

# Transylvanian Architects

## Creators of Heritage

---

MARA POPESCU

**T**HE SZEKLER National Museum (in Hungarian, A Székely Nemzeti Múzeum) is one of the oldest and most beautiful museums in Romania. It originally opened in 1875 in the town of Imecsfalva (Imeni), in what is now Covasna County. The museum's cultural significance was such that by 1876 it had already attracted the attention of professionals on the international museum circuit. It was given its current name in 1877, and by 1879 the museum's growing historical and cultural importance necessitated a move to a more representative location, namely the city of Sepsiszentgyörgy (in Romanian Sfântu Gheorghe; in German Sankt Georg).

Lacking a dedicated space in Sepsiszentgyörgy, the museum was initially housed at Székely Mikó High School on the ground floor of the Béli House. However, when the school expanded into a new building in 1892, the Béli House was demolished and the museum's collections were piled up into two small rooms. This situation not only affected the display of these collections, but also jeopardized their preservation. The urgent need to house the museum in an appropriate space became clear, and in 1890 a fundraising campaign was launched to pay for the design and construction of a new edifice. The museum's main buildings were erected on Alsósétátér Street (known today as Kós Károly Street), on land that had once been part of the village of Sepsiszermerja, which had been incorporated into Sepsiszentgyörgy in 1880.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps less familiar are the details of the process by which the museum was designed. Before the architect Károly Kós finalized the project, the authorities contacted several other professionals who were well known at the time. The original plans, for a location next to the Arcade House across from Székely Mikó High School, were drawn in 1895 by the architect József Huszka. The project was then evaluated by a committee including the celebrated architect Ödön Lechner, which insisted on certain modifications that Huszka would implement in 1898. The site originally chosen for the museum also proved unsuitable, and thus in 1903, the committee purchased a piece of land at the museum's current location on Alsósétátér (Kós Károly) Street and started looking for a new architect. In the hope of coming up with an appropriate design for this space, the

I wish to thank Mr. HUNOR BOÉR of the Szekler National Museum and Mrs. MAGDOLNA CSEGEDI of the Balassi Cultural Institute in Bucharest for their willingness to provide me with documents and translations related to this article.



Székely National Museum, Monument,  
10 Kós Károly St., Code: CV-II-A-13104

committee reached out to several architects: Győző Gyárfás, who had first participated in the project in 1899, joined Huszka's team in 1904; Ede Dvorák came on board in 1905, and Andor Malmos began collaborating in 1907.<sup>2</sup>

After analyzing these architects' proposals, the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education decided against Huszka's idea for a dome and rejected Dvorák's plan for a set of small towers. The Central Bureau of Museums and Libraries (in Hungarian, *Muzeumok és Könyvtárak Országos Főfelügyelősége*, or *MKOFÉ*) then requested the participation of the architect and Professor Dezső Hüttl in 1908; Hüttl very quickly drafted a preliminary proposal for the museum, a façade for the building, and a plan for its construction, which were published in the *Museums and Libraries Almanac* in 1909.<sup>3</sup> By the end of that year, Hüttl had made several sketches of the future museum, but failed to complete a final draft. The directors of the Szekler National Museum faced a crisis; on 4 December 1910, they sent an urgent request to the Central Bureau of Museums and Libraries, suggesting that if Hüttl could not complete the project immediately, Károly Kós should be offered the job. The museum's directors objected to the Baroque style Hüttl had employed and suggested that there was no (Hungarian) national style even in the capital city; perhaps a younger generation of architects might be better equipped than their elders to formulate and work in a national idiom.<sup>4</sup> Hüttl had proposed that the project proceed under the direction of his former student Kós; Hüttl had been a

member of the committee that selected Kós' Noble Castle project for a gold medal in the "tradition" category at a 1908 competition. On 16 March 1911, Count János Zichy, minister of Religious Affairs and Public Education, approved the simplest of Hüttl's preliminary drafts (the one without a tower, numbered 2235), and Kós was tasked with completing the plans for the project under the supervision of the Chief Inspectorate. The latter urged Kós to contact Hüttl and finalize the plan's details immediately. The directors of the Szekler National Museum officially confirmed this decision on 2 April 1911, and Kós would draft its final architectural plan by the end of that same month. By July of 1911, Kós had already drawn up the living quarters for the museum's curators, though he would continue to work on the details of its interior design and furnishings until 1914.<sup>5</sup>

