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THE HUNGARIAN RECEPTION OF KIERKEGAARD IN THE 1930'S

Kierkegaard magyar recepciója az 1930-as években

Recepcija Kjerkegora 1930-ih godina u Mađarskoj

In this paper I attempt to summarize the results of my research project that I have been engaged in for several years. The aim of my research was to investigate the effects of Søren Kierkegaard's (1813–1855) works and ideas on the Hungarian intellectual life in the first third of the 20th century. This topic has been researched for a decade, a few overviews have been published (NAGY 2009, GYENGE 2000) but no study has been made which focuses on interpretation in the 1930's. A prerequisite of the work was to reflect on some basic theoretical problems of writing philosophical history. However, the research is also relevant for ideological history, because the discussed topic is closely related to the crisis-philosophical theories of the era. My primary aim was to create an integrating, text-centered work which helps with basic orientation. The study can also be seen as an attempt at treating the Hungarian reception of Kierkegaard with as precise methods as possible. This was provided chiefly by the mapping of philological links and the genealogy of possible classifications, interpretations and readings.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, reception, Hungarian philosophy, crisis, protestant theology

The place of writing philosophical history within the field of philosophy has long been debated. Investigations of effective history represent an especially problematic area. I would like to emphasize that the topic of my paper is not Kierkegaard himself, but what could have been seen of him in the intellectual climate of the early 20th century. There is a generally accepted chronological and thematic categorization of the Danish philosopher's effective history. The chronological categorization of Kierkegaard's Hungarian reception is less relevant for us, because we are concerned with only one period; however, an overview of the major periods is in order (NAGY 2009). Hungarian reception began with György Lukács's 1910 essay (LUKÁCS 1997), which, despite its significance, remained an isolated attempt. A wide reception only emerged in the 1930's. This boom lasted for only a decade because historical turmoil swept

away the Danish philosopher from the Hungarian intellectual sphere. It was only thirty years later, in the 1970's that he appeared in a couple of papers and even then only examined from an ethical perspective. His works were translated only in the 1990s, which allowed widespread reception¹. The enclosed nature of the Hungarian reception began a gradual change in the early 2000s when there was an obvious aspiration to join international research and be able to internationally present the result of Hungarian reception.

The other usual way of categorizing the works of Kierkegaard's reception is based on thematic criteria. As a rule, philosophical, theological and literary-aesthetic works are differentiated, although certain authors and works cannot be separated into such distinct categories. An important aspect of Kierkegaard's reception in Hungary in the 1930's is that theological and philosophical criteria, issues and methods are inseparably intertwined in them. The majority of the authors were protestant theologians who had a solid knowledge of philosophy. The literary branch of this reception can provide interesting results, as it is a barely researched area even though many 20th century works show the indirect effects of Kierkegaard².

Kierkegaard's German reception was helpful in answering many of the theoretical problems of Kierkegaard's Hungarian reception. The German reception, being the earliest after the Danish, acted as a primary transmitting medium towards other European schools of philosophy. Most readers of Kierkegaard in the era accessed the unique world of his works in German instead of Danish. Furthermore, the significant amount of secondary literature available on the topic was also produced in German³. It should not be neglected either that this philosophical tradition served as one of the main sources for Kierkegaard's ideas. His works are very much related to the works of German idealist philosophers, especially Schelling and Hegel. The majority of the Hungarian interpreters of the 1930's grew into this tradition because this was what they familiarized themselves with at school, therefore they were committed towards idealism even if they often voiced criticism.

I attempt to provide a classification of recipients, which would help mapping their ideological relationships. We should be aware that most authors can fit into more than one group. The group of *protestant theologians* is the most straight-

¹ A typical result of this revival is the following publication of conference proceedings: NAGY 1994.

² Among others Kálmán Mikszáth, Endre Ady, Mihály Babits; Dezső Kosztolányi and Attila József, János Pilinszky, Béla Hamvas, Miklós Mészöly and György Konrád showing the effects of early existentialism.

