in Arad. Indeed, Takács regularly informed the consulate in Arad about the situation of Hungarians in South Transylvania. This fact led to the accusation of espionage. The accusation was certainly used against him on numerous occasions later on in order to steer his actions in the direction expected by the Romanian political leadership. After the Romanian breakout from the German alliance (23 August 1944), Takács was arrested and was about to be interned in a concentration camp but was released after the intervention of communist politician and historian László Bányai. From 1945, he took part in the leadership of the Hungarian People's Alliance (*Magyar Népi Szövetség*), a leftist organization of Hungarians living in Romania, and

3 Ibid.

joined the Romanian Workers' Party. His political career took him to Bucharest. Even in 1945, the communist takeover began in earnest.

In György Beke's assessment, Lajos Takács:

embarked on a new, unknown political career. Obviously, like so many other well-intentioned Hungarian intellectuals from Transylvania, he was convinced that he could continue his service on this path. Only in a broader context, not as an excluded minority but in possession of power, in the spirit of fulfilling its events. This generation, the adherents of popular literature, bourgeois democrats, Christians, and libertarians, who took their destiny with them, became prisoners of the Moscow-born power, only realizing their vulnerable position when there was no escape from it. Death was the only escape from the grip of power, organized with unprecedented precision and ruthlessness.⁴

During the Soviet-style dictatorship, he also held important state positions: from 1947 to 1952, he was Deputy Minister for Minorities (together with Finance Minister László Luka, he was the first minister in Romania belonging to the Hungarian nationality), from 1961 to 1975 member of the Council of State, an alternate member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (1965–1977), and from 1968 member of the Central Election Committee. He was also Member of Parliament (1946–1947) and then of the Grand National Assembly (1948–1952, 1957–1961, 1965–1969, 1975–1980).

At the time of the ratification of the Paris Peace Treaty (1947), he was strangely pleased that the minority rights provisions (which were really of little effect and almost non-existent) that accompanied the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920 were not ratified.

The second issue that I feel necessary to point out here is the omission of any minority protection clause in the peace treaty. For twenty-five years, we have seen clauses of this kind. We know the results. The so-called *Minority Convention* has brought us closed schools, bans on the use of languages, the removal of workers from their jobs, and the impoverishment of the working classes. We were convinced, and our conviction has been strengthened many times since, that the arm of the Romanian worker, the calloused hand of the Romanian peasant, and the word of the progressive Romanian intellectual will give us far greater and more powerful protection than any such clause.⁵

4 Ibid.

5 *Népi Egység* [Popular Unity], 27 August 1947.

Is this the statement of an international public law specialist, soon-to-be professor of this subject? According to György Beke, Dr Takács's statement is so grotesque that it could only have raised a smile had it not heralded the beginning of another minority destiny. These sentences are arguments for Hungarian praise of Hungarian vulnerability. A little-known element is that Hungary drafted a 'Minority Code', proposing that the peace treaty should include provisions for the protection of national minorities or that the permanent members of the UN Security Council should conclude separate agreements with the states concerned with the protection of minorities. Takács opposed this attempt at a settlement on behalf of the Hungarians in Transylvania.

In November 1947, at the 3rd Congress of the Hungarian People's Alliance, Petru Groza, the President of the Council of Ministers, announced that he would appoint Lajos Takács as Deputy Minister of Nationalities. In this capacity, he was observed by the communist secret services. His activities were subsequently described as inadequate: he obstructed proper work, he failed to address the concerns of the Hungarian nationality so as not to take a stand against nationalist elements and the kulaks, he employed for years suspicious and hostile persons, including Ferenc Szentmiklósi, a confidant of Bishop Áron Márton, who was arrested for espionage (on the absurd charge of spying for Tito), etc. Nevertheless, at that time, his appointment must have been a politically planned act: it was at this congress that Gyárfás Kurkó, the former, overly independent leader of the Hungarian People's Alliance, was purged. Takács's appointment as deputy minister was a gesture towards the Hungarian community to divert attention from Kurkó's orchestrated removal and make it acceptable.