Kós discussed his plans for the building in a 1929 almanac commemorating the museum's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, recalling that Hüttl had called him immediately and handed over his preliminary designs, noting that no matter how much he (Hüttl) would have liked to be the architect responsible for the layout of the Szekler Museum, he did not consider himself to be the most suitable candidate.<sup>6</sup> Kós continued:

*It was thus my task to build a structure that would be durable and easy to maintain from a technical standpoint, arranged according to the functional requirements of a museum, and artistically representative of the Székely nation. Moreover, it was also my intention to use, whenever possible, local construction materials and Székely labor.*

*Consequently, I set aside any historical style (understood in its strictest sense) and, taking into account everything I knew and believed to be typical of the Hungarian population of Transylvania, and particularly of the folk art and architecture of Székely Land, I adapted this characteristic style to a modern plan with its special requirements in such a way that the building would be an expression of self-evident authenticity, and yet artistically monumental, so that no Székely would be ashamed to accept it as his own.<sup>7</sup>*

As official steps had already been taken in accordance with Hüttl's plans, changing the basic concept of the museum would have entailed a significant waste of the project's resources. Because of this, with Hüttl's approval, Kós fully redesigned almost everything while maintaining the framework of Hüttl's original scheme. This required a diplomatic, trusting relationship between the inspectorate and the architects involved.<sup>8</sup>

Hüttl's visionary attitude and his choice to encourage Kós at this turning point in Hungarian architecture—a period in which the search for national models was intensifying—gave further impetus to the development of new notions of national identity. Relying directly on the structural and functional logic of a country house, Kós put particular emphasis on the rural cultural heritage of the region that hosted this project. In order to preserve and restore a significant style of historical architecture, he alluded to the cultural landscape of this region by making direct references to its characteristic historical archetypes.

In 2015, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (in Hungarian, a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, or MTA) celebrated the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dezső Hüttl's birth. One of

the outstanding personalities in the history of Hungarian architecture, he designed and erected numerous buildings throughout Hungary and was characterized in the Hungarian Parliamentary Almanac for the years 1939–1944 as follows:

*Dr. Dezső Hüttl, of the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture at József Nádor University of Technology and Economics, was born in 1870 in Felsőbánya, Szatmár County [today Baia-Sprie] . . . He graduated from József Nádor University with a degree in architecture [and] in 1906 completed a doctorate in [that same subject] in Budapest. He attracted attention with a study of Berlin . . . His favorite field of study was the Italian Renaissance. He became an associate professor at József Nádor University in 1910 and a full professor, teaching decorative architecture, in 1913. He now teaches courses on the architecture of the modern era. From 1917 to 1919, he was the dean of the Department of Engineering and Architecture, and from 1931 to 1933 he was the rector of the University . . . A member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences . . . For his achievements, [Regent Horthy] awarded him the Corvin Crown in 1930, the Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit in 1938, and the Corvin Chain in 1939. He is a member of the St. Stephen Academy, the National Scholarship Board, the Board of the Hungarian National Museum, the Committee of Copyright Experts, the Board of Directors of the National Higher-Education Council, the Budapest Public-Works Council, and the National Monuments Committee, as well as the board of directors and voting committee of the Hungarian National Association for the Applied Arts. He is a former vice president and current board member of the Hungarian Association of Engineers and Architects. He is the vice president of the Hungarian Visual Arts Association, an honorary member of the Benczur Society, an honorary member and former vice president of the Union of Hungarian Artists, and an honorary corresponding member of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He is also a Knight of the Order of Franz Joseph and the recipient of a Red Cross for distinguished military service, second class.<sup>9</sup>*

The construction of the Szekler National Museum began in August of 1911 and, by February of 1912, all three buildings had been erected, including their roofs. The curators' quarters were completed the summer of 1912, and by 31 December of that year the main building was essentially finished. From April to December of 1913, workers installed the library's shelving, and in 1914, they put up the front fencing and landscaped the museum's grounds.

