DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE SZEKLERLAND IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY:
FRONTIER ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT AND BUSINESS MODELS IN HÁROMSZÉK

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Economic Development of the Szeklerland in the Second Half of the 19th Century:
Frontier Economic Environment and Business Models in Háromszék

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Research Goals

Despite the fact that the Szeklerland’s economic development during the bourgeois era has been processed fairly extensive, there is a considerable amount of questions regarding the depth of these researches. In recent decades a relatively large number of studies have dealt mainly with the crafts performed in the cities and with certain aspects of manufacturing that appeared around the turn of the century, within the framework of the local historiography, largely structured around local institutions. Works which examine the economic characteristics of the Szeklerland region unitarily or as an organic part of the whole Transylvania could be confirmed as significant scientific results. One must thus highlight the researches of Ákos Egyed, Judit Pál, and recently Petra Balaton, Robert Nagy and Csaba Gidó. The clarification of many detailed question in these works remains pending, as Pál Judit repeatedly draws attention to in her book focusing on the Szekler cites. At this point, we have arrived to the most sensitive issue of the Szekler economic research topics, i.e. the fact that these works rely heavily – unjustly so, in my view – on contemporary journalism, giving voice to various interest groups, the bias of which cannot be detailed here. These aspects have a common denominator, namely the economic backwardness of the Szeklerland, and because of that, in the most cases, the central government was made responsible for it. The government, which eventually applied the principle of neediness, launched targeted economic assistance for the realignment of the region.

The use of drafts from contemporary daily press and literature brochure literature both, as a starting point of the inquiry regarding the economic development is fundamentally problematic in my point of view because of the differences in the usage of the basic concepts. According to these sources, in most cases it is not economic growth or development what are presented, but the progression was sought for, demanded, or the lack of it was exposed. Contents belonging to the latter notion, that were voiced the most by the contemporary press releases are for example the following issues: the equitable distribution of public assets, replacement of the foreign capital considered to be harmful with one accumulated in local level, or eradication of the emigration. I believe that it is important to emphasize all this because the above-mentioned approach is highly subjective, focused on the central issue and ignores the evidence which positively contributed to the accumulation of capital and the changes of economic structures, no matter how modest they were. The research has been performed on three different levels – the macro level, in the context
of national economic policy, the middle level, in the context of the border region as the intersection area of the two states, and the micro-level, in the context of municipal authority – with special focus on the latter. I am trying to detect the structural changes in this latter local base from the evolution of four branches of industry. Beforehand, the premise of the interpretation is the understanding of the impact of both states’ measures in this specific geographic location and of the transformation of the legal system.

The fact that domestic industry in Hungary was fairly promoted by the state is a well-known fact in the economic history literature, beginning from the adoption of the first industry support law in 1881, in the form of tax benefits, or otherwise giving preference to public procurement. One direction of the present investigation thus seeks to reflect whether the craftsmen living in the country’s peripheries have benefited from the discounts available with the introduction of modern technologies or new industries, and if so in what form. Or was there any discount available even before the government’s targeted subsidies? Investigations focusing on Háromszék County show that there were proportionally more companies from this administrative unit that benefited from the law in question – than from the other three Szekler counties – Csík, Maros-Torda (except for the city of Marosváyárhely) and Udvarhely – and less than in the Transylvanian industrial (mainly textile) hubs. The issue of public procurement is more complex.

The management of the first industrial joint stock company in Háromszék County, the First Székely Weaving Factory, focused on receiving State orders but at the same time neglected the free market. The sudden decline of the frontier crafts, caused by the tariff war with Romania, unexpectedly ensured this company a favorable position. Due to the help of the government they gained a greater share of the procurement, which can be evaluated as a form of targeted support as well. Finally in my view the practice of public procurement does not appear to have been effective in the long run because it was not the free market activity that spurred local economic actors and as a result, they rather abandoned their free-market positions than to struggle for achieve new shares from that.

The research includes the examination of those factors that influenced in special ways the economy, leading to examples of development that were entirely different from the general national context and what representatives of traditional historiography have also handled relying on the previously discussed sources. One of these factors is of a legal nature: after the end of feudal relations in the Szeklerland, public taxation was extended to the entire population.
Previously, the majority of the inhabitants were exempted from income tax. The fiscal turnaround was mainly an increased burden on the agricultural sector, but commercialization was promoted as well, for example, as a result of taxation of the brandy distillation. For a region lacking important wineries, the brandy trade opened new opportunities for skilled craftsmen living in the increasingly difficult situation. The other features are more of a geographical nature, linked to the transformation of the functions fulfilled by the border regions. Following the procedure regarding the clarification of the border between Hungary and Romania, major forest estates had fallen outside the national territory and the legal and fiscal uncertainty prompted their owners (natural and legal persons) to long-term leases, which led to the establishment of non-resident-owned wood industry corporations.

