

THE ATTEMPTED ARSON OF THE HUNGARIAN REFORMED SCHOOL IN VUKOVAR, 1904

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ABSTRACT

this paper analyzes the attempted arson of the Hungarian Reformed School in Vukovar in 1904 within the broader context of nationality relations in the late period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The introductory section provides a brief overview of the long-standing presence of Hungarians in Vukovar and eastern Slavonia, from the Middle Ages to the modern period. The central part of the paper examines the specific incident involving the attempted arson of the school and the local and political context in which it occurred. The event is interpreted as part of the broader tensions between Croatian and Hungarian national politics in the period following the Croatian–Hungarian Compromise, when issues of language, education, and cultural institutions carried strong symbolic value in the shaping of national identities. Particular attention is devoted to the reactions of the Croatian press, which tended to relativize the event, and the Hungarian press, which interpreted it as an example of the vulnerability of the Hungarian minority in Croatia and incorporated it into a broader political discourse on Croatian–Hungarian relations. The paper demonstrates how a local incident in a relatively small community could acquire significantly wider meaning through media interpretation and political instrumentalization. Through an analysis of newspaper sources and the local context, the study highlights the ways in which national tensions at the beginning of the twentieth century were articulated through symbolic conflicts surrounding a single educational institution.

Keywords: Vukovar, Hungarians in Croatia, Reformed school, arson.

ABSZTRAKT

a tanulmány a vukovári magyar református iskola 1904-es gyújtogatási kísérletét elemzi a késői Osztrák–Magyar Monarchia nemzetiségi viszonyainak tágabb kontextusában. A bevezető rész rövid áttekintést nyújt a magyarok hosszú távú jelenlétéről Vukováron és Kelet-Szlavóniában a középkortól a modern korig. A tanulmány központi része az iskola felgyújtásának konkrét

kísérletét, valamint annak helyi és politikai kontextusát vizsgálja. Az eseményt a horvát és a magyar nemzetpolitika közötti szélesebb feszültségek részeként értelmezi a horvát–magyar kiegyezést követő időszakban, amikor a nyelv, az oktatás és a kulturális intézmények kérdései erőteljes szimbolikus jelentőséggel bírtak a nemzeti identitások formálásában. Külön figyelem irányul a horvát sajtó reakcióira, amely hajlamos volt relativizálni az eseményt, valamint a magyar sajtóra, amely azt a horvátországi magyar kisebbség sebezhetőségének példaként értelmezte, és beillesztette a horvát–magyar viszonyokról szóló tágabb politikai diskurzusba. A tanulmány rámutat arra, miként nyerhetett egy helyi, viszonylag kis közösségben történt incidens a médiabeli értelmezés és a politikai instrumentalizáció révén jóval szélesebb jelentést. Újságforrások és a helyi kontextus elemzése alapján a vizsgálat rávilágít arra, hogy a 20. század eleji nemzetiségi feszültségek miként artikulálódtak egyetlen oktatási intézmény körüli szimbolikus konfliktusokon keresztül.

Kulcsszavak: Vukovár, horvátországi magyarok, református iskola, gyűjtögetés.

INTRODUCTION

The question of national relations in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is one of the most frequently researched issues in Central European historiography. Although national conflicts have often been examined through the actions of political elites, parliamentary debates, or state policies, more recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes the importance of the local level and the everyday interactions among members of different ethnic and linguistic communities. Such local situations often represented the arena in which national ideologies were concretized through symbolic conflicts, social tensions, or even violent incidents.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the town of Vukovar was a distinctly multiethnic urban center inhabited by Croats, Germans, Serbs, and Hungarians. Although Hungarians did not constitute a numerically dominant group within the population, their presence was visible in the economic, administrative, and cultural life of the town. In the context of political relations between the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia and the Kingdom of Hungary—especially after the Croatian–Hungarian Compromise of 1868—issues of language, education, and cultural institutions frequently acquired pronounced political significance. Schools thus represented one of the key arenas in which the interests of national politics and local communities intersected. The establishment of a Hungarian Reformed school in Vukovar in 1904 generated certain tensions within the local public sphere, and shortly after its opening an attempt was made to set the school building on fire. This incident, which soon resulted in a court case before the judicial table in Osijek, provoked reactions not only locally but also within the Hungarian public sphere. Although it was a relatively limited event that did not cause major material damage, its symbolic dimension and media reception raise a number of questions about the

functioning of national relations, political perceptions, and social conflicts in the late Habsburg Monarchy.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the attempted arson of the Hungarian school in Vukovar in 1904 as a case study of local political violence within the context of national tensions in Slavonia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Particular attention will be devoted to the social context of the event, the judicial proceedings against the perpetrator, and the reactions of the contemporary press. By analyzing these elements, the paper seeks to demonstrate how educational institutions in multiethnic environments often functioned as symbols of national identity and as potential focal points of political conflict.

