

## **The Bohemian Reformation and the Hungarian Kingdom in the 15th century**

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Dear Ladies and Gentleman,

The title of my presentation is: The influence of the Hussites on the Hungarian Kingdom in the first half of the fifteenth century

My lecture today is to pay tribute to the benefits of the pre-Reformation trend that is Hussitism which had a rich history in historical Hungary. The Czech initiated Reformation long preceded that of Luther, therefore, it opened a door for European religious, cultural and social development. What is less known is that the Reformation started in the Holy Roman Empire. We Hungarians were quick to follow the Reformation and enjoy its benefits which unfolded through the vernacular use of the Bible and education in one's own mother language, plus a more democratic governance of the church. We are proud of the first Hungarian Reformed translation of the Bible produced by Gáspár Károli in 1590. This has contributed to the survival of the Hungarian language and culture. However, it is less known for many Western Europeans, even for Central Europeans such as Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks and Poles, that our Czech brothers paved the way. They prepared the ground for the Gospel when, in the southern part of historic Hungary, in Vajdaság which is now called Vojvodina in Serbia, a rich Hungarian history saw its inception which resulted in the first Hungarian pre-Reformation translation of the Bible as early as the early 1400s. Therefore, the first Hungarian language translations of the Bible goes back more than 150 years before the one which was produced by Gáspár Károli. We owe this remarkable achievement to the Hussite involvement in Hungarian history and are proud to be part of the same pre-Reformation family, although the Hussite church did not survive in Hungary.

Historic Hungary was located on the border of Western Latin Christendom. To the south and east Orthodoxy constitutes the majority of Christians. However, the history of Hungary has been shaped by several languages and ethnic groups, and it was marked by the presence of several Christian denominations. Apart from the military

campaigns led against the Ottoman Turks, King Sigismund also marched his army against the Hussites during the first half of the fifteenth century. One may wish to talk about the kind of warfare of the Hussites that had a great impact on the development of Hungarian warfare. Similarly, it would be interesting to analyse the impact of Hussitism on the Peasants' Revolt of 1437 in Transylvania, but it does not fall within the scope of my lecture.

The teachings of the Hussites were preached by Jerome of Prague in the Hungarian capital Buda already in 1410. He was soon imprisoned and could finally leave the country after completing two weeks of his sentence. However, the teachings of Hussitism became very popular in Hungary. Many students from Hungary studied at the university in Prague and a considerable number of them were influenced by the thoughts of Jan Hus. During the 1420s the Hussites rapidly gained space in some regions of Hungary but, interestingly enough, not in the north-western areas which had direct contact with the Czech Kingdom where the Hussite military intrusions had become common since 1428. This explains the reason why the northern counties of the Hungarian Kingdom were not really sympathetic to Hussite doctrines.

The Hungarian Hussite movement sprang off from a town located on the bank of the Danube in southern Hungary named Kamanc which is situated in Vajdaság. The citizens of this little Hungarian town paid for the education of a talented young man, named Balázs, who was swayed by the doctrines of the Hussites. Upon his return to Kamanc he began to preach the truth that he understood from the Bible. Nonetheless, he was not alone with this initiative since two other students, – who studied in Prague and were ordained as priests, the young Bálint and Tamás, – also started to preach the Gospel in Kamanc. First the town, and shortly afterwards, its neighbourhood took sides with the Hussite movement and the southern part of Hungary swiftly saw the spread of the Gospel. In a relatively short space of time, by the mid 1430s, the followers of Hussitism increased to around twenty thousand. The Roman Catholic clerics were unable to prevent the spread of this new movement. King Sigismund appointed an Inquisitor, named Jacob of Marchia, to Hungary with the support of the Synod of Basel in 1436. He had already been commissioned to do a similar job with the heretics of Italy in 1426 and was entrusted to reconvert the Hussites in the Holy Roman Empire and Poland too. The Roman Catholic high clerics from the eastern and southern church dioceses of Hungary, which accounted for almost half of the Kingdom, invited him to suppress the very popular Hussite movement. During a turbulent 4 year campaign between 1436 and 1439 Jacob of Marchia made a report that almost twenty five

thousand Hussites were reconverted to the Roman Catholic church. Nevertheless, we must point out that such forced reconversions did not really show the actual results. This can easily be discerned by the fact that when, after a two year break, he returned to the southern part of the Hungarian Kingdom called Szerémség, which was one of the strongholds of the Hussites, most of the re-baptised Catholics joined the teachings of the new movement. Jacob of Marchia was extremely nervous about the situation in Kamanc, because, not only did the re-baptized Catholics return to Hussite teachings but many others also joined them. An Inquisitional Law Court was established in Kamanc in order to threaten the Hussite believers which led to a revolt. Because of the fear of revenge from the Catholics, a significant number of the inhabitants of the town escaped via the Danube overnight to the neighbouring Romanian Principality named Wallachia. Then they journeyed a bit further to Moldavia which became the central place for Hussite refugees. Here the ruler, the Voivode [Alexandru I the Good](#), gave them protection and was not willing to hand them over to the Hungarian king.

To read the Scriptures in the vernacular languages became an important element in many renewal movements within Roman Catholicism. Such was the case with the Hussites too. It was because of them, that the Hungarian Hussites escaping to Moldavia translated the first known Hungarian translation of the Bible, which is called the Hussite Bible. The most obvious record of its existence could be gathered from the chronicle of the abbot of the observant trend of the Franciscans, named Balázs Szalkai. He was well informed since he was to give support to Jacob of Marchia. In his chronicle about the persecutions in 1439 we find the next entry: “at that time Tamás and Bálint, together with some other fanatics and women, decided to escape during the night and travelled to Moldavia where the two priests spread the aforementioned heresy further, and the writings of both testaments were translated into Hungarian”. This translation was not prepared from the original languages of the Bible, that is Hebrew and Greek, but from the Latin Vulgata and was completed by 1439. However, we do not possess a full translation of the Hungarian Hussite Bible but three partial translations survived from the middle of 15th century. The Codex of Munich preserved the New Testament part of that Bible, while the Codex of Vienne preserved some of the books from the Old Testament. Finally the Codex Apor saved the translation of the Psalms.

The Hussite impact calls for attention while studying this translation of the Bible. It will be noticed that there is a so-called ‘side symbol’, an orthographic system which was developed by Jan Hus for the sounds and letters to describe the Czech words that

could not be found in the Latin alphabet. This technique was acquired by students at the university of Prague. In this system every single sound/letter had its own symbol.

A scholar, Flóris Szabó, questioned the originality of this orthographic system. He argued that this phenomenon was typical of the Franciscan codex at a later period because, in his opinion, some thought that this linguistic innovation was more Franciscan than Hussite. Kálmán Tímár expressed another view and maintained that this kind of spelling system was similar to the writing techniques of the Premontrean order. Nonetheless, one may opt for either the first or the second theory, or just think that the translation technique was genuine to the Hussites. What can surely be stated is the significance of the translation of the Bible into a vernacular language, this is not in dispute.

### Conclusion

We have seen that the Hussite Bible preceeded the translation of Gáspár Károli by one and a half centuries. It is an undeniable fact that the pre-Reformation person Jan Hus was one of the first theologians to underline certain biblical views and he was a pioneer to have the Bible translated into national languages.