The most famous catchphrase of the state program of economic convergence of the Széklerland was to reduce or to eliminate the so-called Székler emigration. In this case as well traditional historiography uses contemporary press and brochure-literature, invoking official statistical data too. The fundamental concern in the Székler counties was the reduction of the population, which ultimately predicted the fallback of the Hungarian ethnic element in Transylvania. The dissertation does not aim at determining the number of expatriates – following the understanding of the practical aspects of data collection at local level, needed for official statistics publication, I considered inadequate to determine the extent of emigration to Romania. It is important to determine the ratios as representatives of industry and the agricultural sector were involved in the migration process. In the case of agricultural workers the buoyancy meant that in Háromszék large estates actually included much less fertile soil than those in the Hungarian lowlands for example, thus the harvest season was shorter and this ultimately made possible an insufficient level of capital formation for households. The practice of landowners who attempted to advance the workers' hands with various loans in offseason made it impossible for the employees to effectively utilize power within the frame of state border. The airwatt exerted by the neighboring state of Romania meant that cereal monoculture latifundia generated an insatiable demand for labor. For craftsmen masters and assistants the primary internal reason for emigration was the saturation of Transylvanian cities with qualified labor force – before the tariff war with Romania. The above mentioned factor of airwatt for skilled crafts clearly represented the atrophy of rural home crafts in the Romanian principalities, because of the labor demand on the large estates (similar to the process in Hungary). Furthermore urban crafts were
underdeveloped, unable to satisfy the growing demand (due to the improvement in the overall economic situation) with their own productive forces. In these circumstances Transylvanian craftsmen were welcome. While this migration seems to have been less spectacular, after the outbreak of the tariff war major waves of Szekler craftsmen who previously only exported their products left the Szeklerland – a phenomenon that was widely known due to informations received/sent out by the chambers of industry and press reports and also led policy makers to take action.

Another important element of the issue of migration concerns the situation of young women. A well-known practice of the era was for young girls to work in major cities before marriage performing jobs like domestic servant, nurse, house maid, kitchen helper etc., in order to accumulate from their income the amount needed for the trousseau. In the new environment the control of the communities dissolved and contemporary press drew attention to the consequences, relating about moral debauchery, prostitution, etc. The authorities responded to that situation with the limitation of border crossings and the local elites also tried to keep young women in place (also) with job opportunities. After the turn of the century, in Transylvanian context, Saint George was the town with one of the highest proportions of women employed in the manufacturing industry.

The other objective of our investigation, in addition to analyzing outward migration, is to clarify the phenomenon regarding to labor shortages and the organized colonization of workers. In Háromszék County the large wood industry companies in particular required permanent workforce, which was difficult to cover from local sources. The agricultural sector exerted a strong attraction as the majority of persons employed as factory workers or wood cutters owned some farmland, where they returned periodically to cultivate, when the growing areas were in season. In order to ensure continuous operation, the managements of the wood industry companies responded quickly: they used manpower from outside the county, and inhabitants settled there by conjuncture came from the most diverse regions of the country. While the attraction range of the manufacturing sites of the county center town mainly covered the territory of Háromszék, the local workers at wood industry companies represented the exception.

The dissertation also discusses how the region in question joined the international trade of goods. Háromszék was located in the immediate vicinity of the artery of continental commerce. During the period before the construction of railways, a significant part of the population was
involved in the long-distance circulation of goods, but not primarily as traders, but as freight forwarders, in close relationship to merchant groups from the town of Brassó. The associations of cart drivers played a significant role in the economic life of Háromszék. The local railway track built in connection to the existing artery obviously greatly reduced the demand for local transporters services.

I shall also attempt to generate an overview image of the nature of illegal border traffic, though I will not try to estimate the volume of that kind of business, because of detected cases are just the obvious exception. Cart transporters were actively involved in illegal border traffic, whether consisting in the smuggling of people or goods, as the representatives of this category were gradually forced out of their original activity by the proliferation of railways. Organized people-smuggling can mainly be identified in the case of young girls traveling and passing the border. Goods smuggling had always been sporadic during the period. In general individuals were arrested for irregular imports of commodities in non-commercial quantities. In an organized manner this kind of activity occurred when factories (Brassó’s textile factories, Kézdivásárhely’s distilleries) and cattle dealers demand for raw materials were made.