HUNGARIANS IN VUKOVAR

The first mention of the town of Vukovar dates to 955, when the fortress of Valkó is explicitly mentioned in the *Gesta Hungarorum* as one of the strongholds conquered by the Hungarians at that time. It is highly likely that Hungarians had already settled in Vukovar by then and constituted at least a certain proportion of the population. In a charter issued by Duke Coloman in 1231, four population groups are mentioned in Vukovar: alongside Germans, Saxons, and Slavs, Hungarians are again explicitly listed. Hungarian toponymy in the late Middle Ages in the Croatian Danube region was particularly numerous and predominant in the area of the lower Slavonian Drava and Danube regions. Among the examples are settlement names that still exist today, although Hungarians no longer live in them, such as Mikluševci (*Miklósfalva*), Markušica (*Márkusfalva*), Gaboš (*Gábos*), Lovas, Mohovo (*Mohó*), Ilok (*Újlak*), and others.¹

During the period of the Reformation, in a letter dated 20 June 1551, one of the most prominent Hungarian reformers, Mihály Sztárai, mentioned Vukovar in the context of the spread of the Reformation: “It is enough to write that we defeated them everywhere, and like wolves from the fold of Christ, we drove them far away, forcing some beyond the Tisza and others beyond the Sava rivers, i.e. beyond the Sarmatians, beyond the icy Caucasus, as the poet says. This year, on the day of Pentecost, on the occasion of the councils held in the vicinity of Valpo and Vukovar, we defeated them in two battles.” However, only a few decades later, in the register (*defter*) of Vukovar, which was then part of the Sanjak of Syrmia, Muslim names absolutely predominated. It may be assumed that some of these household heads—perhaps even the majority—were in fact Islamized Hungarians and Croats, while only a smaller proportion were Anatolian Turks. In any case, during and after Ottoman rule, Hungarians almost completely disappeared from Vukovar and its surroundings, remaining only in Kórógy.²

After the liberation of eastern Slavonia from Ottoman rule at the end of the seventeenth century, Catholics (Šokci) and Orthodox settlers from Bosnia moved into the settlements where Hungarians had previously lived. Hungarian toponymy and oikonymy largely survived the Ottoman period, but the Hungarian population itself did not persist in the region. A new feudal phase in the development of Vukovar began with the noble Eltz family, that is, after they took control of the entire Vukovar area and formed a large estate there. Since eastern Slavonia remained sparsely populated, the Eltz family initiated a planned settlement of new inhabitants on their landed property.³ Alongside the predominantly agricultural settlers who arrived up to the first half of the nineteenth century, the abolition of feudal relations in 1848 encouraged a more noticeable immigration from Hungary of various craftsmen, merchants, officials, and—along with the development of the railway—railway workers. The primary reasons for their settlement in Vukovar and its surroundings were the economic opportunities offered by the region and the considerably lower prices of agricultural land compared to those in Hungary proper.

Among these settlers, alongside Catholics, there was also a noticeable number of Reformed (Calvinist) believers. During Reformed visitations in the 1870s, it was clearly observed that many Hungarians living in eastern Slavonia and western Syrmia lacked adequate pastoral care, which led to the decision to establish a Reformed mission to serve them. The main figure in Vukovar working to organize the local Hungarian community was Zádor Kelecsényi, a public notary in the town. When the Jewish community of Vukovar decided in 1894 to expand and construct a larger synagogue, the Reformed Church, through Kelecsényi, purchased the old one. At that time there were 130 families of the Reformed faith in Vukovar, the vast majority of whom were Hungarians. Nevertheless, Hungarians did not constitute a large proportion of the town's population. In 1900 Vukovar had 10,359 inhabitants, of whom 4,125 were Croats (39.82%), 3,502 Germans (33.81%), 1,500 Serbs (14.49%), while Hungarians ranked only fourth in number with 954 inhabitants (9.21%).⁴ However, in the territory of the entire former municipality of Vukovar there were 3,784 Hungarians,⁵ which was by no means an insignificant number. It should also be noted that the mayor of Vukovar from 1896 to 1898 was likewise a Hungarian, Imre Hideghéthy (1860–1920), who had previously served as a deputy in the Croatian Parliament (1881–1891), later as prefect of Syrmia County (1903–1906), and eventually as Minister for Croatian-Slavonian-Dalmatian Affairs in the Hungarian government (1916–1917). He was also a large landowner in the nearby village of Bogdanovci.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE HUNGARIAN SCHOOL IN VUKOVAR

Hungarian Catholics living in the territory of the Diocese of Bosnia and Đakovo during the episcopate of Bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer were in a particularly difficult position. Bishop Strossmayer was known for his active political stance, one of whose main characteristics was a strong anti-Hungarian orientation. In numerous examples within his diocese, this manifested itself in explicit prohibitions against delivering sermons in the Hungarian language and singing hymns in Hungarian even in purely Hungarian villages. The Hungarian public protested these measures relatively frequently, though largely without success. It should also be noted that Bishop Strossmayer, like most of the Croatian opposition of the time, regarded Hungarians—and the process of Magyarization in Slavonia—as the greatest threat to the Croatian identity of the region. As one of the means of resisting Hungarian influence in Slavonia, Strossmayer also prohibited the teaching of religious instruction in Hungarian in schools attended almost exclusively by children whose mother tongue was Hungarian.⁶

As a result of the overall political situation in eastern Slavonia and western Syrmia, and in order to avoid further provoking or antagonizing Croatian public opinion, it was decided in Vukovar to establish a school within the framework of the Hungarian Reformed Church. Since Croats were almost without exception Catholics, such a “religious” school represented a lesser threat and provocation to the Croatian population. The Reformed school in Vukovar was founded in 1904 and operated entirely within the institutional framework of the Reformed Church. A building in the center of Vukovar was purchased and substantially expanded and reconstructed in the Secessionist style. The institution also included a student boarding facility and an orphanage.⁷ In order to provide the school and the boarding facility with their own financial resources, Zádor Kelecsényi donated 12 acres of his own land to the institution.

