

The spread of Luther's teachings in Hungary before 1526

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Speaking of the Reformation, we must make some basic statements before we can trace its appearance and reception in Hungary before Mohács (1526). First, we must make it clear that the Reformation as a spiritual-intellectual revival in Hungary was realised as a *process* in society and was not an overnight stormy and quick transformation. It is also important that the Reformation did not arrive in an empty, irreligious medium, on the contrary, it arrived in a society that desired renewal. There had already existed a specifically *Hungarian Catholic reform*. Nor is it an insignificant aspect that the *German* origin of the Reformation strongly influenced its judgement in Hungary.

The Catholic reform was represented by some members of the lower-clergy and besides by the Franciscans in the most consistent way. Since the turn of the century, the magistrates of the order, time and time again, scourged those members who practised a new kind of exegesis. The new exegesis, which involved a criticism of the church hierarchy hand in hand with that of the Holy See, had been unfolding among the Franciscans already before the appearance of Luther. All this was completed by social sensitiveness and criticism of society. This process was given a newer push from the revival started in Germany. Thus the reform turned into reformation.

Before the battle of Mohács this interweaving could not be brought about, since in the general anti-German emotions, the Lutheran Reformation seemed to be the stronghold of *German influence*, something that had been hated already. This aversion lasted until after 1526. An interesting light is shed on this by the opinion of *Ferenc Gergely*, a Pauline monk, on Luther's sermons. *Gergely Simontornyai*, a friend of his called his attention to these sermons and recommended them for reading with great enthusiasm. However, Gergely declared that he would not read them. He reasoned like this: "I do not want to be infected by German swill." It was during these years that an anonymous Carthusian published his work in which when explaining the reason for writing his book, he refers to his concern for the country beside other factors: "...my main reason is that perjury and the dangerous Lutheran heresy are in ferment and corrupt the whole of Europe. Alas! This heresy has lately aimed at destroying and annihilating the chosen Hungarian people."² For several decades the vision was held by many that the prevention of the Turkish threat on the country had lain in the renewal of religious life. However, they could not even imagine that this renewal might have its start in Germany, since they thought to discover the source of all trouble in German influence.

King Louis II³ (1516-1526) surrounded himself with Germans in his court.⁴ His uncle and guardian marquis George Von Branderburg played the most important role in his milieu. It was commonly known about George that he lived a frivolous and luxurious life and tried to influence the king in that direction as well. From a warning letter of the other uncle, the Polish king Sigismund written to Louis, it turns out that the rumours had some grounds. Sigismund asked Louis not to have shooting parties and banqueting on holy days and not to tolerate his hunting dogs' eating at his table and, warned him in general to preserve his royal dignity. The warning did not seem to be of much use and with Louis' marriage the light-headed lifestyle intensified. (His wife was *Mary Von Hapsburg* who arrived in Buda⁵ in 1521.) It is true that similar ways of living could be observed in the royal courts throughout Europe. However, in Hungary in the public opinion

¹ Imre Révész, "Simontornyai Gergely," in: *Sárospataki Füzetek*, 1864. p.586.

² Edit Madas ed., *A néma barát megszólal* (Budapest, 1985), p.11.

³ King of Hungary and Moravia. Died in the battle of Mohács.

⁴ See the analysis of the political context in: Péter Kulcsár, *A Jagelló-kor* (Budapest, 1981), pp.166-213. and Győző Bruckner, "Magyarország belső állapota a mohácsi ütközet előtt," in: Imre Lukinich ed., *Mohácsi emlékkönyv* (Budapest, 1926), pp.11-36.