As most historians who believe that the tariff war triggered the decline of Szeklerland’s handicrafts, I deemed appropriate to continue the dissertation with a chapter regarding the trade agreements, the evolution of customs and cargo traffic volumes between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Romanian Kingdom. I discuss the commercial treatises in chronological order; beginning with the one concluded in 1875 and ending with the last one, form 1909, reflecting the usual sequences of the activation of international agreements: negotiation, signature and ratification.

Methods and Sources

Due to the fact that the national boundary was in direct contact with a substantial portion of the Szeklerland, including the Háromszék, special attention should be paid to the examination of the transition from special status with which the region was endowed to integration in unitary civilian legal frameworks, in addition to particular aspects of modernization in neighboring
Romania as well. The chapter containing the overview of the historiography will therefore include separately the specific approach of the Romanian and Hungarian historians discussing the fundamental issues related to free trade and protectionism; commercial treatises and the trade in goods; Transylvania's economic interests and its relationship with the Romanian Kingdom; migration; and the economy of the Szeklerland.

The chapter part that discusses the commercial treatises between Austria-Hungary and Romania focuses mainly on the presentation of the specific interests of Hungary and Romania. The basic resources on the issue consist of relevant documents of the archival fonts of the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce (after the reorganization of the Ministry of Commerce), the Ministry of Finance and the Hungarian Council of Ministerial Protocols. During the research, from the record units in the custody of the Hungarian National Archives I have employed abstracts, calculations, internal correspondence between ministries (including the common foreign affairs) and reports about the process of negotiation concerning the treaties concluded in 1875, 1893 and 1909, and the failed one from 1886.

Regarding the Romanian interlocutors, I have processed the correspondence of the diplomatic missions and of the accredited negotiating delegation from the archival font of the international treatises in the custody of the Romanian Foreign Affairs Ministry’s Archive. The chapter part on ratifications was compiled entirely from the documents (commission reports) and journals (debates) of the Hungarian and the Romanian parliament. In order to test the evolution of the customs burden, I compared the figures registered both in commercial treatises and in the national autonomous tariffs. For Hungary I have always used the tariffs contained in the annex of the Law articles, while in the case of Romania those released in separate publications. The evolution of trade data was reconstructed each time from Hungarian official statistics.

The participation of the border region in question to international commerce is described in general lines and the main part of the data on the subject regarding the counties of Csík, Háromszék and Brassó was obtained from the archival fonts of the Hungarian ministries, but some from the sub-prefect’s joint document of Háromszék and Brassó counties, in the custody of the institutions subordinated to Romanian National Archives. Data on the phenomenon of smuggling have been derived from the descriptions and investigation files filled out by the gendarmerie or the financial guard and were archived by the superior bodies or by the local
administration apparatus. Reference data is primarily provided by the Finance Ministry official and printed publications have been used.

The description of the particularities of the passenger traffic relies on more complex resource bases. On the issue of emigration a large amounts of official correspondence were used, that resulted from the communication carried out by the sub-prefect's office with the subordinate or lower-level institutions: the top bodies of the communities, i.e. city councils, notaries and magistrate offices. In this category one could also include the various denunciations and requests written by individuals or those addressed to the sub-prefect by Romanian workers’ intermediaries, leaseholders, estate explorers or factory directors. The written sources resulted from the communication around the data collecting needed for the official emigration statistics could also be included in the above-mentioned category. After the analysis of the document ensemble the conclusion was that – at least in the case of the Háromszék County – the lot in question does not provide adequate information about the migration towards Romania. In order to estimate the extent of the migration I have created data series using the numbers of passport requests included in the sub-prefect’s reports. A rough definition of seasonality (i.e. the suction power of the agricultural sector) has been partially achieved by comparing the semi-annual and the quarterly data. One can measure more precisely the ratio between the representatives of the agricultural and of the industrial sectors by looking at the registration book of the requests for the travel documents with 15 days validity, only for a minor time frame. The practice of illegal border crossing was reconstructed on the basis of the rosters and statements compiled at the border-crossing stations and of the reports of the gendarmerie. In any case, these types of sources have been uncovered from the documents created by the sub-prefect of the Háromszék County.

