

The contribution of Jewish architects and entrepreneurs to the urban development of Salonta at the beginning of the 20th century

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IN BIHOR County, during the second half of the 19th century, there were many so-called provincial towns (market towns), which were particularly important in the local administration. Salonta was one such town, visited by emperor Franz Joseph and his wife on May 18, 1857, on their way to Oradea.¹

Salonta's history (the town was first mentioned in historical records at the beginning of the 13th century) is linked to the liberation from Ottoman domination in 1692, when general Heisler reconquered the territory and the city of Oradea.² The political and cultural domination of the Habsburg Empire determined the emergence of towns all over the settlements across the empire. Salonta had developed in the vicinity of Culişer fortress, in an agricultural lowland, displaying the characteristics of a rural settlement.

Until the shift from the German to the Hungarian administration, Salonta had been one of the six administrative units of Bihorul de Sud;³ its planimetry had been spontaneously formed to include a medieval-type network of streets and a defined downtown area, nowadays Liberty Square. This square, situated near the Oradea-Arad-Timişoara commercial route (nowadays, Republicii Street), the square included impressive structures specific to a market town, which stood out among the low-rise apartment buildings: The Slanted Tower (built in 1636 to honour the victory of the city's soldiers against the Turks),⁴ the Protestant Church built between 1750 and 1755 and the reformed school built in 1847. Salonta's administration was located in the Fógany house (situated on the current location of the city hall); next to it were the headquarters of the roman-catholic school.

The 1867 event, when the empire became a dual monarchy (the Austrian-Hungarian empire), the population increase, the cultural and religious transformations strengthened the role of smaller towns of Bihor County. The change in administrative authorities had economic and institutional consequences all over the provinces of the empire, Salonta also being influenced by the new concepts of improvement, modernisation and urbanisation.

The development of crafts and trade, the emergence of industry linked to the discoveries in science and technology in the second half of the 19th century strengthened the role of Salonta, laying the basis of a future urban centre. The population increase also played a role (10403 people in 1886), the market town now being included in the category of the large county towns. According to nationality, the distribution of the population was as follows: 9593 Hungarians, 254 Romanians, 65 Germans, 62 Slovaks, gypsies and other 429; according to religion, there were 9171 reformed protestants, 484 Catholics, 311 Orthodox, 298 Jews, 52 evangelics and 87 others.⁵

The economic, commercial and financial prosperity led to an increase in the number of craftsmen, bureaucrats and intellectuals of Salonta. Thus, in 1910, the number of inhabitants grew to 15448 people, of whom 13686 were Hungarian, 792 Jews, 424 Romanians, 24 Germans, and 62 belonged to other nationalities;⁶ this statistics shows a larger increase in the number of Jews who settled in Salonta. The main fields of activity were crafts and trade, where the Jews and the Hungarians formed the majority, then education, culture, health, agriculture and manufacturing industry, which contributed to development of Salonta as an urban centre.

A number of industrial, agricultural and financial societies and associations were established beginning with 1867; the majority of their shareholders were the Jews and Hungarians who brought their contribution to the economic development of the city. These associations were:

- the Craftsmen Union established in 1867; the Toldi Mill Joint Stock Company created in 1867; the Steam Mill built in 1882 and bought by the "Moara agricultorilor" Joint Stock Company; the „Arany János" Memorial Commission founded in 1882; the Commercial Association of Jewish Craftsmen established in 1889; the Centre for Buying and Selling Birds created in 1895; the Company for Producing and Processing Sorghum, founded in 1903; the Salonta Credit Institution created in 1905; the Tile and Roof Factory; the Civil Credit Institution set up in 1910.⁷

In addition to these diverse activities taking place in the market town, there were also many contacts facilitated by circulation, trade relations and information with the cities of Oradea, Arad and other inhabited neighbourhoods, as well

as with Central Europe. The results of these materialised in urbanistic and architectural influences on the image of Salonta on the even of the 20th century.

Thus, the first town works on roads and railroads played an important role in the 19th century, as they facilitated the circulation of goods and people. These were: the road linking Arad to Oradea (started in 1850); the paving of Republicii Street and its sidewalks (started in 1821 and finished in 1895); Gării street (in 1897) and the central square (in 1888); the Oradea-Rijeza railway was inaugurated in 1871, leading to Seghedin through Békéscsaba, Gyula and Kőtegyán.⁸

The upper social classes who had financial power – the Hungarians and the Jews – (whose increased numbers was a result their investment in the area), representatives of the collective (the municipal council) and individual beneficiaries, were the driving force behind Salonta's modernisation, following the model of neighbouring towns and the European capitals Vienna and Budapest. These accomplishments were brought about by the interests of a culturally ambitious bourgeoisie who wanted to attain social prestige and to generously support its local or imperial patrons. Alongside the municipal council, there were some Jewish entrepreneurs among the important partners, such as: the trader Roth Armin, the hotel owner Ellmann Lajos, the publishers Rozenzweig Rezső, Adler Jakab and Reich Jakab, who built impressive and emblematic buildings in Salonta.