THE ATTEMPTED ARSON OF THE HUNGARIAN SCHOOL IN VUKOVAR IN 1904

Shortly after the opening of the Hungarian school in Vukovar, an incident occurred at the school building on the night of 21 September 1904. An attempt was made to set fire to the roof of the building. At the scene, a lid from a jar containing kerosene prepared for starting the fire was found. The municipal police established that the kerosene had been purchased in the Vukovar shop of Eduard Bier. The shop assistants unanimously stated that the lid had come from a jar in which the Vukovar commercial clerk Albert Wenzler had taken kerosene the day before

(20 September). Albert Wenzler and his brother Stjepan stated before the local chief Brandecker that they had carried out the act in agreement with the brush-maker, also a resident of Vukovar, Gjuro Szentgyörgyi. They explained that they had procured a ladder, climbed onto the roof of the school, removed about fifteen roof tiles, and placed beneath the roof beam a bundle of paper and wood chips soaked in kerosene. They did not wait to see the result but returned home so that no one would notice them. A Vukovar metalworker named Seiller, who happened to pass by the school at that moment, noticed flames breaking through the roof and began shouting. The school janitor and several neighbors soon rushed to the scene and extinguished the fire. The damage was minimal, as only two roof laths were affected. The Wenzler brothers and Gjuro Szentgyörgyi were arrested and detained at the district court in Vukovar. Szentgyörgyi denied that he had been present during the attempted arson and attempted to prove an alibi, although he admitted that he had spent the evening drinking with the Wenzler brothers until late that night in the Svirčević tavern in the Donja Mala district of Vukovar. The Wenzler brothers repeated their confession before the court and maintained their statements even when confronted with Szentgyörgyi, additionally claiming that it had been Szentgyörgyi who had conceived the arson as a form of demonstration, whereas they themselves had only intended to break the school windows.⁸ Earlier that same month, the windows of the Hungarian school in Osijek had also been smashed as part of anti-Hungarian demonstrations.⁹

On 9 November, the main hearing was held before the Royal Judicial Table in Osijek against Albert Wenzler, Stjepan Wenzler, and the brush-maker Gjuro Szentgyörgyi for the “crime of arson against the Hungarian school of the Helvetic Evangelical Church community in Vukovar.”¹⁰ The panel was presided over by judicial councillor Vragović, while the voting members were councillors Petrović, Pehar, and Mexner, together with judicial clerk Dittmayer. The state prosecutor was Brosehan, while the defense counsel for the Wenzler brothers was the lawyer A. Bedenić, and Szentgyörgyi was represented by Dragutin Neumann. Part of the indictment was also published in *Narodna Obrana* and *Sriemske novine*.

The indictment read as follows: “In the night from 20 to 21 September 1904, Josef Selinger, a hosiery worker in Vukovar, set out at about a quarter to two in the morning by cart for the fair in Tovarnik. Turning into the street in which the house of the Helvetic Evangelical Church community was located, and where the Hungarian school was situated, he noticed from a distance of approximately one hundred paces that flames about half a meter high were breaking out from the roof of the building. Upon reaching the house he stopped his cart and sent his servant to knock on the door, while he himself shouted ‘Fire!’. In response to the knocking and shouting, the school janitor Andrija Vačik came out and immediately climbed

to the attic with a bucket of water and extinguished the fire, which had already caught hold of the wooden laths that formed the partition of the attic at that very spot. In the meantime, neighbors Ana Kovačević, Ivan and Ana Gjurić, as well as the municipal guards Ivan Terzić and Mirko Stojanović, who happened to be in a nearby street, also came running out of their houses. At the scene they found a ladder, wood splinters soaked with kerosene, and on the window located directly beneath the place where the fire had broken out in the attic a small cork stopper. In the morning the police commissioner Timotije Mirković, who conducted the investigation, discovered that several roof tiles and sulphur matches had been removed at that very spot on the roof, which made it clear that the fire had been deliberately set. It was established that the ladder found in the ditch near the house of the Evangelical Helvetic Church community belonged to Margareta Feješ and was usually kept in her yard opposite the house of the Evangelical Helvetic Church community. Albert and Stjepan Wenzler knew about this ladder, as they had previously lived with Margareta Feješ. Through the testimony of the witness Hugo Angster, a shop assistant, it was established that on the evening of 20 September 1904 Stjepan Wenzler came to his shop and asked him to give him a small bottle of kerosene and a packet of sulphur matches. Angster stated that he indeed gave him these items and that he had sealed the bottle with the very same cork stopper that was later found on the window below the place where the fire had been set. When summoned before the police authorities, Albert and Stjepan Wenzler at first denied the act, but later the same day voluntarily confessed in the presence of Chief Brandecker, senior constable Martin B., Jozo M., and police commissioner V. Mirković that the two of them, together with Gjuro Szentgyörgyi, had set fire to the roof of the Hungarian school after having agreed upon it earlier that afternoon. Gjuro Szentgyörgyi denied the act. During the course of the investigation the Wenzler brothers stated on one occasion that they had set the fire themselves, and on another that Gjuro Szentgyörgyi had instigated them and had set the fire together with them. Szentgyörgyi most decisively rejected these accusations, attempting to prove that he had been at home at the critical time.”¹¹