The presentation of emigration concludes with a section which summarizes the opinions of the representatives of the local political power structure on this matter, expressed in various forums.

The immigration into Háromszék County was approached in terms of labor demand on the part of the larger landowners and timber companies, but official correspondence was also available in this regard. School and church registers served as a source to determinate of the origin of the immigrants, but because of the missing data I was not able to create a highly accurate picture of the phenomenon.

The last chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to “deep drillings”. Concerning the methods employed, more elements were borrowed from the toolbar of business history, though
not exclusively, and this approach is also visible in the substantial volume of quantitative data. Moreover, the author expresses the hope that the chapter appreciated by himself as the strongest point of the thesis does not represent the share of the weird business history category.

The chapter involving four case studies highlights five industrial sectors, one of which was declining (crafts) and four were growing (distilling, timber, textile and tobacco industries).

From the perspective of the use of sources the common point of the research resides in the employment of church registers, as in all cases I have tried to identify the origin of the persons in the given industrial branches as well as to determine their social and financial status of origin, from which they started their professional career. The second common point is the use of administrative correspondence on large-scale: as archival fonts of only two companies (from the ones discussed here) have been preserved, I had to reconstruct numerous moments in history on the basis of the contacts these companies had with the official bodies.

The first subsection discusses the growth of distilleries. The process of departure of craftsmen from the guild context and their orientation towards the commercial activity of distillation can be observed through documents issued by two cities, Kézdivásárhely and Sepsiszentgyörgy; in terms of the types of documents there are statements about taxable and tax-exempt individuals compiled by the finance guard and the nomenclature of industrialists edited for the commercial and industrial chambers in Brassó. The genesis and development of the alcoholic beverages market and the turning points of this process were described on the basis of the protocols created by the municipal committee’s general assembly, because it was the competence of this forum to analyze the lawfulness of the decisions taken by communalities and compossesorates regarding the lease of liquor rights. On the matter of technological turning of the distilleries the investigation was relying on those dossiers which contained the owners request for access the public benefits, addressed to the government, supplemented with the protocols filled out by the architectural office during the tests of steam machines. The detailed image of the urban conflict between the former guild craftsmen and the spirits industrialist is based on the documentation of disputes and litigations regarding the issuance of building permits. The last part of this subsection sheds light on certain aspects of the complementary activities of the distilleries, namely the cattle fattening. To gain knowledge about the participation of distillery owners in long-distance commerce was possible due to reports recorded during the veterinary inspection of the cattle that were to be transported by rail. However, in terms of geographical coverage, the
data is incomplete. From Háromszék County large cattle herds were exported through railway stations in Brassó, Barcafüldvár (Brassó County) and Ágostonfalva (Nagyküküllő County). To my regret, I have entirely failed to identify this type of documents in the Brassó and Maros County archives, probably due to the fact that it has been discarded.

In the introduction of the second subsection, that discusses the topic of woodworking companies, the main question regards the transformation of the border’s functions; a variety of sources was available, such as investigation reports about border incidents, descriptions and maps of the border. The issue of the commercial lease practice of the forests was approached from two directions. The lawfulness of the lease of community-owned forests fell under the authority of the administrative committee forestry subcommittee, thus the dossiers created by that forum prevail among the sources. In the case of individuals, forests sales or leasing were simple acts of private law and in this case the contracts certified by a notary provided useful details. The increase in size of the cutting areas of the timber industry and its directions of expansion could be approached through the reconstitution of the industrial railway tracks. The sources available on the topic were the protocols that arose from site inspections required for authorization, recorded by the architectural office.

The third subchapter focuses on seven Kézdivásárhely master craftsmen's careers when they relocated their workshops in Romania during the tariff war. Most of the sources available consist of interrogation protocols compiled by the city council as industrial authority, in every single case when an industrialist assistant returned home on his own initiative, intended to return to work and made a statement explaining the more important moments of his absence.

The last subchapter discusses the special relationship between home crafts and the manufacturing industry. This presentation relies mostly on sources like pamphlets, memoirs and other types of texts created by journalists, sources that have provided inspiration for traditional historiography as well. In this case a strong revisionist intention can be identified.

The archival fonts of corporate bodies are used here for the first time in order to compile this case study: those created by the Royal Tobacco Factory in Sepsiszentgyörgy and the First Szekler Weaving Factory Company. They are mainly quantitative sources: production data, cost accounting of wages and workers' register etc.
Structure

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Appendix

The appendix consists of 152 charts and tables, which serve not only as illustration, but also provide clues to the interpretation of the quantitative data. It represents an indispensable means of a more accurate understanding of the edited text.