⁵ Buda was the centre of Hungary from the 13th century. It was under Turkish occupation between 1541 and 1686. Now Budapest.

such a conduct gave rise to indignation, for the country came to a very severe situation during those years. In 1521, the Turks wounded severely the southern line of border castles when they occupied Szabács, Zimony and Nándorfehérvár.⁶ Public opinion considered partly the leaders of the country and mainly George Von Brandenburg to be the cause of the tragedy, the main source of troubles. At the national assemblies in the ranks of the noble opposition the opinion was given more and more voice that foreigners, including the Germans staying in the royal court, should be driven out of the country.⁷

The public feeling throughout the country condemned the leading aristocracy and the prelates and fed anti-German emotions. 10 000-15 000 men arrived at the national assemblies of the nobility. Most of them were “walker” poor members of the lower nobility. They took home the news from the ardent atmospheres of the Diets. The degree of hatred and distrust toward the government is illustrated well by the fact that when the pope announced a jubilee indulgence with the purpose of collecting offerings against the Turks, 120 000 forints were gathered. In 1525, when the Turkish threat was greater than ever, he announced the indulgence again. This time there were only 3000-4000 forints in the collecting boxes which was rather little compared to the significance of the issue. There were rather more junk and slips with blasphemous words on them found in those offering boxes.

Thus, in the meantime among the ranks of the nobility in opposition – and elsewhere also – the opinion that heresy born in Germany was the greatest cause of corruption for Hungary spread more and more widely. *István Werbőczy*, the head of the members of the lower nobility, as a member of the Hungarian delegation, paid a personal visit at the imperial assembly in Worms in 1521 in order to ask for help for Hungary against the Turks. In spring, on his way to Worms, in Vienna he republished a work written in the spirit of counter-reformation at his own expense. In the foreword he called upon Louis II to keep this harmful heresy away from Hungary. ...*Someone introduced a book to me and said that it was the only book that destroyed the teachings of Luther. It clearly throws light on the ruse with which Luther first deceived himself and later the inexperienced as well. (...) As soon as it was possible I sent your majesty a copy of this dear book that is the sure and strong shield and sharp arrow of the catholic faith and is republished due to my contribution. (...) This reading is suitable for getting to know this coming disease and for curing those who have been infected by it. Your majesty should do his utmost to prevent the whole country of this plague by means of instructions.*⁸

In Worms the Hungarian delegation was disappointed, for the Empire was engaged with its own concerns, first of all with the issues of the French-Hapsburg conflict and also with the Luther issue and used only fine words to make promises for Hungary. Werbőczy and his companions found Luther's views threatening, keeping in sight the interests of the country. Therefore Werbőczy and *Jeromos Balbi*, another member of the Hungarian delegation, invited the reformer for dinner and they entered into a heated debate over the doctrines. The Hungarians later on made the statement that Luther proved to be “*foolish and ignorant.*” Others who were eye- and ear-witnesses of the discussion declared that the German monk in his answers to the arguments of the Hungarians “*did not behave cleverly.*”⁹ Hungarian interests would have the German Empire undivided since that was the only way Hungary could expect military help from them. It was only the pope who not only promised but also sent money. Thus in its behaviour against the reformer the Hungarian delegation on the one hand, saw an opportunity to express that they stood on the side of those who were Luther's enemies and who could be possible supporters of Hungary. On

⁶ From the 15th century these towns were the most important centres of the line of defence against the Turks. Today they can be found in Serbia. Nándorfehérvár is today's Belgrade for example.

⁷ There were Germans living not only in the royal court. After the Mongolian ravage in the second half of the 13th century German settlers arrived and established towns in Hungary. They preserved their language and culture. Their isolating attitude attained the antipathy of the Hungarian aborigines.

⁸ The work republished by Werbőczy is the work of Dominican monk Ambrosius Catharinus (Lanciloto Politi), *Apologia pro veritate Catholicae et Apostolicae fidei* (Firenze, 1520); the foreword is in: Vilmos Frankl, *Werbőczy István* (Budapest, 1899), pp.164-167.

⁹ Ibid.

the other hand, they also saw the possible support of Luther's movement as inexpedient, for in their eyes the "stubbornness" of the reformer was leading toward the further frittering away of the forces and interests that had already been torn into a thousand pieces.

