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The Implementation of the Hungarian Numerus Clausus Act at the University of Pécs in the 1920s¹

On 22 September 1920 the Hungarian National Assembly passed a law called the “Act on the regulation of admission to the universities of arts and sciences, the University of Technology, the University of Budapest Faculty of Economics and Academies of law”, or as it is widely known, the numerus clausus law. This restricted the rate of Jews in the population and Jewish students at universities to 6% in Hungary. The leaders of the university of Pécs interpreted the numerus clausus law in a different way than the leaders of Pázmány Péter University in Budapest, so more Jewish students were able to study at the University of Pécs than it was allowed. Christian students protested that and came to blow, but the leadership of the university pacified the situation, and they sabotaged the execution of the law by taking advantage (for the greater good) of the legal loopholes and opportunities offered by bad legislation.

Keywords: *numerus clausus law, the University of Pécs, anti-Semitism*

The Erzsébet University of Arts and Sciences of Bratislava temporarily moved to Budapest in 1920 since Bratislava (Pozsony) was occupied by the antant forces because of the Trianon Peace Treaty. Later, its first semester in Pécs could be started in 1923.

After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, (i.e. after August 1919) universities were in a state of siege in Hungary, as students, who defined themselves Christian-Nationalists, demanded that their Jewish fellow-students should be banned from universities. They attacked and beat them, posted guards at the gates, so that these students could not enter, disrupted lessons if Jews were present, they confiscated and ripped their school notes to shreds.

On 26 September 1919 a delegation of students visited the Minister of Education to demand the closure of universities as long as it was possible for Jews to attend, which demand of theirs was met the following day. Their aim was to cleanse all the Hungarian higher education institutions of their Jewish fellow-students. Their aim was supported by many well-known university teachers and professors, especially by the teachers of Pázmány Péter University in Budapest, but this was not specific of the teachers at Erzsébet University.

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¹ This paper is the edited version of the author’s presentation on the workshop „*Theorie und Praxis der Entrechtung in der zweiten Hälfte der Horthy-Ära im Vergleich mit dem NS-Regime*” (Pécs, 2–6 September 2019).

the University of Budapest Faculty of Economics and Academies of law”, or as it is widely known, the *numerus clausus* law. This restricted the rate of Jews in the population and Jewish students at universities to 6% in Hungary. Despite this, there were difficulties at the beginning of the next semester too, as the student organisations were campaigning for the enforcement of the law and the attacks against Jewish students continued. That is why – even in 1921 and 1922 – there were ongoing demonstrations and riots at universities. These, just like earlier, occasionally turned into nationwide protests and riots. As a consequence, the Rector of the University of Pécs was forced to have his institution closed for two days in March 1923. Of the series of clashes, one that stood out in particular was the one, that involved *Ernő Glanz*, a 19-year-old Jewish medical student. He was attacked on the street by some of his fellow-students who assaulted him and started to beat him up. *Glanz* then pulled out a revolver and fired it into the air to frighten his attackers, who, then let go of him and backed off. *Glanz* then fled to the police station and reported the incident.

The anti-Semitic student organisations issued a communiqué memorandum in 1922, which included the following claims: 1. The law of *numerus clausus* shall be applied to students who studied and graduated abroad. Their diplomas shall be naturalised in compliance with the ratio (i.e. quota); 2. The law of *numerus clausus* shall be extended to include all the colleges; 3. The quota should be applied even if the number of applicants to the university is lower than the capacity of the university.

Klebelberg, the Minister of Education, met the representatives of the students and informed them that the government was dealing with the issue and with the matter of foreign university diplomas. The third point of the memorandum was included because news spread that universities in the countryside – for example the University of Pécs and the University of Szeged – did not comply with the *numerus clausus* law and more Jewish students were admitted than what the quota allowed.²