Results

The most important objective of the research was to complete the missing sections of the overall image provided by the historiography so far regarding the topic of economic development in the Szeklerland during the Dualistic Era. I must also admit that the revision of the traditional
frameworks of interpretation was among the targets. To this end, I tried to focus on the archival sources and preferably to avoid data from contemporary press and other publications from the area of pamphlet literature. Obviously the latter goal may seem strange in itself, but to support the accuracy of the decision we can use the argument that the authors of the abovementioned sources attempted to persuade their readers to accept that exclusively the presented point of view is correct. Case studies relying on locally created historical sources generate a reasonably clear image of the Háromszék's economy as a whole that is not identical with the one mediated by the aforementioned source type. Obviously, the economic backwardness of the peripheral area under discussion can be detected, but the lack of business initiatives is by no means self-evident. During the research I have succeeded to detect the genesis of branches of production that have established themselves from locally specific crisis situations: the commercial alcohol production from the practical implementation of the burden sharing; the large-scale timber industry came to life as a result of confusion in the ownership of the forests after fixing the border line between Hungary and Romania. The contemporaries of these phenomena have usually approached them from another angle, leading to fairly one-sided assessments, such as those according to which the representatives of the timber factories were corrupt, causing damage to broad masses of people. Therefore, my investigation is based on my own system of criteria, whereby it was important to get to know the business actors of old times. The special frontier economic environment was attractive for foreign entrepreneurs and in addition I evaluate as significant the presence of local forces as well.

One of the branches investigated in the case studies, craftsmanship, was in decline, such as, and here I found the most common points with the many contemporary formulated opinions. In the case of two upward industries (distilling and wood industry) buoyancy was given by the specific geographical and legal environment in no negligible measure. Among those active in these branches one can encounter both local and foreigner entrepreneurs and the transfer of professional knowledge between themselves is also clearly identifiable. The last case study opposes the bureaucratic attitude of wishing to help the economic ills of the local community and the for-profit entrepreneurship mode. Representatives of the former group were made known widely through the correctness of the direction of their activities, which ingrained strongly in the common knowledge of posterity, mediated by historiography. My aim was to review all of this and the result makes clear that the business activities of the local power structure actors, who
were not personally motivated to making a profit, were doomed to fail and they kept afloat by administrative means unviable showcase companies. However, some questions still remain open. For instance, if the fact that the outstanding tax burden (spirits production-related) in Háromszék County had any role in the state treasury decision to establish a tobacco factory located in Sepsiszentgyörgy.

The present research also marks new achievements on the issue of employment. Beyond bringing to light some elements regarding the mechanisms of emigration, I was also able to identify the allurement of the newly established manufacturing industry. The labor catchment area of the timber companies, established in the mountainous region, in the immediate neighborhood of the national border, was not primarily the Szeklerland, but the much more distant regions (the upper counties, Croatia, and the Austrian territories). The two manufacturing facilities in Sepsiszentgyörgy mainly attracted the county’s female labor force, so the role that was originally expected from these production units were undoubtedly accomplished. At this point, I probably do not exaggerate drawing a parallel between the 1880s gendarmerie records and the workers’ recruitment journal of the tobacco factory. Both source types registered groups with a similar composition, namely young girls of the same age from a particular settlement. In the first case they occur who attempt to cross the green border have failed, in latter case those who intended to work in factory.

A significant part of the employed sources includes document types that were not utilized until now in the history of science, therefore often I failed to find an analogy for comparison. Ultimately, this has provided me with the opportunity of developing a particular methodology in some specific cases.

I have also investigated phenomena that do not stimulate the attention of economic history-writing, when in fact they played quite an obvious role in influencing the economy. My research in this part highly relies on locally generated sources, because of requirement of profound investigations. Sometimes I consider that too much focus was placed on highlighting local characteristics. Because of the novelty of the research method I retain some uncertainty as to whether my results could be generalized to the whole Szekler region with special status that ceased to exist at the same time.

One can perform a reassuring comparison of my results with works regarding more general aspects of economic life of Hungary during the Dualist Era. As a result, I have had to
obtain a clearer image about the state of the region whose legal status already was integrated in the national system, but the historical traditions and geographical position of which shows special features. I hope one can acknowledge the results of the present work as something unusual.