At that point, the work ground to a halt because the project had gone over budget and the outbreak of the First World War made it impossible to find more funding. Háromszék (in Romanian, Trei Scaune), the county where Sepsiszentgyörgy was located, became a war zone, and between 28 August and 24 October 1916, the museum's curators abandoned it and left the city. On 23 March 1917, the Romanian Army repurposed the main building as a field hospital; it was converted back into a museum space only on 5 May 1920.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of 1913, the Inspectorate of the Hungarian Monarchy suggested that an expert be sent to the site to ensure that the building complied with its standards for museums. As a sign of the authorities' trust in Dr. Hüttl's professional judgment, they appointed him to conduct this inspection, and he returned with a laudatory evaluation:

*The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, in its letter of 4 November 1913 (no. 16651), announced to the Inspectorate of the Hungarian Monarchy that it had approved the budget for the building of the Szekler National Museum in Sepsiszentgyörgy, but requested that the Inspectorate send an expert to the site to perform an analysis of the building and gauge its suitability as a museum.*

*In accordance with this request, I traveled to Sepsiszentgyörgy on 8 December 1913, and evaluated the building; I now have the honor of presenting to you my report.*

*The museum was built by the architect Károly Kós, who took elements of Transylvanian architecture and stylized them, distinctively and simply, producing architectonic effects by means of pleasant and interesting combinations of various construction materials. The basic plan of the building creates intense patterns of shadows on its surfaces and walls, and its colored wooden sills, red-tile roof, white walls, and naturally-colored wooden features give this picturesque group of buildings a pleasant harmony. The simplified layout of these elements also reduces the maintenance costs of these buildings.*

*Inside these structures, the effect created by this simplicity and by the partitioning of these spaces is one of liveliness.*

*Somewhat unsatisfactory is the size of the three narrow, short openings in the main hall towards the staircase. This issue cannot be corrected now. The wall that forms the balustrade up the stairs is also very low. If I remember correctly, the original plans called for a forged-iron railing which has yet to be put in place. Because the current height of this balustrade could be dangerous if [the stairs were to become crowded], I recommend that this railing be installed as quickly as possible.*

*The visual effect of the interior spaces will be improved significantly upon the implementation of polychrome decoration, which was a condition of the planning of certain rooms, but which, due to a lack of funds, has yet to be realized. It would be advisable to start by installing the large piece of stained glass above the staircase, because the bright light through the provisional clear glass, together with the white walls, is unpleasant and distracting to the eye.*

*The size of the rooms, their partitioning, and the connections between them have been executed as planned and are impeccable. A visitor might eventually take note of the large number of tiled stoves; this is, however, acceptable given that the building has no central heating, only some of its rooms are heated, and the climate in the area is very cold.*

*In the galleries, there is a basic coat of paint, which, together with artful decoration and later furnishings, will create splendid spaces in which to exhibit collections.*

*In terms of its structure, I did not have the opportunity to examine the building. This was beyond the scope of my trip. I did find, however, that in the attic, the chimneys have been integrated into the wooden structure of the roof, which could be dangerous in case of fire.*

*Some of the beams have been built into the chimneys. Mr. Lajos Vájna, the head of the national construction bureau and the chief technical advisor on this project, was present at my inspection and I drew his attention to this shortcoming, thus he has taken note of my observations.*

*It is also just as dangerous that some of these chimneys are not built high enough above the roof. On the one hand, this impedes their proper functioning; on the other hand, it is dangerous for the gallery built of wood, given that a single piece of burning paper could fly out of a chimney, fall directly into the gallery, and thus endanger the entire building.*

*This shortcoming could be resolved by finishing the chimneys with caps and putting glass walls around the gallery-tower.*

*The fence around the building is not yet complete. In the workshop, I saw Szekler gates which will soon be set up and which will frame the façade in an interesting manner.*

*All the work looks very picturesque. It has a pleasant effect; it is a work of art which will achieve its aims, though in order to fulfill its ultimate purpose, more funds will be needed for the completion of its interior decorations, which [could help it] become one of the most interesting of our museums in the provinces.*

*Budapest, 14 January 1914.*

*signed Dr. Dezső Hüttl, national inspector<sup>11</sup>*

As the first part of his report makes clear, Hüttl appreciated the originality of the museum's architecture; he was also one of the first to note the main features of a new national trend: construction using local building materials from the Szekler region and employing local Szekler craftsmen.

This construction was carried out under the direction of local entrepreneurs like István Molnár and Mihály Szabó (master builders), András Deák (ironware merchant) and István Jakócs (master locksmith). The museum's foundations and pedestals were cut from Örkő sandstone (in Romanian, *piatra de veghe*), typical of the area around Sepsiszentgyörgy; the remaining masonry featured bricks from the nearby commune of Prázsmár (Tartlau, now Prejmer); the carpenters worked with wood from the surrounding forests, and the roof was assembled from tiles manufactured in the neighboring village of Sepsibodok (Bodoc). The white marble used in the window frames and in other elements of the museum's interior design came from the Székely village of Szárhegy (Lăzarea). Only its glazed stove tiles traveled any great distance, having been brought in from a factory in Kunszentmárton, almost 600 kilometers away.<sup>12</sup>