The way the reformer took a stand on the war against the Turks did not help the Hungarian politicising public opinion welcome him with an unbiased attitude. Although Luther was not concerned about the Turkish issue by itself he did make statements about it in some of his works. First of all Luther was indignant at the pope wanting to raise money for the expedition against the Turks by selling indulgence notes. What is more, the inner problems in Germany were a lot more burning than the threat of the Turks. "Do we want to fight against the Turks? That is not so! First we should set to work at home for things are looking the worst here."¹⁰ The reformer inveighed against the pope also in 1522, when he condemned the papal curse pronounced on the helpers of the Turks. When the emperor, who had taken steps against the reformer, claimed himself to be a defender of Christianity in connection with a possible war against the Turks, Luther wrote indignantly: "Finally I beg all beloved Christians to help pray to God for these miserable and blinded princes – it is without doubt that God punished us with them – so that we do not get to the point of marching against the Turks or giving offerings, for the Turks are ten times more clever and pious than our princes. (...) For behold, you can see how that poor mortal larva-sack, the emperor, who is not sure about his life for a moment, boasts impudently: he claims to be the true and chief protector of the Christian faith. (...) This is how the king of England boasts, also claiming that he is the protector of the Christian church and faith. **What is more, the Hungarians are boasting about being protectors of God and this is what they sing in the litany: 'ut nos defensores tuos exaudire digneris', listen to us, your defenders.**"¹¹ Thus we can see that Luther spoke about the Turkish issue in a different context than the Hungarians did. Obviously, viewing it from Wittenberg it looked different than from Buda! After Mohács at the request of many he returned to the question, first negatively, for "the Turks have returned home again, and our Germans do not care about them any more, and the time has not arrived for me to write about this." Later in 1528 he finds the theme timely, for "the Turks are approaching us."¹² What was a burning question for the Hungarians remained an issue of minor importance for Luther until Germany became directly endangered. In this respect it is understandable that the reformer remained *only a German* in the eyes of our Hungarians.

We must view the laws issued against the Lutherans in the context of what has been said.¹³ If they had labelled the hated foreigners as Germans it would not have been expedient at all. That is why they turned against them as against Lutherans. An article of Decree 1523:54 spoke about the Lutherans, however its sting was aimed at the Germans of the royal court: "Your kingly majesty, as Catholic prince, kindly punish all the Lutherans, their supporters and all those who stick to their denomination as public heretics and enemies of the blessed virgin Mary with the death penalty and the taking away of all their goods."¹⁴ The enemies of the Virgin Mary are the enemies of Hungary. Members of the lower nobility gathered in large numbers and armed at the 1525 national assembly demanded in this spirit that the king remove the Germans, *who are all Lutherans*, from his court in five days. The king made promises concerning this, indicating that he would keep four of them beside himself and the queen. The article against the Lutherans got into the decree in connection with the removal of foreigners. "The Lutherans all should be expelled from the country and wherever they can be found they should be caught and burnt not only by church people but by secular people as well."¹⁵ All this does not mean that these decrees were not used indeed for persecuting – although only sporadically – those who spread the Reformation, as we are going to see it.

¹⁰ Jenő Sólyom, *Luther és Magyarország* (Budapest, 1933), p.91. (This was elaborated by Luther in his *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*.)

¹¹ Jenő Sólyom, *op.cit.*, p.94. (in his *Két császári összeegyeztethetetlen és ellentmondó, Lutherre vonatkozó parancs*.)

¹² *Ibid.*, p.96.

¹³ Mihály Zsilinszky, *A magyar országgyűlések vallásiügyi tárgyalásai a reformatiótól kezdve*, vol.1. (Budapest, 1881), pp.11-22.

¹⁴ *Magyar törvénytár 1000-1526* (Budapest, 1899), p.825.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.831.

THE ROYAL COURT

Were there Lutherans during these years in Hungary? Was the king, or rather the queen and her surroundings really followers of Luther's teaching?¹⁶ When answering these questions we must refer to the fact that in the early 1520s in Buda there was not a sharp borderline drawn between the teachings of *Erasmus* and that of *Luther*. Since the public split of principle between the two of them occurred only in 1525-26 we should not wonder at the standpoint taken by the humanists of Buda. And although on one occasion the humanist *Jakab PISO* in the presence of the royal couple refuted the views that identified Erasmus and Luther, this did not change the reality of the *sympathy* felt toward Luther. We must use this expression since the teaching of the reformer was not yet a national issue at that point, not as in Germany, but *solely* a theological question. *István Brodarics*, the bishop of Szerémség¹⁷ made a statement in this spirit siding with Luther in connection with the priests' being married and having communion in both kind. The queen herself must have been thinking in the same way, seeing Luther as a consistent disciple of Erasmus. Of course we must take it into account that beginning in 1521 Luther was under a curse, which did not prevent certain members of the royal court of Buda from giving expression to their sympathy. From this it also followed that it was not simply theological naivety that maintained sympathy toward the reformer. Several things point to this. However, it is for sure that what was called "Lutheran" in this anti-German atmosphere was not necessarily Luther's teaching.