In 1949, he became lecturer at Bolyai University's Faculty of Law and Economics, a Hungarian-language university established in 1945 in Cluj (in Hungarian, Kolozsvár). He commuted weekly from Bucharest to Cluj. He was able to continue his activities until 1952, when he was removed from the university. The fault line of 1952 is also visible in his public functions: he lost his function and was expelled from the Romanian Workers' Party. He was accused of spying for Hungary before 1944. The context of the measure is the persecution of the intellectual elite associated with the Hungarian People's Alliance by the Romanian communist authorities. In the considered opinion of Sándor Enyedi, 'the prison list of the leadership of the Hungarian People's Alliance is also a bit of a list of values'.⁶ Gyárfás Kurkó, János Demeter, Lajos Csőgör, Lajos Jordáky, József Méliusz, and Edgár Balogh were all imprisoned. Unlike his fellow law professor János Demeter, Takács avoided imprisonment. He was soon also allowed to teach again.

According to a report on him in December 1956, he 'behaved well' during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. As a law student of Bolyai University recalled later,

⁶ Enyedi 1988.

‘we made the poor man very embarrassed when we asked him in an international law class in ‘56 what he thought about the Soviet intervention in Hungary. He was a much wiser man and knew more about this regime than we did. He said: boys, we’d better not talk about this, don’t embarrass me.’⁷

A small book on public international law published in Hungarian (*Tudnivalók a nemzetközi jogról*, Bucharest, 1957) is related to the period he taught at Bolyai University. A year after the 1956 Soviet military intervention in Hungary, in the mentioned book he circulated the following: ‘In its practice, the Soviet Union not only gave credence to the principles of state sovereignty, equality of rights between small and large nations, and non-interference in internal affairs, not only faithfully observed its obligations under international treaties but also helped to establish new legal institutions in international law.’ It is a perfect example of the freedom of science in a Soviet-style dictatorship: there was no such thing.

In 1957, Takács was appointed Rector of Bolyai University. He was to be the last rector of that institution. He held on to this post until 1959, when the two – Romanian- and Hungarian-language – universities of science in Cluj were forcibly merged on orders from the party, in 1959. Takács had to and did assist in the grand unification meetings at the House of University Students in Cluj: he sat at the main lectern. He took part in this well-orchestrated charade of justifying decisions already made.

Professor János Demeter, who was released from prison in 1955, spoke on behalf of Hungarian lawyers in support of the unification of the universities: ‘It is our duty as Hungarian teachers and students to fight vigorously, above all, against the nationalism that certain corrupt and hostile elements are trying to spread among Hungarian academic cadres and students.’⁸ Takács himself asked:

Have we done everything to bring students of different nationalities closer together? Can we be satisfied with the fact that the young people of Babeş and Bolyai universities meet only occasionally in the work camps or at comrades’ meetings? I believe that this is not enough. We call Babeş and Bolyai Universities our sister universities. As we know, siblings live in the same house.⁹

Takács’s assistance with the university merger is difficult to appreciate. They could have ordered and coerced him or assured him that everything would be fine. They could have pretended that there would be separate Romanian and Hungarian sections within the unified university and that Hungarian education would not be threatened (it was not). The immediate liquidation of the independent Bolyai

7 Veress–Kokoly 2016. 196.

8 Vincze 2005. 668.

9 *Ifjúmunkás*. 26 February 1959. 8.

University and the regression of the merged Hungarian education (for example, in the case of the Hungarian legal education, the effect was immediate cessation, while in other cases a permanent deterioration took place throughout several decades) could certainly not have been prevented by Takács' opposition. Nevertheless, his servile behaviour contributed to the unification of the university. It cannot be forgotten that other university professors of Bolyai University committed suicide in protest against the forced merger of the two universities. The dual name of the university, according to János Demeter's recollection, 'was precisely to avoid the appearance that Bolyai had been liquidated, insisting that the university resulting from the merger should keep both names: Babeş and Bolyai. Thus, for such reasoning, it became Babeş-Bolyai, as it were a symbol.'¹⁰

However, Lajos Takács's career was not interrupted. He was not transferred to the Romanian Law Faculty in Cluj, as some of his colleagues had been, but back to Bucharest. He became an adviser to the Ministry of Education and Culture and taught at the Faculty of Law at the University of Bucharest. He was awarded the Order of Labour, Class I, in 1964.

In 1968, a decade after the unification of the universities and three years after Ceauşescu had come to power, Takács was still a staunch supporter of the communist regime. He declared that he considered 'the nationality question to be solved' and that 'the biggest problem is that Hungarians still do not speak Romanian well enough' and that Romanian language teaching should be strengthened. In the same year, Takács and János Demeter drafted a new nationality statute (minority act), but negotiations on this issue could no longer begin. It was precisely about this period that the following discussion was recorded regarding the visit of comrade Lajos Takács to a meeting in Braşov (in Hungarian, Brassó), where the situation of Hungarian education was discussed.