³ The Appendix of my dissertation contains the list of primary and secondary literature used by the authors of the 1930's which clearly supports this.

forward one: László Ravasz, Sándor Tavaszy, Béla Vasady, László Széles, Lajos Zsigmond Szeberényi and Sándor Koncz belong here⁴. Their works, which border on philosophical and theological reception, are characterized by the use of the tools of philosophy and the goals of theology. Their works generally aim at “Christianizing” the Danish philosopher and emphasizing the “edifying” part of his oeuvre.

The other large group is that of the “*Kierkegaard-biographers*”⁵: Béla Brandenstein, Sándor Tavaszy, László Széles, Lajos Zsigmond Szeberényi, Sándor Koncz and György Lukács. In their case biographical aspects are foregrounded during interpretation.

Two authors with their brief writings, Olivér Brachfeld and László Noszlopi can be classified as *psychologists*, who tried to show the complex system of relations between modern psychology and the Danish philosopher.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that Béla Hamvas and György Lukács form a group on their own because they cannot be classified elsewhere, due to the fact that the former was an intellectual outsider of his own era, while the latter was a conformist. However, it is interesting that many common features can be discovered in their relation to Kierkegaard.

For the German Kierkegaard-reception, I relied on Schulz’s categories (SCHULZ 2009: 308–309), and here I would like to emphasize those two into which most of the analyzed works can be sorted: we can talk about *productive reception* in cases where Kierkegaard plays a central role in the author’s work but it is observable only in certain parts or chapters. The other fairly typical type is *receptive production* in which case the author devotes the entire work – paper, treatise, essay or even entire book – to Kierkegaard. I decided to add a seventh category to Schulz’s six groups, which was “Hungarianization” because the earliest translations of the examined era have to be considered parts of the effective history.

The significance of György Lukács (1885–1971) cannot be stressed enough. On the one hand, he produced the first piece of the Hungarian reception, an essay from 1910, in which the then 25-year-old young man’s attention was drawn to the Danish philosopher’s problem of love-breakup-creation. On the other hand, the Danish philosopher’s influence was still vividly present in Lukács’s philosophy decades after he wrote, and later disowned, his essay on Kierkeg-

⁴ Many of them knew each other well; many figures of the Hungarian reception of Kierkegaard can be found among the members of a single intellectual workshop, the Soli Deo Gloria Reformed Student Movement: László Ravasz, Sándor Koncz, László Széles and Béla Vasady.

⁵ The term was introduced by Béla Vasady (VASADY 1931: 19).

aard, and it was still observable in the 1930's and 1940's, as others have also pointed out (NAGY 2011, GYENGE 2005). Lukács's interpretation carries a number of characteristic features, which brings about its uniqueness and which also crop up the reception of the 1930's even though there is no explicit trace that those authors were familiar with Lukács's essay⁶.

For instance, Lukács was able to recognize some important aspects of the study of Kierkegaard's states. Though he was blind to the problem of desperation-anxiety-jump he could very well see the compulsion of choice, perhaps owing to his own experiences. He recognized the core similarities of the aesthetic and religious state, because in both cases we arrive outside of ethics, and pure subjectivity becomes determining.

Lukács was known to be distant and even hostile towards religion; nevertheless, he acknowledged certain practical results of Kierkegaard's faith. By Kierkegaard's approach, he could realize how the individual can be alienated because of incommunicability and inexpressibility. However, Lukács's big mistake was that he considered the Danish philosopher's criticism of religion to be merely "religious atheism".

Lukács's perhaps most consequential error was that he did not recognize the effects of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and the inherent interpretational potential. He treated the entire oeuvre as a single body of texts, therefore he could not have been aware of the fact that the personalities constructed for the pseudonyms and the complexity of diaries, notes, edifying speeches and philosophical writings could be disputable.

The perpetuation of the essayistic discourse in the Hungarian reception is primarily attributed to Lukács. Based on his collection of essays we can talk about a biographic approach, which – even today – is perhaps the most apparent, disputed and diversely interpreted feature of Kierkegaard's reception. Zoltán Gyenge pinpointed that the reason behind this phenomenon is the fact that Lukács realized that in case of the Danish philosopher, the "personal experiences are very closely intertwined with the thoughts" (GYENGE 2005: 39).