Shortly after George Von Brandenburg had left Buda, he supported the Reformation to such an extent that he received the adjective "pious." He was still staying in Buda when in 1521 he invited *Simon Grynaeus* from the University of Vienna, which he had to leave because of the steps taken against the Reformation. (*Grynaeus was born in Germany in 1493. He made friends with Melanchton.*)¹⁸ Grynaeus worked as a professor in Buda. The Dominicans accused him of heresy, that is, Lutheranism, because of which he had to suffer imprisonment. He was released through the intercession of George Von Brandenburg and that of Queen Mary and left for Wittenberg. The Queen not only interceded for Grynaeus but also supported *Konrad Cordatus*, who was preaching in the spirit of the Reformation, as a priest of *Blessed Virgin Church* in Buda.¹⁹ Public opinion being discontent with the Lutherans did not deter the queen from inviting another court-minister from Upper Hungary.²⁰ *János Henckel* also worked in the spirit of the Reformation. He was in contact with both Erasmus and Melanchton.²¹

After the disaster of Mohács it was Luther himself who wrote a consoling book to Queen Mary. Mary's brother, Ferdinand,²² who was a zealous Catholic, warned his sister not to deviate from her forefathers' religion. Mary in her response said that she "*cannot forbid Luther to write what he considers good to be written.*"²³ Having left Hungary Mary for long years tried to reconcile in herself the spirit of Luther and Erasmus, until she finally decided to stick to the latter, to the great relief of her family.

Thus we should not be astonished at the fact that the papal ambassador reported the following to Rome in 1524: "*According to public information, God forbid, the king and the queen are Lutherans.*" What is more, the ambassador of the pope also mentioned that he had firsthand informa-

¹⁶ The most significant literature on the Reformation before Mohács is: Jenő Zoványi, *A reformáció Magyarországon 1565-ig* (Budapest, 1922); Imre Révész, *Magyar református egyháztörténet* (Budapest, 1938); Sándor Bíró, Mihály Bucsay, Endre Tóth, Zoltán Varga eds., *A Magyar Református Egyház története* (Budapest, 1949); Mihály Bucsay, *A protestantizmus története Magyarországon 1521-1945* (Budapest, 1985); Ferenc Balogh, *A magyar protestáns egyháztörténelem részletei a reformatio korától jelenig* (Debrecen, 1872).

¹⁷ The very southern comitat of Hungary. Now belongs to Serbia.

¹⁸ Jenő Zoványi, *Magyarországi protestáns egyháztörténelmi lexikon* (Budapest, 1977), p.225.

¹⁹ Jenő Zoványi, *Lexikon... op.cit.*, p.114.

²⁰ Upper Hungary is today's Slovakia. During the time discussed it was inhabited by German settlers. Some of the towns were the property of the queen.

²¹ Jenő Zoványi, *Lexikon... op.cit.*, p.251.

²² He succeeded Louis II on the throne. With him being the first, the Hapsburg throne became consolidated in Hungary until 1920.

²³ Győző Bruckner, *Magyarország belső állapota... op.cit.*, p.22.

tion from the archbishop of Esztergom²⁴ according to which “*Mary agrees with Luther.*”²⁵ All this did not involve formal transitions. Traditional church festivals were still held in the royal court and the processions were still held in their former splendour and ceremony.