It became more and more obvious that the implementation of the *numerus clausus* law was not always clear. Such an ambiguity was the case of baptized Jews (who converted to Christianity). The National Association of Hungarian Physicians, among others, also took a position on the issue. According to this, it was not appropriate, and it was unacceptable that the University of Pécs considered baptized Jewish, convert applicants as Christian Hungarians. They claimed that the law had never classified citizens based on religion but on the basis of race and nationality. A Jew that was born from Jewish parents did not change their ethnic Jewish status by converting to Christianity. Based on this viewpoint, the National Association of Hungarian Physicians asked the Minister of Education to order that the same procedure shall be used at the country universities as the one that was followed by the verification committees of the Faculty of Medicine at Pázmány Péter University. These committees strictly complied with the *numerus clausus* law.³

However, the grenade was finally dropped by *Károly Hoór*, the professor of the Pázmány Péter University in Budapest when, in November 1923, he handed over a pamphlet to the press,

² N. SZEGVÁRI, *Numerus clausus* 131–133.

³ *Szózat*, October 19, 1922, 2.

in which he claimed that the University of Pécs doesn't comply with the numerus clausus law.⁴ According to *Hoór*, in these institutions the 6% quota was not calculated with the use of the number of students that were actually admitted but with the use of a numerus clausus, that is a closed number, specified by the Minister of Education. The problem arose from the fact that the number of applicants did not reach the number of students that could have been admitted. Here is an example with the exact numbers of applications to one faculty of the University of Szeged: in 1922 the University was allowed to enrol 150 students and out of these 9 could have been of Jewish origin. However, only 57 students applied to this faculty and 9 out of these amounts to almost 20 % instead of 6%. What is more – says *Hoór* – many other offences are committed by these institutions. Agreeing with the statement issued by The National Association of Hungarian Physicians, he emphasises that the numerus clausus is a racial law, and baptism and conversion do not alter the status of the Jewish university students. Just like a Chinese or a Black person will never become a White person. According to the author, another problem stems from the foreign applicant cases, as religion is not inspected there, because the law cannot be applied to students from abroad.

Influenced by the pamphlet, the students soon acted. They started campaigns to make moves in Pécs and the Christian-Nationalist students of the university handed over the following claims to Rector on 10 December 1923: 1. The rate of the Jewish students at the University of Pécs exceeds the rate prescribed by the numerus clausus therefore “*we believe the future success of the Christian youth is at great risk*”. 2. „*The Jewish students greatly endanger and disrupt the course of lectures with their aggressive behaviour, by arriving at lectures armed with sticks, revolvers, and knuckle-dusters and with behaviour that disturbs the peace of mind of the youth.*” 3. They demanded that no students from abroad (eg. from Prague or Vienna) should be received, because, in their opinion, this will turn the University of Pécs into a “*garbage dump*” of Jewish people. 4. They demanded the Jewish medical student, *Glanz*'s removal from the university, as *Glanz* “*dared to shoot into a crowd of Christian youth with a revolver.*” 5. “*We feel aggrieved that the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, dr. Mihály Pekár, employs two Jewish interns at the institution instead of Christians.*”⁵

Influenced by the pamphlet, the students soon acted and with the help of the right-wing Christian civil organisations of Pécs as well. They held a rally on 16 December 1923 in Pécs. The participants included the representatives of the students, delegates of different Christian and right-wing organisations, for example the National Association of Hungarian Women, the Catholic Society of Pécs, the Association of Awakening Hungarians, the Christian-Socialist association and the trade union.⁶ The assembly was opened by *László Babusik*, a leader of the students, who was one of the main initiators of the fights.⁷

Finally, the Christian university students turned to the Minister of Culture, *Klebelsberg*, via drafting a new and long memorandum, according to which the University of Pécs violated the

⁴ HOÓR, A numerus clausus, passim.

⁵ Nemzetgyűlési Napló 1922–1926, December 15, 1923, vol. 18. 135–136.

⁶ Dunántúl, December 16, 1923, 2.

⁷ *László Babusik* is one of the three students, who was charged by the University Committee because for ambushing and starting a bloody fight against two fellow students, who were brothers. This charge was aggravated „*in case of repeated smaller offence, the charged person may be dismissed from the university*”.

following specifications of the law: 1. It enrolls more than the prescribed ratio of 6% of Jewish students. 2. It recognizes the baptised as convert Jews and Hungarians; 3. It recognizes Jews from occupied, former Hungarian territories as foreigners. 4. It naturalises diplomas obtained by Jews abroad; 5. It enrolls Jews who are rejected by other universities because they are unreliable in terms of “loyalty to the nation”; 6. Jews who started their university studies abroad are also enrolled.