László Ravasz (1882–1975), a protestant bishop, was a significant protestant thinker of the first half of the 20th century. He studied at Kolozsvár University, where he was a student of Károly Böhm, along with Sándor Tavaszy and others. This is important for us because in 1914, almost at the same time as Lukács, he published a short paper on the Danish philosopher (RAVASZ 1914). Furthermore, he translated two of his sermons (RAVASZ 1929). With a paper published in 1930,

⁶ This complete rejection can be attributed to the fact that by the 1930s Lukács himself disowned his early works and due to his political involvement he became an "outcast" from these circles of the Hungarian intellectual life.

he undoubtedly connected to the contemporary problems of crisis. He saw the way out in the return to the original Christian faith, his final conclusion was the same as Sándor Koncz's: "The solution of crisis is redemption" (RAVASZ 1932: 246).

After the first interpretations of the 1910's, let us now examine who produced the effective history of the interwar period. The works of Sándor Tavaszy (1888–1951) provide the starting point of the big wave of reception in the 1930's and at the same time they are also significant concerning the research areas and questions of effective history. At Kolozsvár University he was a teacher of reformed theology, bishop's secretary and later professor of philosophy.

The author treated the Danish thinker explicitly in two works: *Kierkegaard személyisége és gondolkodása* [Kierkegaard's personality and thinking] published in 1930 and *A lét és valóság. Az egzisztencializmus filozófiájának alapproblémái* [Existence and reality. Basic problems of existentialist philosophy] published in 1933, but his indirect influence is also observable in other works.

He arrived at Kierkegaard through German mediation: through Spengler's idea of crisis and Barth's dialectical theology. Existentialism and Heidegger were ways in which Tavaszy continued the Danish philosopher's legacy.

Béla Vasady (1902–1992), theologian, was a professor in Pápa, Sárospatak and from 1925 onwards in Debrecen, after returning from his annual American study trip. In 1945 he emigrated to the United States where he continued his work as a teacher, his research and editorial work until his death.

His book titled *A hit misztériuma* [The mystery of faith] was created for two reasons. On the one hand, with the aim to "clarify the Christian faith" he wanted to recompense his earlier mistakes in the psychology of religion, while on the other hand he aimed to "introduce the reader to present-day theological thinking" (VASADY 1931: 4). Kierkegaard's role and the role of authors and schools continuing his legacy were quite significant in both aspects. Vasady's work can be construed as a typical attempt at Christianizing the Danish author and it also exemplifies that analyses with a well defined aim can also yield correct interpretations.

The next two authors arrived at the Danish philosopher from the area of psychology. Ferenc Olivér Brachfeld (1908–1967) studied in Budapest, and between 1925 and 1927 in Paris and in Vienna as a student of Alfred Adler. The central problem of his works is usually referred to as the "betrayal of the intellectuals". Julien Benda's 1927 work by the same title⁷ sharply criticized the 19th-20th century intellectuals who served those in power and "practicality", and no longer sought Truth and Goodness because of an idea or an ideology. Brachfeld drew inspiration to study Kierkegaard partly from the Spanish intellectual life, especially from José Ortega y Gasset who was an important representative of European existentialism, and partly from Adler's psychology.

⁷ Julien Benda: *Az írástudók árulása*. Anonymus, Budapest, 1945

László Noszlopi (1901–1990), who was the other psychologist with an education in philosophy, worked on the border of two interrelated sciences: ethics and psychology. He produced two short papers in the 30's: *Kierkegaard a változó korszellem tükrében* [Kierkegaard in the reflection of a changing zeitgeist] (1932), and *A modern társadalom embere Kierkegaard szemléletében* [The man of modern society from the approach of Kierkegaard] (1933).

In both his papers there is a definitive psychological perspective and therefore a biographical starting point. Noszlopi's statements are often rather shallow in the earlier piece, while in his second paper many important questions and problems of Kierkegaard are interpreted precisely.

László Széles (1907–1958) was a representative of protestant theologians, who, as a member of the Soli Deo Gloria Reformed Student Movement, was friends with Sándor Tavaszy and László Ravasz. It is possible that he got impulses from this intellectual workshop to write his 1933 work, *Kierkegaard gondolkozásának alapvonalai* [The basics of Kierkegaard's thinking]. Despite Széles "Christianizing" the Danish philosopher – similarly to other contemporary Christian thinkers – he nevertheless produced an authentic picture of him, concentrating on the most important works, notions and problems he was able to mediate Kierkegaard's thoughts to his readers with exceptional meticulousness. The precise description of incognito and the new notions created by Széles through the translation of Kierkegaard's works and terminology should be considered a significant achievement for the entire Hungarian reception.