THE SPREAD OF LUTHER’S TEACHINGS

The ideas of the Reformation spread in the German-speaking towns first. By means of the natural, economic and cultural relationships with the motherland Luther’s teachings arrived here quite early. It was recorded about Tetzl who was selling indulgence slips that he was complaining about the 95 theses having been familiar in Hungary since 1518. A more reliable date is from 1520 when in the *Szepes*²⁶ region in a place next to Késmárk parish priest *Tamás Preisner* read out loud the theses from the pulpit.²⁷ It must have been a response to the spreading of the reformer’s ideas that in 1521 in the churches of some more notable towns the archbishop of Esztergom announced the papal edicts that condemned Luther. He wanted to assure in this very sorrowful and critical year that Hungary stood on the side of the Holy See of Rome. This only made sense if there was something *against* which this had to be emphasised. Lutheran ideas had already spread in the more notable towns. And from 1522 Hungarian students got moving to Wittenberg. That year two students from Upper Hungary, and until 1526 eleven more partly from Transylvania, Buda and Esztergom studied in Wittenberg.²⁸ The spread of Luther’s teachings is also evident from the forbidding instructions of János Horváth, the provost of Szepes. From the instructions issued by the high priest in 1524, who by the way morally speaking was rather ill-reputed, we learn that there were many who joined *the heresy without any discernment. They are the kind of persons who disparage the holy mass with indecent words, disdain and cease it. They arbitrarily change the number of sacraments, they condemn virginity among the monks and nuns and allow the priests to marry. They desecrate the Cross of the Saviour and the sculptures of the saints, and make ungodly statements about the Virgin Mary about whom they used to sing hymns and praises. They revile the pope, the bishops and the clergy in general and make them odious in the eyes of the laity. They undermine the influence of the kings, princes and authorities with defiling words. There are also some who find the church ceremonies unnecessary and want to restore the modesty of the apostles’ days. Under the pretext of Christian freedom they back out of church discipline. They consider confession, purgatory, penitence, indulgence and performing masses the means of making money and human inventions. The shameful doctrines are spread not only by lay people but also by priests who have forgotten about their duties. What is more, they claim Luther’s teachings be of the Gospel. Afterwards the provost warns the clergy to hinder this spreading heresy by all means and not to listen to the heretic teachings at all. They should not allow for any changes to be made in the old ceremonies.*²⁹

The above mentioned influential ministers in Upper Hungary also worked in the spirit of the Reformation. János Henckel in Lőcse and in Kassa, Cordatus and János Kresling in the mining towns, the English born rector Leonard Cox, who studied in Wittenberg and was an outstanding representative of humanist poetry imbued by the spirit of the Reformation, also worked in Lőcse and in Kassa. The town of Eperjes already in 1521 expelled a person who was selling indulgence slips. In Bártfa³⁰ in 1525 a royal order of arrest was issued against a member of the magistrate born of the place because of the spreading of the ideas of the Reformation. The same year – as a consequence of the above discussed money transactions and the steps taken against the Fuggers – workers in the mining towns rebelled. In the beginning of 1526, after long wran-

²⁴ Esztergom lies on the right hand side of the River Danube; a residence for the archbishop; it was a border castle during the Turkish threat and was under Turkish occupation during 1543-95 and 1605-85.

²⁵ Győző Bruckner, *Magyarország belső állapota...* op.cit., pp.22-23.

²⁶ It used to be inhabited by Germans. Today it is in Slovakia.

²⁷ Győző Bruckner, *A reformáció és ellenreformáció története a Szepességben* (Budapest, 1922), p.54.

²⁸ Imre Révész, “Magyar tanulók Wittenbergben Melanchton haláláig,” in *Magyar Történelmi Tár*, 1859, Vol.IV, pp.205-220; Vilmos Frankl, *A hazai és külföldi iskolázás a XVI. században* (Budapest, 1873), p.294.

²⁹ Győző Bruckner, *A reformáció és ellenreformáció...* op.cit., pp.55-57.

³⁰ Both Eperjes and Bártfa used to be German-speaking towns. They belonged to Hungary until 1920. Now are in Slovakia

gling, the royal court of law executed the leaders and compelled the participants to obey the authorities and *deny the Lutheran heresy*.