The Christian students of Pécs stated in a memorandum that they did not feel comfortable among so many Jews at the university because “*they cannot feel the Hungarian national spirit*”, since in Pécs some “*alien sentiment and scientific attitude dominate*” and this “*gives the Catholic city of Pécs a Jewish character*”. The most popular extreme right-wing newspaper, edited by *Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky*, called ‘Szózat’ commented on the campaign organised by the students of Pécs and said that if their demands were not met, “*there is nothing for it but to close down this state funded Jewish university, which, in their view, is not only unnecessary but downright harmful to Hungarian culture*”.⁸

The students of Pécs drafted a list of four specific demands to forward to the leadership of their university. To begin with, they demanded that the university should strictly comply with the numerus clausus law. Secondly, they demanded that crosses should be hung on the walls of classrooms. Their third demand was that only Christian students should be allowed to sit in the first rows in the classrooms. The fourth demand was that they should settle the *Glanx* case, which actually meant the expulsion of the student from the university.⁹

But let’s examine what the ratio of Jewish students was at the University of Pécs. First, let’s quote *József Halasy-Nagy*, the Rector himself, in whose autobiography we can read about this era.¹⁰ According to his memoirs, the leaders of the university interpreted the numerus clausus law differently from, for example, the leaders of Pázmány Péter University in Budapest. To quote his specific example: if the quota was 100 and only 60 Christians applied, they would enrol Jews to fill the 40 places. Furthermore, they would even enrol Jewish students from foreign universities if they applied, and they would naturalise foreign diplomas as well. In senior classes the ratio of Jewish students was higher in the first place already, because a lot of those had attended the former University of Bratislava¹¹ and the numerus clausus did not affect them (as it had to be implemented gradually with a bottom up approach). “*This is how the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Pécs became the safe haven for the Jewish youth in Hungary*”.

The Committee of the University of Pécs discussed the claims on 19 December 1923. The Rector asked the faculties to take a stand on every point.¹² Following this, they discussed these views and formed their own opinion. The Faculty of Law compiled an especially detailed analysis, which was in accordance with the views of the leadership of the university.¹³

⁸ Szózat, January 1, 1924, 6.

⁹ Dunántúl, December 16, 1923, 2. and December 18, 2.

¹⁰ HALASY-NAGY, Summa vitae, passim.

¹¹ LENGVÁRI, Az Erzsébet Tudományegyetem alapítása 21; LENGVÁRI – POHÁNKA, A pozsonyi, majd pécsi M. Kir. Erzsébet Tudományegyetem 49–83. According to the authors the number of the students of the university was around 1,5 thousands, out of which 60 % were Jews by religion.

¹² PEL VIII. 101.a. 1923/24.

¹³ LENGVÁRI, A pécsi jogi kar véleménye 311–320.

According to the lecturer, Professor *Ferenc Vasváry*, the quotas on the number of students is necessary, as every university can only enrol as many students as they can properly teach. It also follows from this that the number of places specified by the quotas must be filled, because that many students are required, but the racial quota must only be taken into consideration in the case of surplus applications, that is, the law is only applicable to the students over the quota.

Year	Faculty	Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Israelite
1920/21	Law	no data	no data	no data
	Medicine	176	85	368
	Humanities	9	6	2
1921/22	Law	127	50	44
	Medicine	301	140	763
	Humanities	26	10	28
1922/23	Law	153	73	48
	Medicine	319	135	735
	Humanities	33	12	22
1923/24	Law	178	58	55
	Medicine	269	94	522
	Humanities	21	4	16
1924/25	Law	208	58	53
	Medicine	282	99	299
	Humanities	33	7	10
1925/26	Law	255	65	49
	Medicine	239	83	186
	Humanities	59	15	8
1926/27.	Law	297	79	44
	Medicine	209	69	120
	Humanities	79	20	12

Fig. 1: The distribution of the students according to their religion at 3 faculties at the University of Bratislava and then Pécs.¹⁴