The carefully designed interior elements—doors, door handles, banisters, and furniture—which delimited the various halls and galleries were also fashioned by local craftsmen. Other components, however, including certain fixtures and shelving, were made and delivered by companies from Budapest.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, with the elegance of their large surfaces and the coherence of their smallest details, this museum's buildings combine to form a masterpiece of harmony and a vivid representation of the history and culture of Székelyland. □

## Notes

1. H. Boér and R. Várallyay, "Muzeul Național Secuiesc, Sfântu Gheorghe," accessed 27 May 2016, <http://referinte.transindex.ro/enciclopedie/monument.php?id=260>.
2. Ibid.
3. A. Gall, *Kós Károly és Sepsiszentgyörgy* (Sepsiszentgyörgy: Székely Nemzeti Múzeum; Alapfő Kft., 2015), 27.

4. Ibid., 27.
5. H. Boér, “A Székely Nemzeti Múzeum a magyar tudomány és közművelődés történetében, 1875–2000,” Ph.D. thesis, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest, 2007, 21–73, accessed 27 May 2015, [doktori.btk.elte.hu/hist/boer/diss.pdf](http://doktori.btk.elte.hu/hist/boer/diss.pdf); id., “A Székely Nemzeti Múzeum a Béli-házban (1879–1892),” in *Emlékkönyv a Székely Mikó Kollégium alapításának 150 éves jubileumára*, edited by K. Árvay and J. Dobra (Sepsiszentgyörgy: Charta, 2009), 58–86; *Emlékkönyv a Székely Nemzeti Múzeum százhuszonöt éves jubileumára = Acta (Siculica)* (Sepsiszentgyörgy) 1 (2001), 2 (2000), 3 (2003); Kós Károly *Székely Nemzeti Múzeuma*, edited by M. Vargha (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2012); A. Gall, *Kós Károly műhelye: Tanulmány és adattár/The Workshop of Károly Kós: Essay and Archives* (Budapest: Mundus Magyar Egyetemi Kiadó, 2002), 21–79, 240–249; Boér and Várallyay.
6. Gall, *Kós Károly és Sepsiszentgyörgy*, 28.
7. K. Kós, “A Székely Nemzeti Múzeum építése,” in *Emlékkönyv a Székely Nemzeti Múzeum 50 éves jubileumára*, edited by V. Csutak (Sepsiszentgyörgy: Székely Nemzeti Múzeum, 1929), 26–29; S. Benkó, *Kós Károly életrajz* (Bucharest–Budapest: Kriterion, 1991), 5–190; Boér and Várallyay.
8. Gall, *Kós Károly és Sepsiszentgyörgy*, 28.
9. [http://www.budapest-foto.hu/Hultl Dezso epitesz eletrajza.htm](http://www.budapest-foto.hu/Hultl%20Dezso%20epitesz%20eletrajza.htm), accessed 27 May 2016.
10. V. Csutak, “Kós Károly és a Székely Nemzeti Múzeum,” *Erdélyi Helikon* (Koloszvár) 6, 10 (1933): 689–696; *Emlékkönyv a Székely Nemzeti Múzeum százhuszonöt éves jubileumára*; Kós Károly *Székely Nemzeti Múzeuma*, 11–46; Gall, *Kós Károly műhelye*, 21–79, 240–249; Boér and Várallyay.
11. <http://www.muvelodes.ro/ro/>, accessed 27 May 2016.
12. Á. Kónya, “Kós Károly épületek Sepsiszentgyörgyön,” *Aluta* (Sepsiszentgyörgy), 5 (1973): 219–236; Kós, “A Székely Nemzeti Múzeum építése”; Kós Károly *Székely Nemzeti Múzeuma*, 11–46; Boér and Várallyay.
13. Ibid.

### Abstract

#### Transylvanian Architects: Creators of Heritage

140 years after its founding, the Szekler National Museum remains one of the most beautiful museums in Romania. A number of renowned architects took part in drawing up plans for its structure, including József Huszka (1895), Győző Gyárfás (who was involved with the project as early as 1899), Ede Dvorák (1905), and Andor Malmos (1907). Before the museum’s design was finalized by the architect Károly Kós, the Central Bureau of Museums and Libraries requested the participation of the architect and university professor Dr. Dezső Hüttl in 1908.

### Keywords

The Szekler (Székely) National Museum, Dezső Hüttl, Károly Kós