Europe at the end of the 19th century was marked by an innovative, youthful artistic style called *Art Nouveau* that stood in contrast to the classical style of the previous era; this style was prominently visible in architecture. In central Europe, this style was called *Secession*; it arrived in Salonta after 1900 and lasted until 1920, when other artistic trends appeared in Europe.

The architects who adopted this 1900 style, who had been trained in Vienna and Budapest, were mostly Jewish (Komor Marcell, Hidi Z., Dvorak Ede); they also had projects in the neighbouring city of Oradea, working with their Hungarian colleagues (László Székely) and local craftsmen (Nagy József) to design various kinds of buildings for the wealthy families. They created an original *Art Nouveau* architecture that linked the multi-ethnic local cultural architectural shapes to Europe's common searches.

1900 architecture in the downtown area of Salonta

IF THE neighbouring cities of Oradea and Arad were undergoing a new volumetric and plastic organisation based on the views of the age that considered the “centre” as the articulation space of social life and identity, the community of Salonta also wanted to become involved in promoting architecture by calling upon the creators of the new style. The 1900 interventions highlight the sources of structural organisation based on the prominence of the centre, as well as the influence of vernacular architecture.

After the fires in the first half of the 19th century, the local authorities ruled that the new buildings had to be made of durable materials that could withstand rough weather; they also wanted to reorganise the centre of the town by building representative structures. The part of the road leading to Oradea and Arad was paved and the central park was organised (based on composition principles); between 1890 and 1891, Zsigmondi Béla⁹ drilled there the first fountain whose water temperature was +18°C.

Considering that Hungarians were the majority population group, followed by the Jews (a situation that was visible in the 1920 statistics as well),¹⁰ they were the ones who commissioned the buildings erected in the downtown area of the city.

In 1900, the downtown area was transformed by the partial replacement of the buildings erected in the previous period and the ordering of street fronts; the original features of the settlement were preserved. In the medieval central area, one could distinguish, at the beginning of the 20th century, the church spires (the Protestant Church, the Roman-Catholic Church), and the specific recognisable buildings elements (the Slanted Tower, the park with the fountain). The architectural influences were evident in the case of these new buildings, a fact explained by the desire to adhere to the new aesthetic concepts shaping the great neighbouring cities. Other influences included the formal space-style unity of the new buildings and, last but not least, the atmosphere created by the relationship between the town and its inhabitants.

All the new buildings erected on pre-existing structures did not affect the identity of the geographic location, the town’s morphology (its shape, division and street structure), as well as its historical and architectural characteristics.

The architectural programmes implemented, such as the administrative one, the public accommodation and commercial one, the housing one, were carried out taking into consideration the scale of the city; these structures were not very large, but they were proportionate, expressive, artistically refined and coherent from a stylistic and functional point of view.

The building of the City Hall (on the location of the old Fógany house no. 1) as institutional authority was completed in 1907 following the commission of its collective beneficiary, the municipal council; the building was designed by

the Salonta architect Lázsló Székely, who had won the architecture competition organised in 1905. Other buildings erected in the following years included: the Central Hotel (1910), Roth Armin's house (1910), the Hospital Clinic (1911-1914) and Arany Palace (1912),¹¹ whose beneficiaries were Jewish entrepreneurs and the „Arany János” Cultural Association. The value of the buildings in the downtown area of Salonta is increased by the presence of some decorative art works and urban furniture, such as “The Woman with a Vase”,¹² located in the central park. The shape of the Salonta central square has been preserved to this day; the square has been completed with buildings of the modern age, which give it a “La Belle Epoque” air: the 1900 style buildings (the City Hall, the Central Hotel, Roth Armin's house) reveal the two dominant tendencies in terms of shape, the geometric and the waving one.

If the building of the City Hall, together with the structures built previously, is symbolic for the entire Salonta community, buildings such as Roth Armin's house and the Central Hotel are representative for the Jewish community.

These buildings were designed by the architects of the age, who drew their inspiration from the Viennese and Budapest *Secession* movement and who addressed the needs of those who had commissioned the new buildings: the Jews and the entire Salonta community.

Armin Roth's House, built in 1910, is situated in Liberty Square no. 5, on the corner with Moldovei St. Its similarities with the Adórjan family houses from Oradea might point out to the fact that its designers were the Jewish architect Komor Marcell and the Hungarian Jakab Dezsó.¹³

The building, exhibiting the curvilinear style of *Art 1900*, is part of the programme combining commercial with housing spaces built on the ground floor with a partial superior floor. The building is impressive through its height (two floors) and mass, as well as through its corner location, the structure having curvilinear fronts on the attic level.