The continuation of the main hearing was published the following day in *Narodna Obrana*:¹² “The accused Albert Wenzler stated that he had not intended to burn down the Hungarian school and cause a fire, but merely to stage a demonstration. On the evening of the 19th he met with the accused Szentgyörgyi and told him that the school windows should be smashed. Szentgyörgyi replied that this was foolish, and that if they wished, the two of them could instead set the school on fire. That same evening, on the 19th, Albert Wenzler told his brother to procure kerosene. The brother did so, but Albert immediately used it up. He then told his brother that the kerosene had been spent and that he should fetch another

bottle. The brother brought a bottle, which Albert put in his pocket, while in the yard Szentgyörgyi filled the bottle with kerosene. Gjuro Szentgyörgyi also left the tavern and brought kerosene. His departure could be confirmed by Sitzenkopf and Svirčević. On the 20th, while leaving the singing school, Szentgyörgyi said that they would set the school on fire that evening. Albert and his brother then went home, changed clothes, took the kerosene, and went to the monastery. There Szentgyörgyi joined them and asked whether they would proceed, to which Albert Wenzler replied that they could. Szentgyörgyi told them to fetch the ladder while he would bring the wood splinters. When Szentgyörgyi returned, he first checked whether anyone was nearby and then told them to take out the ladder. He directed them and sent the brother to stand guard. Albert Wenzler and Szentgyörgyi removed several roof tiles. Szentgyörgyi then provided the wood splinters, poured kerosene over them, placed them in the attic, and set them alight. The flames were more visible on the roof than in the attic. At that moment a cart passed by, whereupon Szentgyörgyi left and carried the remaining wood splinters somewhere into Jelačić Street. Albert Wenzler and Stjepan Wenzler also went into Jelačić Street, returned again afterward, and only then was the fire set. The whole operation lasted about five hours. He did not see any flames.”

He and his brother maintained a close friendship with Szentgyörgyi, frequently visiting one another. The following day Albert Wenzler went to Szentgyörgyi and told him that the cork stopper had been left behind. Szentgyörgyi then said that he would not confess to the act and that he would deny it. On the evening of 22 September Szentgyörgyi went to Vinkovci. Albert Wenzler saw him near the café and joined him, whereupon Szentgyörgyi again stated that he would not confess. While in custody, Szentgyörgyi allegedly told the Wenzler brothers to assume the blame themselves. For this reason Stjepan first described the act without mentioning Szentgyörgyi, and later Albert Wenzler did the same. At first the brothers were detained together by the police, while Szentgyörgyi was held separately. Later Albert Wenzler suggested to Police Commissioner Mirković that they be placed in the same cell. Szentgyörgyi, however, requested that he be released.

The accused Stjepan Wenzler testified that on 19 September Albert came to him and asked him to obtain kerosene. He procured it from Angster and brought it home. When he asked his brother why he needed it, Albert replied: “You will see, you will hear.” On the morning of the 20th Albert Wenzler told him that he had agreed to burn the Hungarian school. Around eleven in the morning he was with his brother when Szentgyörgyi came to them from across the street and spoke with Albert. In the evening they attended the singing school and afterward went to Svirčević’s tavern, from which Szentgyörgyi and the brothers went out together for about half an hour. On the evening of the 20th, around midnight, they left

Svirčević's tavern, went home, and changed clothes. They then went to the monastery, where they waited. Szentgyörgyi arrived and said that they should go and prepare the ladder. They went but did not remove the ladder. Albert Wenzler told them that he had already used up the kerosene obtained from Angster. Before the court Stjepan Wenzler initially defended Szentgyörgyi, but when he was warned that the penalty could be severe, he refused to accept the punishment in his place. The accused Gjuro Szentgyörgyi stated that both of the other accused were implicating him in order to absolve themselves. He did not remember where he had been on the 19th. That evening he had been at Svirčević's tavern, where the Wenzler brothers were also frequent visitors. He could not recall who else had been present. On the 20th, after the singing rehearsal, he again went to Svirčević's tavern, later played cards there, and around half past midnight went home.

After the testimonies of the accused, the following witnesses were heard: Andraš Vaček, Hugo Angster, Josip Selinger, Ivan Gjuričić, Franjo Szentgyörgyi, Timotije Mirković, Anton Svirčević, V. Sitzenkopf, A. Peheim, Ružica Wenzler, Aug. Misler, and Stjepan Wenzler, who testified about the decisive circumstances of the act. After the documents had been read, the state prosecutor took the floor. He stated that there was no doubt that the accused Albert and Stjepan Wenzler had participated in the act, as they themselves had confessed. According to the testimony of Police Commissioner Mirković, the crime could only have been committed by persons familiar with the house, which was the case with the Wenzler brothers. Stjepan Wenzler had instructed his brother to obtain kerosene, and the cork stopper from the bottle had indeed been found. According to their own testimony, Gjuro Szentgyörgyi had also participated in the act, although he continued to deny it. During the course of the hearing nothing emerged that could undermine the credibility of the Wenzler brothers' testimony. They identified Gjuro Szentgyörgyi as their accomplice. No hostility between the accused Wenzlers and Szentgyörgyi had been proven; there had been disagreements and quarrels, but not such hatred that would have motivated them to shift the blame onto him. Only the testimony of Szentgyörgyi's brother Franjo contradicted the Wenzlers' statements. However, the testimony of other witnesses demonstrated that Franjo Szentgyörgyi's account was unreliable, since he claimed that Gjuro had arrived home two minutes after half past midnight, which other witnesses did not confirm.