Béla Brandenstein's (1901–1989) interest in Kierkegaard was rather "professional" because he was not "infected" by his style and thoughts as opposed to the majority of the Danish philosopher's interpreters. The basic stance of this author, as a systematically thinking philosopher, is the opposite of Kierkegaard's. The Danish philosopher has no decisive influence on his oeuvre, the study devoted to his should only be considered a "slip" brought about by the need to fulfill his scientific curiosity. What I consider the biggest achievement of the book is that the author has been able to provide an overview for the Hungarian readers of the most important texts of Kierkegaard, which belong to a body of work that has drawn ever greater attention in the era.

In 1937 Lajos Zsigmond Szeberényi (1890–1941) devoted an entire book to the Danish philosopher, titled *Kierkegaard élete és munkái* [Kierkegaard's life and works]. Beside this work, in 1929 he produced the translation of two short sermons⁸. Szeberényi's biggest mistake could have been that he wanted

⁸ KIERKEGAARD, Søren: *Önvizsgálat. Isten változatlansága*. Translated by Szeberényi Lajos Zsigmond. Új mandátum, [Debrecen], [1993].

to protect his church by all means, which resulted in the interpretations containing false verdicts, shifts of focus and distortions. András Nagy aptly called Szeberényi's work the "efforts of a unique whitewashing" in which the main thread of the entire analysis is the dogmatism of the Lutheran church and the sole purpose is to integrate Kierkegaard's attack on the church into this ideology (NAGY 2011: 147). Unfortunately, Szeberényi was also blind to the philosophical themes of the corpus. With his simplifications and mistakes he arrived at dilettantism.

Béla Hamvas (1897–1968) is a figure of the intellectual life of the era that is impossible to sort into any of the conventional categories. He could have been the founder of a school of thought thanks to his wide scope of interest and charismatic behavior as a thinker, yet he was excluded from the Hungarian philosophical canon where he still cannot be placed with certainty.

The Danish philosopher was present in Hamvas's thinking from the 1920s, his strongest influence was observable in the works created in the second half of the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s. Kierkegaard appears both explicitly and indirectly in many different ways and in connection with many topics in Hamvas's works: through figures (for example Karl Jaspers or Heidegger), works and intellectual traditions. His works titled *A világválság* [The world crisis] and *Szellem és egzisztencia* [Spirit and existence] provide the major pieces of reception, but the number of those novels, papers, essays or notes is far larger in which the reader can find a couple of hidden references. Primarily along the concepts of crisis, sin, religion and existence can we discern the footprints of Kierkegaard on Hamvas's works.

It should be emphasized that with his novel titled *Kierkegaard Szicíliában* [Kierkegaard in Sicily] Hamvas obviously crossed the boundary of literary reception. Although the purpose of his thought experiment devoted to the "Socrates of Copenhagen" is some kind of deep empathy rather than understanding, we can still find many layers of philosophy during the analysis of the text. The significance of Hamvas in Kierkegaard's reception is mainly that he was able to summarize the crisis literature of the end of the century, and connected it with the existentialist school, while in doing so reflecting on many Kierkegaardian problems.

Sándor Koncz (1913–1983), reformed theologian, teacher, and academician was, for many reasons, a highly significant figure of Kierkegaard's Hungarian reception of the early 20th century. The interpretational wave of the 1930s culminated in his work, titled *Kierkegaard és a világháború utáni teológia* [Kierkegaard and post-war theology] which synthesized previous achievement on an internationally measurable level. This latter aim is evidenced by the fact that at the end of the work the reader can find a German and English summary

and a nearly thirty-page-long specialized bibliography. He referenced the existing Hungarian works, often arguing with them thereby presenting his own point of view.

Sándor Koncz's book is a fitting closure of the 1930s wave of reception. Despite the fact that his aim, which he maintained throughout the work, was to assess the theological effects, the philosophical aspects are not the least bit negligible either. The most interesting parts of the book were those which contained Koncz's reflections on the problems of effective history and the Hungarian aspects of the reception.