– Look, maybe I can understand his behaviour at the meetings to dismantle Bolyai University. He was under mortal duress. Everyone couldn't just sacrifice themselves like Szabédi. But who demanded that he lecture the Hungarians of Braşov for requesting a Hungarian-language vocational school? All the time, he kept saying that it is the assertion of Hungarian youth that requires their education in Romanian. Because if they know the terminology in Hungarian, how can they stand their ground in, say, Galaţi or Brăila? The Hungarian language would be a ghetto for them.

– I know this argument, Sándor. I just don't know why a Szekler [Hungarian living in the Szeklerland region of Transylvania – translator's note] worker

10 Vincze 1997. 401.

should necessarily have to stand his ground in Galați? This is Ceaușescu's thinking.

– Exactly! And Takács is Ceaușescu's puppet!¹¹

Something must have broken in this man. His tortured conscience must have won out. From the early 1970s, Takács became increasingly vocal in his defence of minority rights. On 31 March 1972, Takács protested against the fact that more than half of the Hungarian native speaker students were no longer allowed to study in their mother tongue after the eighth grade. According to Károly Király:

[T]he last straw for him was the Council of Hungarian Nationality Workers' meeting on 31 March 1972, where Lajos Takács criticized the party leadership's anti-nationality policy, which was depriving the students of their rights, in a harsh tone. The last rector of Bolyai University also criticized himself: he was ashamed that he had allowed himself to be misled about the merger of Bolyai and Babeș Universities, which led to the liquidation of Bolyai.¹²

It was partly as a result of this Takács speech that Károly Király became 'oppositional'.

In June of the same year, Takács wrote a letter to Ceaușescu about the rapid decline in minority education. His letter went unanswered. In the following period, relations deteriorated further. Ceaușescu declared that 'Romanian is not a foreign language for any young person living in Romania! It is the language of our socialist society, and all Romanian citizens must learn it.'

In April 1974, Takács spoke at the national plenum of Hungarian national minority workers, and he also described to the party leadership the minority grievances in the field of education and pointed out that the proportion of Hungarian minority members in the prosecutor's offices, courts, and police force was almost negligible. Ceaușescu's reply was that everyone should speak one language, the language of socialism and that the emphasis should therefore be on learning the official language. The dialogue with the nationalities living together, after a long pause, ended in complete failure. Immediately afterwards, the plenary leader, Miron Constantinescu, who is also a Hungarian speaker, was relieved by the party's central committee of his duties to supervise the national councils. This was punishment: Constantinescu had led the meeting too liberally.

In Cluj, it is recorded that when the former Piarist grammar school, Hungarian Lyceum No. 11, was to be *transformed* – the only Hungarian

11 Beke 2002. 20.

12 Csinta 2020. 10.

secondary school left in the city – Edgár Balogh, Sándor Kacsó, and Lajos Takács sent a joint telegram to President Ceaușescu, protesting against the planned *merger*, i.e. the liquidation of the Hungarian school. The merger was not carried out to the consternation of the local education inspectorate. When in 1977 a security brigade arrived from Bucharest to Brașov and the Háromszék region in Szeklerland to force the targeted Hungarian teachers to confess their crimes by physical and psychological torture: that they were educating Hungarian children in a nationalist spirit, and when professor Zsuffa [Zoltán – translator's note], a teacher from Covasna [in Hungarian, Kovászna – translator's note], after the suicide of Jenő Szikszay from Brasov, escaped from his home in the middle of the night and did not stop until Lajos Takács's home in Cluj, the former deputy minister went straight to the President of Romania without hesitation to stop the fatal persecution.¹³

In 1978, an informant wrote the following report to the Securitate: '... a few days ago I met Lajos Takács on the street, who was coming home from a walk in the park... I congratulated him on the Academic Prize he had received for a textbook he had written with a colleague, and I had the impression that he was delighted to have won this prize.' The Romanian-language volume, *Drept internațional public* (Public International Law), was written by Takács and his co-author Marțian I. Niciu and was published in Bucharest in 1976. He was conferred the Order of Tudor Vladimirescu, 2nd class, in 1971. In 1973, in honour of his 65th birthday, he was awarded the Order of 23 August, 1st class. In 1978, with a masterstroke of state hypocrisy, he was awarded the first degree of the Order of Merit in Science. He was by then 70 years old. The state tried to reassure him with awards.