Regarding the legal qualification of the act, the state prosecutor rejected Albert Wenzler's defense that they had merely intended to stage a demonstration rather than to burn the building. The results of the hearing did not support such a claim. Their conduct indicated that they had indeed intended to set the building on fire. Their act corresponded fully to the definition of arson: the fire had spread from the combustible material to the building itself, thus fulfilling the criteria under point

6 of paragraph 167 of the Criminal Code. The defense attorney, Dr. A. Bedenić, argued that opposition to Hungarian schools had been expressed throughout the country and that people therefore felt obliged to react. In their youthful patriotic enthusiasm, these young men had committed an act that could not be approved but could not be classified as the crime of arson either. They were not arsonists, criminals, or dangerous individuals. The hearing had shown that the legal qualification contained in the indictment was unfounded. The small amount of splinters ignited by the accused could not possibly have caused a fire; the flames were extinguished immediately, and although the wooden laths were blackened, they continued to serve their purpose even at the time of the trial and were therefore not damaged. It was not sufficient for the combustible material to burn; the structure itself had to catch fire. In this case only the splinters brought to the attic had burned, while the laths themselves had not caught fire. Consequently, there could be no question of the crime of arson. Nor could it be established in the subjective sense, since the perpetrators would have had to possess a direct intention to cause a fire. His clients had not intended that—they had merely wished to stage a demonstration, believing that no fire would occur. The defense counsel cited a decision of the Vienna Supreme Court in which a woman had been acquitted of arson after she stole laundry from an attic and burned the remaining garments in a chest in order to conceal her theft, inadvertently causing a fire that resulted in damage exceeding 17,000 crowns. For the crime of arson, direct intent was required. Anyone who wished to cause a fire would not do so in such a clumsy, imprudent, and irrational manner as his clients had, using a small quantity of damp splinters from which a fire could not possibly arise. In the present case, he argued, the provisions of paragraph 459 should be applied. He therefore requested that the accused Albert Wenzler be acquitted of the charge of arson. As for the accused Stjepan Wenzler, he could not be held responsible at all: although he had purchased the kerosene, he had also used it up, and he had otherwise not participated in the act. The defense therefore asked that he also be acquitted.¹³

Defence counsel Dr Dragutin Neumann: "In order to establish the objective elements of the crime of arson, it is absolutely necessary to prove the intent to cause a fire. On this question there is no disagreement among jurists. But has such intent been proven here? The prosecution derives this proof from the confession of the accused Wenzler. Both of them admitted this in the investigative record, and from this confession the public prosecutor concludes that the perpetrators had the intention of committing arson. However, the Wenzlers also stated in the record that Szentgyörgyi had not participated in the act, yet the public prosecutor attaches no importance to that statement. If it cannot be proven that there was a direct intent to commit arson, then there can be no talk of the crime of arson at all. During the

trial it was not proven that the accused had the intention or deliberate design to set fire to the Hungarian school. The defence counsel draws attention to a ruling of the Viennese Court of Cassation from the most recent period. In that case a woman was acquitted, although the damage caused by a fire she had lit amounted to more than 17,000 crowns, because a direct intent to commit arson had not been proven. He then proceeds to his main task, the defence of the accused Gjuro Szentgyörgyi. The prosecution did not act according to the procedural principle when it claimed that nothing had been presented at the main hearing that would refute the statement of the accused Wenzler against Szentgyörgyi. The accused is not required to prove a negative; if such a principle were valid in legal proceedings, even the most innocent person could be convicted on that basis. The prosecutor must prove guilt. What, then, has been proven against the accused Szentgyörgyi? If one does not rely on the statement of the accused Wenzler, nothing has been proven against him. On such grounds he cannot be convicted. Evidence is required. Both Wenzlers have repeatedly altered their statements and contradicted themselves. The defence counsel lists a whole series of contradictions into which both Wenzlers have fallen. On the testimony of such witnesses the guilt of Gjuro Szentgyörgyi cannot be established. Even if one disregards the testimony of these two accused persons, counter-evidence regarding the alleged guilt of Szentgyörgyi has been provided by the principal witness, Franjo Szentgyörgyi, who testified that Gjuro came home two hours after half past midnight. This testimony is essentially confirmed by other witnesses as well. The testimony of Franjo Szentgyörgyi does not contradict the witnesses who stated that Szentgyörgyi came home at about half past midnight. Any witness may easily be mistaken by a few minutes, and the question of the accused Szentgyörgyi's guilt cannot depend on a difference of a few minutes. Moreover, Franjo Szentgyörgyi testified that Gjuro Szentgyörgyi remained at home at that time and that he himself had been awake the entire time. It has been established that the act was committed at about half past one at night. According to the testimony of Franjo, it is therefore proven that Gjuro Szentgyörgyi did not participate in the fire. Finally, one more point: the findings of the Chemical Analytical Institute show that the wood splinters used to start the fire are not identical with those found in Szentgyörgyi's possession. This circumstance therefore also fails to corroborate the testimony of the accused Wenzler. For this reason, I consider that the guilt of the accused Szentgyörgyi has not been proven and I request that he be acquitted."¹⁴