The relationship between form and structure is expressed by the symbiosis among the three amply carved curvilinear traves situated on the ground floor. These are smaller on the first floor and marked by mortar pilasters. The lateral volume has five traves, of which four include three-door hollow spaces, which the fifth is the hollow space by which one enters the building. The relation between the hollow and full spaces creates a serial rhythm by grouping together a wider hollow space between two more narrow ones. The entire building volumetrics, crowned with a baroque roof, reveals the importance of the taller and more impressive building corner, which points to the fact that this buildings had a different function than the commercial structure situated next to it.

The *1900 Style* applied decorations are placed in the frame of the curvilinear

attics and it is made up of symbolic vegetal pieces depicting wild flowers, leaves and stalks.¹⁴

The Central Hotel dominates the middle part of Liberty Square through its two-floor. The building's history mentions that the commissioner was the Salonta Jew Ellmann Lajos, who owned a one-floor building there used as a hotel and restaurant. It was here that many balls and artistic events took place; in 1905, the first film screening in Salonta took place in this location. During this event, they used their own electrical generation, as the city had no electricity at the time.

The owned had this building demolished in 1910, erecting the current one, designed by Nagy József, in its place; its destination remained unchanged. The new cinema, with a capacity of 500 seats, was an appendix of the hotel building. In 1913, the first International Women's Congress took place here. The room functioned as such until 1928, when its destination was changed and it became a sports hall.¹⁵

The building is a *Secession*-style geometric one with applied decorations. The façade is plain, interrupted by semicircular ground floor elements and the succession of hollow spaces on the first and second floors; only the semicircular wrought iron balcony, opening above the ground floor, stands out in the façade plane. The central trave has three windows, the middle one being more narrow; the lateral traves have on larger window each. These windows are framed either by a bow or a flat-cornered detail. The building bears the name "hotel" inscribed on the attic along the composition axis.

The decoration of the building is more simplified, reduced to geometric elements carved in mortar together with the pilasters; these emphasise the structural frame, the building being an illustration of how form takes the upper hand over decorations, which was a characteristic of the Viennese school of architecture.

These buildings situated in the downtown area, as well as many others from the periphery of Salonta, offer us, on the one hand, an image of the architectural styles of this provincial town, and on the other, the ensemble of representative buildings from the downtown area belonging to Salonta community, whose Jewish component was an important part at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Hospital Clinic, the Arany Palace, the "Arany János" high school, as well as some apartment buildings, are built in the same 1900-style. This fact shows the powerful influence of the *Art Nouveau* style used as formal inspiration for buildings that are considered today "architectural works" representative for their towns and cities.



Notes

1. Dánielisz Endre, *Monografia municipiului Salonta în date. Conologie locală, culturală și urbanistică*, Primăria Municipiului Salonta, 2003, p.16 (henceforth: *Monografia municipiului Salonta...*).
2. Idem, *Salonta în 101de imagini*, Publishing House, Editura Prolog Kiadó, Verlag, 2006, f.n.
3. *Ibidem*.
4. *Ibidem*
5. Idem, *Monografia municipiului Salonta...*, p.20.
6. Lucia Cornea, *Contribuții la o istorie a orașului Salonta în perioada Interbelică, 1919-1945*, Editura Muzeul Țării Crișurilor, Oradea, 2005, p. 25 (henceforth: Lucia Cornea, *Contribuții la o istorie...*).
7. Dánielisz Endre, *Monografia municipiului Salonta...*, pp. 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 27, 28, 31.
8. *Ibidem*, p.18.
9. *Ibidem*, p.21.
10. Lucia Cornea, *Contribuții la o istorie...*, p. 25.
11. Rodica Hârcă, *Repertoriu arhitectura l- Salonta*, în *Biharea*, 2001-2003, Muzeul Țării Crișurilor, pp. 311, 315, 316 (henceforth: Rodica Hârcă, *Repertoriu arhitectural...*).
12. *Ibidem*, p. 307.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 315
14. Marian Daniela Georgeta, *Buildings Style 1900 which Require Restoration, Roth Armin from Salonta City* (Clădiri stil 1900 ce necesită restaurare, casa Roth Armin din Salonta), in *Analele Universității din Oradea*, fascicule *Construcții și Instalații hidroedilitare*, Editura Universității din Oradea, 2010, p. 102-103.
15. Rodica Hârcă, *Repertoriu arhitectural...*, p. 314.

Abstract

The economic, industrial, social-cultural development, as well as advances in science and technology in the second half of the 19th century enhanced the role of the market town Salonta, revealing the complexities of a future urban centre. This position was strengthened by the local and Jewish entrepreneurs settled in this town. At the beginning of the 20th century, the architectural style of Secession was a reflection of the way in which the Salonta and Jewish communities commissioned representative buildings in the downtown area. The wealthy Jewish commissioners called upon a number of architects – mostly Jewish themselves – who had studied in the schools of the empire and who designed buildings in the synthesis style of Art Nouveau in the provincial town of Salonta.

Keywords

Entrepreneurs Jewish architects, urban development, Salonta, 20th century, Bihor county.