Luther's teachings spread widely among the Transylvanian Germans. Their privileged, unified political and church organisations provided a good opportunity for them to pave the way for renewal in an organised way within their own circles. The centre of the Transylvanian German Reformation was Szeben³¹ where in 1522 the town council openly sided with the priests who preached in the Lutheran spirit. The dean of the Szeben district, the vice-archbishop, reported the situation in the town to the archbishop in Esztergom. The archbishop induced the king to issue an edict against the Lutherans. *Mark Pemflinger*, count of the Transylvanian Germans supported the attempts at reform and was successful in preventing steps to be taken against the Lutherans in the town. In 1523 another royal edict was issued which ordered the Lutheran writings found in Szeben to be burnt. The royal commissioners did find some books about Luther, which they ceremonially did burn. The dean excommunicated several citizens because of their being Lutherans. In 1525 the anti-reform clergy complained to the archbishop of Esztergom about the fact that "*the new doctrine could not be more predominant in Luther's own town.*"³² The archbishop induced the king, who was just about to leave for the fatal battle of Mohács, to issue a document against those in Szeben. However, this could not prevent that with the lead of the town the acceptance of Lutheran doctrines would spread more and more widely among the Saxons.

We find traces of the spread of the Reformation in other parts of the country as well. In Sopron³³ in 1522 Franciscan monks and a secular priest preached in the spirit of Lutheran teaching. From confessions made before the inquisition it turns out that both the clergy and the citizens were interested in the ideas of Wittenberg. The faith-investigators also found some Lutheran books in town, which they burnt in front of the church building. However, this did not prevent the spread of the Reformation in Sopron. Nor did another burning of books in 1524 frighten the citizens. One of the citizens made the statement that "*he could not be fleeced for such books that are publicly sold.*"³⁴ Thus Lutheran writings were not secretly smuggled into the town. The citizens gathered regularly in the restaurant and read out loud the writings of the reformer. While they do that "*they say so many bad things about his holiness, the cardinals and others that it is sinful even to listen to.*"³⁵ Later, in 1526 some Lutheran citizens were imprisoned and some more writings were "to be burnt", that is, some Lutheran books were found as well. The same year in spring in Pozsony³⁶ the burgomaster himself had the theses of Luther copied and announced them publicly.

The attitude of the royal court and the countrywide situation did not make thorough persecution possible. We have also seen that laws were not made primarily with that intent either. Thus persecution was not general but only local. A servant who was bringing books for Cordatus from Wittenberg was burnt either at the border or in Buda in 1523. German hatred just as well as the charge of being a Lutheran could have played a part in this. (A German smuggling German books that are to corrupt the Hungarians.) Very likely other book merchants suffered the same fate in 1524 – for the very same reason. It is also likely that István Werbőczy and palatine³⁷ István Báthory had people tortured (or even burnt – it is not clear from the obscure memorandum) because they were suspected of being Lutherans.

Although the Hungarians welcomed Luther's teachings with prejudice – due to the above-elaborated reasons – there are traces of the spread of his teachings in the Hungarian-speaking regions as well. The statement of the anonymous Carthusian, whom we have already quoted, may also refer to this when it says that *the Lutheran heresy aimed at destroying the chosen Hungarian people*.

³¹ German *Hermannstadt*. Belonged to Hungary until 1920. Now it is in Rumania.

³² Ferenc Balogh, *op.cit.*, p.30.

³³ Lies in the West of Hungary. It used to be a German-speaking town.

³⁴ Jenő Sólyom, *op.cit.*, p.22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ A once German-speaking town. After 1541 it became the capital of Hungary. It belonged to Hungary until 1920.

Now Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia.

³⁷ According to the noble constitution the palatine was the second highest dignitary following the king.

This comment also sheds light on the fact that the Hungarians became familiar with Luther's ideas first from works that attacked him, that is, from a negative approach. This also contributed to the reserved attitude they had toward it. The tragedy of Mohács and its consequences later on led the Hungarian people to listen to the message of the Reformation without bias. In this respect it is also true that in order to have our faith and lives cleansed "*we are in need of Mohács...*"³⁸

³⁸ Title of a poem by Hungarian poet Endre Ady (1877-1919). In Ady's view Hungarians can come to their senses only if they go through a tragedy. In this poem he begs God to scourge the Hungarians, otherwise they are lost.