The hearing was attended by a large audience, which awaited the announcement of the verdict with great anticipation. On Saturday evening the verdict was announced before the local Royal Court; Gjuro Szentgyörgyi was sentenced to five years of severe imprisonment, Albert Wenzler to three years, and the nineteen-year-old Stjepan Wenzler to two years of severe imprisonment. Both defence counsels,

Dr Neumann and Dr Bedenić, lodged a plea of nullity and an appeal, while the public prosecutor also filed a plea of nullity (regarding Szentgyörgyi) and an appeal.¹⁵

REACTION OF THE BUDAPEST PRESS

A particularly interesting aspect of the entire case is the way in which the incident was interpreted in the Hungarian press. The reaction of the newspaper *Pesti Napló* demonstrates that the event in Vukovar was very quickly incorporated into a broader political narrative about the alleged endangerment of Hungarians and Hungarian culture in certain parts of the Monarchy. In an article published on its front page, the newspaper interpreted the incident not as an isolated act committed by three young men, but rather as a symptom of a “national disease” that supposedly affected the non-Hungarian peoples of the state. Such rhetoric was typical of the political polemics of the period, in which individual incidents were often used as evidence of a wider problem of national loyalty or political agitation.

Particularly noteworthy is the way the article interprets the role of the school. The school is described as a symbol of civilisation and cultural progress, while its attackers are portrayed as enemies of education and social development. Such an interpretation clearly reflects the ideological framework of Hungarian nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which educational institutions played an important role in the spread of the Hungarian language and culture.

At the same time, the article adopts an emphatically dramatic and alarmist tone, presenting the incident as a warning of broader dangers to the Hungarian state. Within this discourse, the idea also appears that national conflicts were instigated by political agitators, especially among the clergy and the intellectual elites of the non-Hungarian peoples. In this way, the incident in Vukovar was incorporated into a broader narrative about the manipulation of an “uneducated” population by nationalist movements.

With this front-page article, *Pesti Napló* reacted to the attempted burning of the Hungarian school in Vukovar as follows: “The most dangerous diseases sometimes manifest themselves in the most insignificant symptoms: a small rash on the skin often carries death within it, or a slight redness on the face, which to the layman may appear to be a sign of health, is to the expert physician a herald of final destruction. Sometimes a dark stain appears on the body of a nation to which we attach no importance, although it conceals a serious problem. Small occurrences appear here and there in one or another part of the country; something breaks out here or there, and hardly noticing it, we believe it to be insignificant; the newspapers briefly record it, and then we indifferently turn to the ordinary course of daily news. Yet these are small symptoms of great chronic diseases which, in a latent

way, destroy the body of the country until suddenly a great illness erupts, for which the remedy then comes too late. Who noticed the insignificant incident that three young Croatian men, one of whom bears an old historical name that sounds Hungarian, set fire to the Hungarian Lutheran school? During the night they leaned a ladder against the wall of the Hungarian school in Vukovar, climbed onto the roof, and thrust pieces of wood soaked in kerosene under the roof, which they set alight. They did this to a school that is as sacred and inviolable as a church, a school that preaches culture, knowledge, and the spirit of peace. And they did it out of hatred toward Hungarians, out of Croatian national fanaticism. An insignificant incident—but a symptom. The manifestation of a secret, great national disease that will soon break out. One must reckon with it, for it is becoming habitual. This act of arson has now appeared in the south among the Croats. It will appear again in the north among the Slovaks. Again and again in the east among the Vlachs. Fires are being lit everywhere—sometimes with kerosene, sometimes with words and writings. Suddenly we may realise that the country is burning above our heads. It is time to put an end to Hungarian nationalism's patience. It would be advisable to deal with the question of nationalist arsonists not only in daily news, but also in the Council of Ministers (if the question of baronial appointments leaves time), in Parliament, and in social and cultural associations. Here in Budapest we invent fine phrases about building the Hungarian national state, while in the countryside Hungarian buildings are being burned. Do the gentlemen who speak so successfully about national policy in Budapest have no idea how that Hungarian national policy actually stands in the country? And does no one know how many difficulties Hungarians in the countryside, and our good patriotic fellow citizens of foreign speech who are receptive to Hungarian culture, have with these nationalist arsonists who constantly throw stones between Hungarians and non-Hungarians? The fact is that even today the 'nationalities', that is, citizens who do not speak Hungarian (for separate nationalities cannot be recognised alongside the unified Hungarian nation), are not enemies of the Hungarians so long as they enjoy the benefits and culture of the Hungarian state, respect its laws, maintain their mother tongue among themselves, and even adopt the language of the state, which opens for them the path to life, enrichment, and advancement in all kinds of careers. In every part of the country there are certain agitators who profit if the people do not learn the language, do not become educated, and live almost an animal-like life within the narrow limits of their mother tongue, because in that way they can be more easily exploited and used for every purpose. Such people are mostly found among priests and lawyers, as well as in national associations and financial institutions. They spread a spirit of withdrawal among otherwise peaceful citizens who slowly and steadily undergo Magyarisation. It is very characteristic of these agitators that they

