

DUELLING IN HUNGARY BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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In the minds of a public tainted with cinematic melodrama, the word "duel" brings up Pushkinian visions of a small clearing in a gloomy, perhaps snowy, forest where, at daybreak, well-clad gentlemen – disregarding the danger of catching cold – had shed their redingotes, and are poised with pistols at the ready. Better even, the action has already been completed as one is allowed to conclude from the fact that one gentleman, dead or dying, is lying on the ground. One might even perceive in the distance a coach in which a veiled and distressed lady watches the outcome standing, of course I mean morally, behind the man through all the tribulations he would not have had had it not been for her.¹

Let me now jump a century or so and move from an unspecified country to Hungary, say in the 1930s. The duel is taking place in a well lit gymnasium (literally a fencing-room *vívóterem*) in the presence of four seconds and two doctors. The duelists are naked above the waist with bandages protecting the neck and wrist arteries. The fencing swords have been duly inspected and disinfected. The senior second had already done his duty and called upon the parties for a reconciliation. Now he is standing with a sword in his hand and gives the first command *Vigyázz!* ("Attention!"); the two men salute with their swords. At the second command *Állás!* ("On your mark!") the duelists take up their position at a distance which would allow the points of the two swords to touch when the arms of the antagonists were fully extended. At the third command, *Rajta!* ("Go!"), which would follow almost at once, the duel starts and probably in less than one minute there is a clash resulting, in this imaginary case, in a small cut on the forearm of one of the men. The leading second shouts *Állj!* ("Stop!"). The fight is over; the insult which caused the duel to be fought had been a slight one and it had been agreed that it would stop "at the first blood" (*első vér*). Let us hope that before the duel the insulting party had expressed to his own seconds his readiness to apologize to the insulted party; he now does so, and the other man accepts the apology; reconciliation follows. But even if the ending is not as happy, for all intents

and purposes the affair ends here: chivalrous amends (*lovagias elégtétel*) have been given for the insult, quite irrespective of the outcome, i.e. whether the insulted or the insulter had been wounded. Subsequently, the four seconds would prepare the minutes of the meeting, and sign them; a copy would go to each of the parties involved.

Perhaps it might be useful to introduce the protagonists of the cast; each of them plays a double role, one passive and one active. He who suffered the insult becomes the challenger, demanding satisfaction while, conversely, the insulter becomes the subject of the challenge which he is bound to accept. The insulted party, through his representatives, two seconds, has the privilege of determining the time and location of the duel, the choice of the weapon (mostly swords of differing weights, or pistols), and the severity of the conditions. It had to be decided whether thrusts with the sword were allowed or only slashes. Thrusts were very dangerous and were allowed only in cases of severe insults. Agreement between the seconds had to be reached also on the length of the encounter, namely whether the combat should last until the first wound had been inflicted or until disablement of at least one of the parties. (I will come back to explain how "disablement" was defined.) In all these negotiations conducted by the seconds, the wishes of those representing the insulted party were decisive: he who made the affront must pay for his behavior.

The opposing parties never meet before a duel or, more precisely and accurately, while the "chivalrous course of action" (*lovagias eljárás*) has not been completed. Each of them is represented by two "seconds" (*párbajsegéd*) who not only conduct all negotiations but whose decision is binding on the parties involved. The course of action is as follows. He who feels insulted and is ready to challenge² the insulter asks two gentlemen to represent him in this affair. They establish contacts with the adversary who will promptly name his own seconds. It is the duty of these four men to determine what would constitute satisfactory, honorable amends. It is important to remember that the seconds are not playing the role of attorneys, defending the interests of their clients. For instance when it comes to armed confrontation they must abstain from giving advice to their party. The seconds are guardians of the well-established chivalrous tradition, and their duty is to make sure that its rules are well and humanely followed. Once they have become familiar with the circumstances of the insult, they submit their recommendations to their respective party who would normally abide by them.

It should be remembered that there is a perfectly honorable way to put an end to the conflict, one that does not involve the recourse to arms. The insulter may express his "regrets", or "deep regrets", he may state that he had acted

under a misapprehension, that there is a misunderstanding and he had never intended to insult or, indeed, that the words or acts imputed to him had never been uttered or committed. Most importantly, he may even be willing to offer his apologies; these may or may not be accepted by the insulted challenger. It is, of course, also possible that the insulter shows no regret for his action or that the insulted may remain dissatisfied with a mere expression of regrets or even with an apology offered before the duel, though he may be willing to accept it following the armed confrontation. If an agreement is reached on a peaceful solution, the two men may never need to meet, avoiding thereby a perhaps painful or embarrassing scene. The insulter would simply have to state to his own seconds, perhaps in writing, that he would be willing to express his regrets or to offer his apologies. The seconds convey this to the seconds of the adversary who may or may not accept the olive branch thus offered. In most cases he would follow the advice of his seconds, who prepare the minutes of their deliberations and signed copies are given to the parties involved. If ever needed, each of them can prove that they abided by the code of honor. The choice of the seconds is an important one. They should be men of integrity, experienced in chivalrous courses of action, and not of a bloodthirsty disposition. In my recollection most of these conflicts could be resolved without an actual duel taking place.