The first point to mention in the summary of the research results is a feature that is observable in every interpreter of the era: namely, the biographical perspective and the emphasis on biographical elements in the reception. It is especially true of those authors who are categorized as *Kierkegaard-biographers* that the biography "outweighed" the analysis, and the presentation of life events became an endeavor done only for its own sake. Among the authors of longer, book-length studies Széles and Koncz tried to introduce the Danish thinker through separating life and philosophy, which is obviously an effect of identifying with the methodology found in the German literature and reflects a modern approach.

Another frequently occurring motif is the unique style which reflects the Danish philosopher's influence. Based on the essay form and the accompanying discourse, this is most strongly observable in Lukács and Hamvas. The *protestant theologians'* – from Tavaszy to Koncz – interest in the philosophy of religion and Kierkegaard's criticism of the church usually provided enough protection against any significant or long-lasting influence. In their case, mostly the description of the phenomenon can be found: sometimes they talk about the modern following of the Socratic stance, sometimes about the existentially weighed questions forcing the reader to take sides and at other times about the literary use of indirect communication. Béla Brandenstein's objective scientific approach represents the other extreme in this case, as no traces of personal affectedness can be discovered in his work.

Owing to its complexity, the Kierkegaardian incognito is difficult to examine, and it is especially problematic to pinpoint how much could the interpreters of the 1930s have seen form all this. Certain interpreters, for instance Szeberényi, only mentioned it as a peculiarity, but some others sensed its complexity and presented some of its aspects. For example, Koncz gives a description of dialoguing works and pseudonyms. Hamvas created the heroes of his novel in a very Kierkegaard-like manner, attempting to apply certain practical aspects of "masked literature". In Vasady's case with a strange interpretation twist all this boiled down to be a "Christ-like incognito".

“Stage theory” also appeared in most of the texts from the 1930s. In general, it can be said that the *protestant theologians* interpreted the states as a process of development, the ultimate goal of which is to arrive at religion. Examples of this dialectic thinking can be the works of Brachfeld, Szeberényi and Koncz, but while the first two of them described the states only in general terms, the third was able to see and describe all three “life options” in their respective depths. László Széles interpreted the Danish philosopher’s stages through the notion of “categories of existence”, with significant amounts of further thoughts. As opposed to this, many interpreters were only able to describe only one stage, which often resulted in serious mistakes and unacceptable interpretations.

The crisis-theme can be considered to be the cornerstone of the entire Hungarian reception. This provided the key to the interpretation in many authors. The definitive theoretician of the topic was obviously Béla Hamvas, who, through the compilation of a bibliography of crisis literature, defined the Danish philosopher’s role in the prediction of crisis universally apparent in the era, and at the same time based on he also developed a distinct cultural criticism.

After the First World War, the idea of crisis became a focal point in the entire European intellectual life. Hungarian intellectuals and those who were cut off from Hungary by the newly established borders felt this especially deeply due to the suffered losses. Thus the philosophy of crisis in Tavaszy’s work first became the continuation of Spengler’s cultural criticism then later minority philosophy and finally a catalyst driving him to Heidegger and existentialist philosophy.

The other defining factor for the authors responsible for creating the Hungarian effective history of the era was commenting on Kierkegaard’s criticism of the church and religion and taking a stance in the issue. This is another topic that none of them – except for Lukács – could have avoided, and its interpretation defined their entire view of Kierkegaard. In the case of the *protestant theologians* it can generally be seen that they tried to fit Kierkegaard’s works into the Christian faith, or in other words to “Christianize” him. However, huge differences are apparent among them. For instance Sándor Koncz gave a thorough and authentic picture of the Danish thinker, while the sole purpose of Szeberényi’s entire output was to twist Kierkegaard’s oeuvre into being dogmatically acceptable. The purpose of Béla Vasady’s book is to present the modern theological trends and notion of faith built on a Kierkegaardian source, using the Danish philosopher’s ideas to this end, but not being at all concerned with his critical approach towards the church. As opposed to this, Béla Brandenstein acknowledged and analyzed from several perspectives Kierkegaard’s anti-religiousness and tried to grasp it within the notion of “private Christianity”.