But at the same time he became a definitive dissident, an oppositionist. As vice-president of the Council of Hungarian Nationality Workers, he submitted a petition on the erosion of Hungarian-language education and the dismantling of minority rights and drafted an eighteen-point package of proposals. The Memorandum reached the West, was reported in the Western press, and the text, smuggled out of Romania, was published in English the following year (in *Witnesses to Cultural Genocide. First-Hand Reports on Romania's Minority Policies Today*, New York, 1979, edited by György Schöpflin). The Memorandum accurately and richly detailed the increasing national oppression and violations of the Hungarian minority's rights in Romania and became widely known.

In March 1980, another secret service report on him recorded how he objected to the nomination of Győző Hajdu as a representative to the Grand National Assembly. The informant, a paid asset of the communist secret police, was the author of the previous report as well. Takács objected to Győző Hajdu because the latter behaved at the XII Congress like a buffoon who outdid even Păunescu

13 Beke 2002. 20.

in flattery towards Ceaușescu (Adrian Păunescu was the ‘court poet’ of the Ceaușescu regime). Hajdu was mocked as a Hungarian Păunescu. Takács was angry that such people represented Hungarians and that other, more capable people were being ignored. So angry, in fact, that he did not renew his subscription to *Előre* (Forward, the Hungarian-language newspaper of the Communist Party) having as Editor-in-Chief Győző Hajdu. In fact, according to Takács, the whole Hungarian community should have boycotted *Előre* in protest. At the end of the informer’s report, the secret police wrote: the informer has been made aware of his obligations to moderate and influence.

A memorandum written by Hungarian intellectuals in Cluj (*Malomkövek között*, in English: Among Millstones) included the following about Păunescu:

Why is the exponent of the government, of its most nationalist, and one might even say fascist ideology, Adrian Păunescu, inciting against us? After all, most Romanian intellectuals also condemned his unbridled incitement, nationalist fanaticism, and anti-Hungarian agitation among Romanian youth. Let us ask: why is he shooting more and more wildly at us?! We know the answer: only because he is expressing the government’s intentions and ideas, only because the government has decided that we, the Hungarians in Romania, must disappear into the abyss of history so that a nationalist fever dream, the *united socialist Romanian nation*, can be created. It is a disgrace to humanity that such a far-reaching programme can be announced at all, which is destined to eliminate the nationalities of a country by force (...) It is a nightmare. It is heartbreaking to think that not a single person in the country has publicly rejected this diabolical plan to create a *homogeneous socialist Romanian nation*, a monolingual country, by the year 2000. The obsessives of the racial myth are impatient; the deadline has been set too short.¹⁴

This passage is a good indication of the reality and spirit of the times.

Sándor Kacsó, writer, politician, recorded the following in his diary when Bishop Áron Márton died:

4 October 1980. Today after eight o’clock, we left in Lajos’s car, Lajos and I, to Gyulafehérvár, to the funeral of Áron Márton. I was worried by Lajos’s condition; fits of weeping tormented him, which greatly affected me, resulting in the same. My son Feri was driving the car, and one eye was constantly on us. There, in the cathedral, in the crowd, we calmed down a bit.¹⁵

Takács’s tears were not only for the death of Áron Márton but for his own tragedy. Lajos Takács, who was seriously ill in the last years of his life, died in

14 Király 2014. 109.

15 Antal 1997. 116.

1982, caught in a web of hopelessness and impossibility. His remains lay in state in the House of University Students in Cluj, used as a funerary home for these occasions, and were buried next to his parents in Ocna Sibiului.

In the last decade of his life, Takács was an oppositionist, but, as Lajos Kántor recalls, the atrium of the House of University Students, where the funeral casket was displayed, was ringing with emptiness.

Attending the funeral could have been a mass protest against the dictatorship and national oppression – instead, an unusual, cool reserve filled the huge space at the ornate funeral (...) Lajos Takács, the rector who played the pathetic role he had been assigned in the unification of the Romanian and Hungarian universities of Cluj without public protest, could not be forgiven for his behaviour in 1959.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Kántor 1995. 2.