attack the school. This is indeed the classic feature of the arson of the school in Vukovar. When robbers wish to steal and plunder, they first extinguish the light and create darkness. The school spreads light; therefore it must first be destroyed so that darkness may arise, after which stealing and plundering become possible. Anyone who has ever travelled in a minority region will have noticed that in most places the only civilised building is the Hungarian school, especially if it is a state school. One may walk for hours in remote regions and see dilapidated huts everywhere, among which it is impossible to distinguish whether a man or a pig lives inside. The people are poor and ignorant; they know barely a hundred or two hundred words of their own language and understand nothing because they have learned nothing, and their lack of education is largely the cause of their misery. For them the Hungarian school is a blessing of God, where they are taught at least the language by which they may leave the nest of their misery, depart from their village, earn a living, obtain employment, even accumulate wealth for themselves, and escape their animal fate. The Hungarian school is the only refuge and at the same time the source of civilisation in such a region. Its role in the national territories resembles that of missionary stations among the wild Indians—and such missionary buildings our own ‘wild Indians’ burn. There can be only one answer to such attacks: to multiply and strengthen the missionary stations—the Hungarian schools. We urgently await the school proposal of Albert Berzeviczy, which must be turned into law as soon as possible. And if Count István Tisza truly wishes that this proposal become law, then we ask him now to bring the public education bill before Parliament immediately after its opening and not postpone it until after other government proposals that provoke political storms, particularly the revision of the defence forces. Political reason and a sense of national honour demand that this proposal—on which all opposition parties agree in strengthening the national state—be allowed to become law before the political storms. Albert Berzeviczy is currently visiting Transylvania. We hope he will see there the difficult struggle of the Hungarians against the constant secret arson of nationalist agitators. May the small forces of Hungarian culture at home be multiplied with renewed zeal, energy, and Hungarian spirit. Perhaps the prime minister might also concern himself somewhat with these Croatian agitations. Do not diminish the national problems. *Jam paroximus ardet Vukovár!*¹⁶

ANALYSIS OF THE EVENT AND MEDIA DISCOURSE

The attempted arson of the Hungarian Reformed school in Vukovar in September 1904 represents an instructive example of a local incident that relatively quickly acquired broader political significance. Although the event itself was limited in material scope—the fire was extinguished quickly and the damage remained

minimal—the manner in which the incident was interpreted in the judicial proceedings and in the contemporary press demonstrates that its importance greatly exceeded the criminal act itself. In this sense, the event may be interpreted as an instance of symbolic political violence within the context of national tensions in the late Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

The available sources, particularly the records of the court proceedings, indicate that the perpetrators—brothers Wenzler and Gjuro Szentgyörgyi—gave partially contradictory statements during the investigation and the trial regarding both their motives and the course of events. Nevertheless, a recurring claim in their testimonies was that their intention had not been to start a large fire but rather to “demonstrate.” This formulation is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that the perpetrators themselves perceived the act as a form of political or symbolic protest rather than as an ordinary criminal offence.

In the historiography of political violence, it is frequently emphasized that such incidents possess a pronounced communicative function. Violence is not necessarily directed toward the physical destruction of an object or opponent but toward conveying a political message to a particular community or to the wider public. From this perspective, the attempted arson may be interpreted as a demonstrative act intended to express opposition to the establishment of the Hungarian school. The fact that the target of the attack was precisely a school building was by no means accidental. In multiethnic environments, educational institutions often represented key symbols of national presence and cultural influence.

This interpretation is further supported by the fact that other incidents involving Hungarian schools occurred at roughly the same time, such as the breaking of windows at the Hungarian school in Osijek. These events suggest that educational institutions were perceived as politically and culturally sensitive spaces in which tensions between different national projects manifested themselves.

The court hearings before the judicial bench in Osijek reveal that the legal system sought primarily to treat the incident as the criminal offence of arson. The public prosecutor insisted that the act had involved a clear intention to cause a fire and attempted to demonstrate the existence of direct intent on the part of the perpetrators. In contrast, the defense emphasized the demonstrative character of the act, arguing that the accused had had no genuine intention of setting the school on fire. This debate reflects a broader problem in the legal interpretation of politically motivated violence. The judicial system was required to determine whether the event should be viewed exclusively as a criminal offence against property or whether the political context and motives of the perpetrators should be taken into account.

Although the defense sought to mitigate the gravity of the offence by emphasizing the youth of the accused and their “patriotic fervour,” the court ultimately

accepted the legal qualification of the crime as arson and imposed relatively severe sentences. Such a verdict demonstrates that the judicial authorities sought to preserve the authority of the state and to prevent the spread of political violence, regardless of the national motives underlying the incident.