Let us imagine now a few cases to exemplify how the system worked in practice. At a party, a slightly drunk Mr. A calls a Mr. B an ass who, understandably upset, issues right then and there, but certainly within 24 hours a challenge. By that time a sober Mr. A has come to regard his remark as unjust; he offers regrets or apologies which are then conveyed through the seconds to Mr. B who graciously accepts them. The affair is closed.

Now it so happens that a few months later, at another party, the two men meet again and the previous scenario is repeated. Once more Mr. A calls Mr. B an ass. In due course he is challenged but, this time his apologies would not be accepted and, most probably, a duel would ensue.

Let me spin my yarn a little further. Some time later, at yet another party, for a third time, Mr. A calls Mr. B an ass who, this time losing his temper, slaps Mr. A. A physical assault being considered more grievous than verbal assault, the onus would shift: Mr. A is now the insulted party who will seek satisfaction on his own terms which may be quite heavy. Had Mr. B retorted "you are an ass yourself" he would have kept the status of the insulted. In an exchange of verbal insults the insulter is he who began the exchange.

Not surprisingly, things get much more complicated when women are involved. Let me again present a scenario. On a sunny morning a perfectly sober Mr. A is standing, say, in the corridor of the university. His reveries are

interrupted by a lady, a nodding acquaintance, who points at a Mr. C whom she accuses of having followed her for fifteen minutes through the streets and into the building in a way which she had found aggravating. Having said so much, wrapped in her dignity she moves on. Mr. A and Mr. C gaze at each other (probably neither of them has much sympathy for the lady), but they have no choice, this is a typical and somewhat extreme case where *noblesse oblige*. The two men exchange their calling cards, the four seconds will gather and, this is my hunch, will conclude that Mr. C followed the route taken by the lady by sheer coincidence and, though he may have noticed her pleasing appearance, he had no intention to become disrespectful. Therefore Mr. C expresses his sincere regrets for any temporary distress he may have caused to the lady and assures Mr. A of his high esteem of the chivalrous and justified steps he had taken in the defense of said lady. The mechanism is set to work, the four seconds prepare the minutes, etc.; the matter is settled. The six men may derive a modicum of satisfaction from the fact that the lady, though probably tortured by curiosity, will never learn what had happened. She knows better than to ask, ever so indirectly, but were she to do so, Mr. A would pretend not to have heard the question. In all such matters absolute discretion is the rule. The lady's name was not mentioned by anyone engaged in the proceeding.

Let me now switch from this trifling affair to another, much more consequential. Our friend Mr. C, a moderate person, accompanies his mother to the theater. As they squeeze their way through the row towards their seats, the lady treads with her pointed heel on a most sensitive corn on Mr. D's foot. She apologizes at once but Mr. D, not known for his self-control, lets go a string of pejorative adjectives which it cannot be my task to reproduce here. Of course Mr. C's first reaction would be to slap Mr. D in his face, probably causing him to fall over his neighbor; a *mêlée* might ensue which would be most inconvenient to a great number of people and, almost certainly would bring about the arrest of both gentlemen by an ever-vigilant police officer. Since the curtain is just about to rise, Mr. C – a moderate as I have just said – sits through the first act and uses the interval to exchange cards with Mr. D To assault verbally a middle-aged lady in the presence of her son, whose responsibility it is to defend and protect her, is no small matter and the conditions under which the duel would have to be fought would have to be commensurate with the insult.

It would be my bet that a duel "to disablement" (*harcképtelenség*) would be suggested by the seconds of Mr. C The seconds of Mr. D, to avoid the charge of cowardice, would probably agree. In such a case, the first cut would not put an end to the duel but, perhaps, with some short pauses the combat would

continue until either one of the duelists or one of the doctors present declare that one of the combatants can no longer fight effectively (as judged for example by losing the firm grip of the sword) or that a heart-attack may be imminent. A duel fought under such conditions was no child's play. Of course it was still less life-threatening than a duel fought with pistols and allowing for several shots to be fired. But duels of that type were relatively rare in interwar Hungary and I would abstain from their description. It is probable that Mr. D genuinely regretted his harsh reaction but he did not offer his deep apologies lest he would appear to chicken out of a difficult duel. At the same time Mr. C felt that words alone were insufficient to compensate for the insult his mother had suffered. Now, having put up a brave fight, nothing stands in the way of a genuine reconciliation between the two men. Let us have a kind thought for the mother, uninformed of the details of the proceedings but sufficiently familiar with the stakes to know that her son may be carved up rather badly.