Among his contemporaries, Béla Hamvas succeeded in understanding Kierkegaard's criticism of religion in the most complex way. An essential element of his entire output and ideological stance was criseology, which partly relied on the Danish philosopher's ideas, in which one of the ways leading out of crisis was the restored, "preexistent Christianity". His deep understanding is also evidenced by the fact that he spoke about an "inner Christianity" the major element of which is the subjective relationship to God, which is only available to the individual and not the community.

Even at the beginning of the research the unavoidable question arose: what brought about the nearly ten year long boom of Kierkegaard's reception in Hungary in the 1930s. During this period, Kierkegaard shot to the foreground of European thinking, so the question should rather be what could have been the reasons behind the abrupt end of the reception in Hungary. Besides the obvious historical changes the individual fates of the authors were equally important, furthermore the authors could not rely on primary texts translated into Hungarian and amidst the historical turmoil they could not pass their interest onto future generations of researchers.

However, Kierkegaard's Hungarian reception did not cease entirely with the 1930s. There is evidence that during and after the Second World War a number of works about Kierkegaard were produced – for instance by György Nádor, József Szigeti or György Bartók – but these remain unexplored even today.

On the whole, I believe that the "interpretational boom" of the 1930s was a great but missed opportunity in the history of Hungarian philosophy. Despite the diverse experiments drawing on multiple sources, the reception failed to achieve significant depths. Although Hungarian thinkers, especially Sándor Koncz with whom the Hungarian effective history of the 1930s came to an end, made efforts to be open towards Kierkegaard's European reception, their endeavors were not significant enough to be recognized abroad in their time or to be recognized in Hungary until the present day.

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Kierkegaard magyar recepciója az 1930-as években

Tanulmányomban egy többéves kutatás eredményeit foglalom össze. Ennek célja az volt, hogy feltérképezzem Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) műveinek, gondolatainak hatástörténetét a XX. század első harmadának magyar szellemi életében. Már egy évtizede folynak a témával kapcsolatos vizsgálatok, néhány áttekintő munka is megjelent, azonban az 1930-as évek interpretációját középpontba állító elemzés máig nem készült. A kutatásnak eszmetörténeti vonatkozásai is voltak, hiszen a tárgyalt téma szervesen kapcsolódik a korabeli

válságfilozófiai teóriákhoz. Elsődleges törekvésem volt, hogy egy rendszerező, szövegközpontú, az alapvető eligazodást megkönnyítő mű jöjjön létre. A filológiai kapcsolatok felderítése, a lehetséges klasszifikációk és az interpretációk, értelmezések genealógiájának bizonyítása szintén a célok között szerepelt.

Kulcsszavak: Søren Kierkegaard, recepció, magyar filozófia, válság, protestáns teológia

Recepcija Kjerkegora 1930-ih godina u Mađarskoj

Studija predstavlja sažetak rezultata koji su proistekli iz jednog višegodišnjeg istraživanja autora. Cilj istraživanja je bio da se sačini mapa istorije uticaja dela i misli Sorena Kjerkegora (1813–1855) na duhovni život u Mađarskoj u prvoj trećini 20. veka. Istraživanja u vezi ove teme vrše se već desetak godina, objavljeno je i nekoliko preglednih radova, međutim do danas još nije vršena ni jedna analiza koja bi u svoj fokus postavila interpretaciju 1930-ih godina. Ovde predstavljeno istraživanje se delom odnosilo i na istoriju ideja, naime tema rada je usko povezana i sa teorijama filozofije krize iz posmatranog perioda. Prvenstvena težnja autora je bila da sačini sistematizovano delo u čijem su fokusu posmatrani tekstovi i koje može da doprinese osnovnoj orijentaciji među pojmovima. A među daljim ciljevima istraživanja mogu da se navedu i otkrivanje filoloških veza, odnosno argumentovanje mogućih klasifikacija, te genealogije postojećih interpretacija Kjerkegorovog stvaralaštva i njegovih uticaja.

Ključne reči: Soren Kjerkegor, recepcija, filozofija u Mađarskoj, kriza, protestantska teologija

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