THE SCHOOL AS A SYMBOLIC SPACE OF NATIONALISM

The attempted arson of the Hungarian Reformed school in Vukovar can be further interpreted within the framework of contemporary theoretical approaches that emphasize the symbolic and everyday dimensions of nationalism. In this regard, the concept of “banal nationalism,” developed by Michael Billig, is particularly useful. According to this approach, national identity is sustained not only through spectacular political events or explicit ideological programs but also through a range of everyday practices, institutions, and symbols that continuously remind individuals of their belonging to a particular national community.¹⁷

In the late Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, educational institutions constituted one of the most important arenas for this kind of everyday reproduction of national identity. Schools were spaces in which language, cultural patterns, and historical narratives were transmitted, thereby shaping the national consciousness of new generations. For this reason, the establishment of new schools in multiethnic environments often carried a significance that went far beyond their purely educational function. School buildings, the language of instruction, and the administration of schools became symbols of the political and cultural presence of particular national communities.

Within this context, the Hungarian Reformed school in Vukovar represented not only an educational institution intended for the local Hungarian community but also a visible sign of the presence of the Hungarian national project within the city. This symbolic dimension of educational institutions was particularly pronounced in the political circumstances that shaped relations between the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia and the Kingdom of Hungary following the Croatian–Hungarian Settlement of 1868. Under these conditions, questions of language and education frequently acquired a strong political dimension, and the establishment of schools using a particular language could be interpreted either as a form of cultural domination or as an expression of national affirmation.

From this perspective, the attempted arson of the school may be interpreted as an attack on a symbolic space of national presence. The act was directed not only against the physical building but also against the meaning it represented within the local social landscape. This explains why the target of the attack was a school rather than some other public or private building in the city. The school embodied

a visible sign of the institutional presence of the Hungarian community and of its cultural policy.

At the same time, the reaction of the press in Budapest demonstrates that the other side also interpreted the event primarily in symbolic terms. In an article published in the newspaper *Pesti Napló*, the incident was not portrayed as an isolated act carried out by individuals but rather as an attack on Hungarian culture and education. Such an interpretation fits within a broader Hungarian public discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which educational institutions were frequently presented as key instruments of cultural mission and civilizational progress.

This demonstrates that the same event could be interpreted in two fundamentally different ways. For the perpetrators, the attempted arson represented a demonstrative act of political resistance against the symbolic expansion of Hungarian institutions, whereas in the Hungarian public discourse it was interpreted as an attack on culture and education. Precisely this divergence in perception reveals how heavily educational institutions in the multiethnic environments of the late Monarchy were burdened with political meaning. In this sense, the attempted arson of the Hungarian school in Vukovar may be viewed as an example of a conflict over symbolic space in which different national projects intersected. The incident illustrates how the political ideas of nationalism manifested themselves not only at the level of state policy or parliamentary debates but also within the everyday urban spaces of towns such as Vukovar.

CONCLUSION

The attempted arson of the Hungarian Reformed school in Vukovar in 1904 represents an example of a relatively limited local incident that nevertheless raises a number of important questions regarding the functioning of national relations in the late Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Although the event did not result in significant material damage or serious consequences for urban life, an analysis of the court proceedings and the reactions of the contemporary press demonstrates that its significance extended beyond the framework of an ordinary criminal offence. The court hearings before the judicial bench in Osijek reveal a complex relationship between the legal qualification of the act and the political motives underlying it. While the court sought to treat the incident as a conventional case of attempted arson and thereby preserve the authority of the state's legal order, the statements of the accused suggest that they perceived their own act as a demonstrative political protest. This tension between legal interpretation and political motivation was characteristic of many forms of political violence in European societies at the

end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, when national movements increasingly resorted to symbolic or demonstrative actions in order to express political positions.

A particularly important aspect of the case is the media reception of the event. The reaction of the Budapest newspaper *Pesti Napló* illustrates how a local incident was very quickly incorporated into a broader political narrative concerning national relations within the Monarchy. The attempted arson was interpreted as a symptom of deeper political and social tensions between the Hungarian state and its non-Hungarian populations. Such an interpretation reflects the manner in which the contemporary press frequently transformed local events into symbolic examples of wider political conflict. An analysis of the object of the attack itself further confirms the political dimension of the incident. As an institution, the school was not merely a place of education but also an important symbol of cultural and national presence. In multiethnic environments such as Vukovar, educational institutions often represented key spaces in which the national projects and political ambitions of different communities manifested themselves. For this reason, the attack on the school was directed not only against a particular building but also against the symbolic meaning it carried within the local social landscape.

In this sense, the attempted arson may also be interpreted in light of contemporary historiographical approaches that emphasize the everyday and symbolic dimensions of nationalism. According to such interpretations, national identities were not shaped exclusively through political programs and the actions of elites, but also through everyday institutions, practices, and conflicts. Educational institutions, the language of instruction, and local cultural organizations constituted key elements in this everyday reproduction of national belonging, and conflicts surrounding them often acquired strong symbolic significance. Ultimately, this case confirms the importance of a microhistorical approach in the study of national relations in Central Europe. The analysis of a relatively small and locally confined incident provides insight into the complex dynamics of political perceptions, social tensions, and symbolic conflicts that characterized everyday life in the multiethnic environments of the late Habsburg Monarchy. It is precisely through such local events that we can gain a better understanding of the ways in which national identities were shaped, contested, and politicized in the social realities of the early twentieth century.

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The Building of the Hungarian Reformed School in Vukovar (the photo was taken by the author)

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