The reasoning as given in my imaginary examples may seem complicated. In fact it is most straightforward. The party insulted must be given satisfaction on his own terms. If for whatever reasons, be it gender, age, or physical handicap the person insulted cannot personally seek compensation, any member of the family, indeed any able-bodied man whose help was asked for immediately following the insult may take up the defense of the weaker (as was the case in the aforementioned A versus C scenario). It should be noted that there is no winner or loser in a duel; both men satisfied their chivalrous obligations and thereby put the matter to rest.

Life produces smaller conflicts galore and the imaginary cases described may give the impression that most of Hungary's male population was constantly engaged in chivalrous courses of action. After all, many men follow many women in a way which the latter find aggravating, many men are called asses on innumerable occasions, and the number of painful corns tread upon at any given hour is astronomical. Every society has its contingent of rowdies, ready to pick a fight at the slightest provocation – or without it. In Hungary, as elsewhere, there was very little one could do to neutralize them. They could take offense where there was none, or, conversely, they could gratuitously offend any one whom they wished. They would be called by the pejorative term of *krakéler* (a German loan) or, in a slightly ironical tone *párbajhős* "hero of duels". I know of one instance where such a man was converted to more civilized behavior by a good, old-fashioned thrashing, administered quite outside the norms of any chivalrous course of action.

When compared to the country's population, and in absolute figures, the number of "chivalrous courses of action" taken must have been insignificant.

Only a small proportion of the country's adult, male population was expected to follow a chivalrous way of action. Men were either *párbajképes* or *párbajképtelen*. A rough translation of the two terms would be "fit for duel" or "unfit for duel". On the analogy of the adjective "clubbable" derived from "club" one might suggest "duelable" and "non duelable". The content of these terms was hard to define, though all concerned knew how and when to apply them.

In the interwar years on which I focus, the duelling code compiled by Vilmos Clair³ was the authoritative work on such matters. It was for chivalrous actions what Robert's Rules of Order are for American debates. Though the two words are frequently used on its pages, no definition is given for either of them. The excellent one volume Hungarian-Hungarian dictionary *Magyar értelmező kéziszótár* (Budapest 1972) defines *párbajképes* az, aki a feudális erkölcsi szabályok szerint párbajt vívhat, i.e. "he who according to feudal moral habits is fit for duelling". The seven volume *A magyar nyelv értelmező kéziszótára* (Budapest 1959-1962) gives a much more detailed, and more Marxist definition of the word: *A kizsákmányoló társadalom uralkodó osztályaiban olyan, rendszerint érettségizett férfi, akit a feudális felfogás szerint értelmezett becsülettel összeférhetetlennek tekintett cselekmények nem terhelnek, akit ilyenek miatt katonai vagy polgári becsületbírósa, ill. bírói ítélettel nem bélyegeztek meg, s ezért mint sértett vagy sértő fél párbajt vívhat*, i.e. "a man, usually a high-school graduate, belonging to the ruling classes of the exploiting society who has not committed acts considered incompatible with honor as conceived by feudal opinion, one who has not been found guilty by military, civil or courts of honor of such acts and who, therefore is fit to duel either as the insulting or the insulted party."

This is a carefully worded, accurate definition made by men who knew what they were talking about because, there is reason to believe, in the earlier years of their lives they themselves had been "fit for duel" because they had their *érettségi*, i.e. their high-school certificate and had belonged "to the ruling classes of the exploiting society." Clearly, anyone found guilty in a court of justice of a felony would be disqualified from taking part in any chivalrous course of action. But if the absence of any such blemish would be sufficient qualification for the right to fight in a duel, surely the great majority of Hungarian men would have been "duelable". Yet this was not the case. I cannot enter here into the discussion of the structure of Hungarian society in the interwar years, but at least between the men there was a clear dividing line: there were the *urak* on the one side and the rest of the male population on the other. The definition of an *úr* is a very difficult task which I intend here to side-step by simply equating it with the concept of a "gentleman". But then who could be considered a "gentleman"?

If we turn to various dictionaries of English we find some differences in the definition of the word. I rather like the one given in the *Oxford Advanced*

Learner's Dictionary of Current English (1974) "gentleman" is defined thus: "a man who shows consideration for the feelings of others, who is honourable and well-bred." I would love to believe that this description indeed fits or fitted every *úr* I have had the honor of meeting, but, of course, I know better. So I have consulted my *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, the one that has been on my shelves since 1938, and discovered that the first meaning given for the word "gentleman" is: "man entitled to bear arms but not included in the nobility." A combination of the two definitions gives a fairly accurate picture of what a Hungarian *úr* was supposed to be and in most cases really was, at least within his own social class. And here lies the rub. Because in far too many instances the consideration for the feelings of others did not extend beyond his own, *úri* circle. For example, the man capable of challenging another, unknown man because of some slight inconvenience caused to a virtually unknown *lady*, could show the most callous behavior to a *woman* perceived as belonging to an other social class.