According to Professor *Vasváry*, the *numerus clausus* law “added such a concept to Hungarian public law that was unknown earlier” and this concept is “racial discrimination”. The term of race can be linked to the science of anthropology and fundamentally it is based on lineage. However, lineage is “disputable in our country, where - for a millennium - people of different lineages and origins blended”, and this term “is not at all suitable to be used in public administration”. *Vasváry*, however, – being a law-abiding citizen – attempted to get inside the legislators head and asked: in what way could this law ever be used? According to legislators, “the Hungarian Jewish population is racially the least mixed component of the population of Hungary” as “for religious reasons mixing with other races has always been banned”. (They have always been barred from interbreeding.) As lineage is the most important component of racial character, in the case of the Jewish population, we can indeed use the term ‘a separate race’, which “cannot be terminated by their converting to Christianity”. It follows from this that “all those that

¹⁴ SZABÓ, A M. kir. Erzsébet Tudományegyetem 113–115.

were born Jewish must be considered to belong to the Jewish race". This is the only way that the law can be interpreted and applied, that is by accepting the term of Jewish as a biological race and then the quotas must be applied to this race.

Vasváry emphasises, however, that the quota is only applicable to the surplus number of applicants. He admits that if there are fewer applicants than what the quota allows, *"it might happen that the racial ratio of the admitted students does not comply with the 6% Jewish quota of the numerus clausus"*. The Faculty of Law also voiced their opinion about the display of crosses and did not rule out the possibility of hanging out crosses.

Mihály Pekár, the dean, put forward the viewpoint of the Faculty of Medicine.¹⁵ According to this, the faculty had complied with the numerus clausus and intended to do so in the future as well. He rejected the demand that the faculty should not employ Jewish assistant lecturers and undergraduate assistants *"because only aptitude and not racial considerations can be determining factors in this case. The faculty rejected the seating arrangement request as well. With regard to the Glanz case, the faculty stated that back then, when the shooting happened, the Faculty of Medicine launched an investigation. However, no plaintiffs turned up despite the invitation of the faculty. Therefore the legal proceedings had to be terminated"*. And finally, he did not object to the display of crosses, except in the laboratories.

The viewpoint of the Faculty of Humanities was put forward by Professor *Tivadar Thienemann*. According to this, *"they did not think the display of the crosses was a request that could be granted because our university is a state and not a church institution"*.

After discussing the views of the faculties, the University Committee adopted the following united stand: it rejected the complaints concerning the implementation and enforcement of the numerus clausus law. They implied that the law was open to different interpretations. Concerning the seating arrangements and the employment of assistant lecturers, the Committee completely and textually adopted the viewpoint of the Faculty of Medicine. As there were differing views on the display of crosses, the issue was put to the vote at the order of the Rector. Only Dean *Thienemann* voted against it, so the Committee agreed to the display of crosses in classrooms. Finally, in the *Glanz* case, the Committee ruled that new legal proceedings must be started.

As a result of all these, but mainly as a consequence of the sober actions and behaviour of the Rector and the University Committee, the situation and the disputes were being slowly settled in the first semester in Pécs, however, peace did not last long. In the following years, new scandals broke and anti-Semitic demonstrations were held. Still, to sum up, it must be emphasised that the case of the University of Pécs demonstrates it very well, what a badly elaborated and inaccurately drafted law the numerus clausus was. The University of Pécs proved that it was a racist, anti-Semitic law, which was similar to the subsequent National Socialist laws and Pázmány Péter University interpreted it and applied it like such.

At the same time, it must be stressed that the leaders of the University of Pécs – Professors *Halasy-Nagy*, *Pekár*, *Vasváry* and others – did not apply it like the Pázmány Péter University, but acted differently. Defying the anti-Semitic public sentiment in Hungary back then, demonstrating great humanity and courage, they protected the fundamental human rights and

¹⁵ PEL VIII. 101.a.

strived to stop the campaign of discrimination, hatred and extreme right-wing rabble-rousing. Practically, they sabotaged the execution of the law by taking advantage of the legal loopholes and opportunities offered by bad legislation and this way they made it possible for a lot of young Hungarian people to continue their studies at the university.

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