Strong as the wall separating *úr* from non-*úr* might have been, it had a wide-open door: education. Any Hungarian man having passed the difficult, comprehensive *érettségi*, the examination that ended his high-school studies, was thereby qualified to become a military officer, thus, by definition, a gentleman, fit to duel. Let me make it clear: the *érettségi* was not a prerequisite of an *úri* status; but he who had it automatically qualified for chivalrous courses of action. In fact, if he had already served in the army, he had to have recourse to these proceedings, and this notwithstanding the fact that duelling was a punishable offence in Hungarian law. The military code of honor prescribed a procedure which, in many cases led to a duel forbidden by law.⁴ In practical terms this meant that for every able-bodied man with a high-school diploma and of military age, recourse to chivalrous proceedings and possibly to duelling was not an individual choice but an obligation the avoidance of which would have had very unpleasant consequences.

I have cited the term *párbajképtelen* "unfit for duel". Interestingly, it is not listed in any of the above-mentioned dictionaries. Yet, most of Hungary's adult male population belonged to this category. Let us disregard the small section of men who, to use the above-given definition, "committed acts considered incompatible with honor". The vast majority of men considered "unfit for duel" was so categorized merely on account of their social status in the strongly hierarchical Hungarian society. Even in the theoretically egalitarian American society one encounters the dichotomy of "white-" and "blue-" collar workers. If, somewhat anachronistically, this distinction is projected into the Hungarian society of the interwar years, one could say that the latter were "unfit for duel". In a perceptive book describing Hungarian society of his own

time (1930), István Weis⁵ put the numerical strength of Hungarian middle-classes at about 300,000, in a population of 8,688,319, i.e. a mere 3.45 percent of the country's population. We obtain a slightly higher figure by looking at the number of high-school graduates. In 1930, only 3.6 percent had the *érettségi*.⁶ It would thus appear that – since women were exempt from duelling – no more than about two percent of the country's population was “fit for duel”.

Let me now conclude with a brief examination of a conflict arising between two men, one of whom is *párbajképtelen*. In such situation basic decency dictates the solution: if asked for satisfaction, the insulter must comply, irrespective of the status of the man whom he had insulted. If insulted by someone “unfit for duel”, he has no obligation to seek “chivalrous satisfaction”.

The societal structure of Hungary in the interwar years was not exempt from contradictions; I know of no society which is. The recourse to a “chivalrous course of action”, let alone to duelling, does seem archaic. It is. Yet, having listened to many high-falutin' talks about methods of “conflict resolution”, I am convinced that it was an excellent way to resolve non-legal conflicts arising within a small, restricted, and well defined stratum of society.

Notes

- * This article is an extended version of a lecture given in March 1993 at an East-European Conference held at New College, University of South Florida, Sarasota, Florida. It attempts to provide primary material to some future social historian focusing on Hungarian life between the two World Wars. The number of witnesses or participants of duels is fast diminishing; such value as the present essay may have consists in its claim to be a primary source, a first-hand account of duelling as practiced in Hungary, essentially in the 1930s. It was thought that the mechanism of the proceedings deserved to be recorded.
1. The literature on duelling is extensive. V. G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History. Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford University Press 1986), is by far the best general presentation I have come across. It also has a good bibliography. The few remarks the book has on Hungary “a duelling country par excellence” are perceptive but do not go into detail. Closer to my topic is István Deák: “Latter Day Knights: Officer's Honor and Duelling in the Austro-Hungarian Army,” *Österreichische Osthefte* 28 (1986), 311–326. Though he focuses on the period before the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, some remarks made by Deák are relevant to the interwar years.
 2. The technical term for a challenge was *kihívás* literally “calling out”, a term used by Kiernan but one I could never substantiate from other sources.
 3. *Párbajkódex* 25th edition (Budapest 1940). The book has 159 pages covering all contingencies of “chivalrous proceedings”. I have followed closely the procedures described in this work.

4. The first edition of the aforementioned duelling code by Vilmos Clair appeared in 1897; I own its 25th, probably last, edition published in 1940. This excellent work, which provides the authoritative guide for an action forbidden by law, is dedicated to the Regent of Hungary, Miklós Horthy and is prefaced by a distinguished civil servant, former minister of justice.
5. *A mai magyar társadalom* (Budapest 1930), 124. For our purpose, to this figure should be added an "upper crust" of the society, estimated by Weis to comprise about four thousand people.
6. Balogh Sándor (ed.), *Magyarország a XX. században* (Budapest 1985), 504.