

GHEORGHE BÂRLEA MD, PHD, PUPIL AND COLLABORATOR OF PROFESSOR BILAȘCU

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Abstract

Being the first collaborator and assistant of Professor Gheorghe Bilașcu, the founder of Cluj and National School of Dentistry, Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea kept very close to his master in developing the Dental Medicine in Cluj and in Romania, from 1908 to 1936.

From the beginning of his career, he was involved in the establishment of the new Dental Clinic in the University of Superior Dacia as well as in the compilation of the teaching curriculum at the level of the avant-garde universities at that time. He was deeply involved in the recognition of Dentistry as discipline and medical practice and in the official achievement of the law and practice of this profession in Romania. Dr. Bârlea devoted his life and work to the cultural and social life of the Romanians, his efforts contributing to the Great Union of Romania.

Passing away at an early age, Dr. Bârlea left Romanian dental profession without an important support.

Keywords: Gheorghe Bârlea, history of dentistry, dental education



Figure 1. Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea.

Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea was the first collaborator and assistant professor of Professor Gheorghe Bilașcu, founder of the Cluj and National School of Dentistry (Figure 1). He was born in Maramureș County, in 1885, in an old family of Greek-Catholic priests, his father being, at that time, a priest in Berbești. He was from the same county with Bilașcu, his master, whose roots were in Petrova, near Sighetu Marmăției.

They met in Budapest, where Gheorghe Bârlea attended the Faculty of Medicine. Gheorghe Bilașcu had graduated from the same Faculty, years before, and, he was the one who provided Bârlea with financial support over the years of study. It is a known fact that, Bilașcu supported pupils and students from the Romanian region, occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

After the primary studies in Ocna Șugatag, he attended the Gymnasium of the Piarist Order in Sighetu Marmăției, then moved to Oradea for high school studies [1,2]. Bârlea's enrolment at the Faculty of Medicine in Budapest was the result of the refusal of the Greek-Catholic Theological Seminary of Gherla to enroll him. The refusal

was due to the fact that he had a brother in the fourth year of the same seminar. Following this refusal, Bârlea was professionally oriented towards medicine, a profession that, in a way, corresponded to his humanist nature. In 1903 he enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine in Budapest.

During his studies, Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea was exposed to much more than good professional training. His capacities to embrace things were much greater, which allowed him to join the other Romanian students studying in Budapest. In the historical conditions caused by the Austro-Hungarian dualism, the necessity of the struggle for the emancipation of the Romanians through culture became imperative. It was the only form of resistance to the danger of denationalization. "Petru Maior" was one of the literary societies in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that resisted denationalization and Gheorghe Bârlea was one of the students who adopted the society goals, becoming an active member.

After graduating from the faculty, in 1908, he obtained his Doctor of Medicine degree. At that time, his compatriot, Dr. Gheorghe Bilaşcu, graduating from the same faculty and specializing in Dentistry, already had a reputation in Budapest, being known as the "King of Dentists". Taking it as a professional landmark, after graduation, Dr. Bârlea showed interest in Dentistry specialization, which was a new specialty in medicine. He became a distinguished student of the Dental Clinic near the Polyclinic led by Prof. Dr. Rothman and Dr. Bilaşcu [3]. In this elevated environment, he gained extensive specialty knowledge. During the period of specialization in Budapest, and even afterwards, he continued to work in the "Petru Maior" Society.

After finishing the specialization, he opened his own dental office in Sighetu Marmatiei, without interrupting his relationship with his master, Dr. Gheorghe Bilaşcu, in Budapest. In Sighetu Marmatiei he developed a high-quality professional activity, without abandoning his national interests. Thus, on May 29, 1912, he was in Alba Iulia, alongside Gheorghe Bilaşcu and another 5000 Romanians, protesting against the establishment of the Hungarian-Catholic Greek-Catholic Bishopry of Hajdudorog, near Satu Mare [1]. For national interests, he mobilized every time the local Romanian candidates needed support in the Hungarian Parliament. Then he went to his native Maramureş to explain his compatriots the need to support the local Romanian candidates to the Parliament and to explain them the danger of the electoral bribery, to which the Romanian peasants were exposed, being asked to vote for the Hungarian candidates.

This activity of Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea came in contradiction with the interests of the Hungarians. He, as well as his master, Dr. Bilaşcu, were included in the list of Bella Kun for the massacre of the Romanians. Evidence was given when he returned from the Galician front in 1918, when he was arrested in the Hungarian capital

and sentenced to death. He escaped through a miracle, running, walking down to Romania. After many hardships he reached the front line of the Romanian army on Tisza, where he found his salvation [4]. In the liberated Romanian territory, he used all his power to prepare the Great Union. He organized popular assemblies and formed National Romanian Committees throughout Maramures, which played a huge role in the realization of the Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia.

After the liberation of Transylvania by the Romanian army, he used his talent to organize the Dental Service in Cluj.

With the end of the war and the Peace Treaty, on the occasion of the foundation of the Romanian University of the Upper Dacia in Cluj, Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea was delegated by Prof. Bilaşcu to take over (together with Ioan Aleman, then a student) the material base of the Ambulatory belonging to the Hungarian Medical Faculty. This was a modest sanitary unit, but it was still a starting point to be developed to correspond to a university-level education [5]. The transition of this unit took place in reasonable and academic terms, on both sides, in the middle of May of 1919.

It is worth mentioning that both Dr. Bârlea and Ioan Aleman knew the Hungarian language well, including the name of the inventory objects. The handing over was made by Dr. Koloman Höncz, the head of that Ambulatory, to whom the university management had offered to continue his activity, provided he knew the Romanian language. Not knowing this language, Dr. K. Höncz gave up the didactic career, but he kept his professional one.

After taking over the Ambulatory, Dr. Bârlea, together with his master, engaged in extensive work of expansion and endowment to meet the requirements of a modern university education unit. Indeed, after only four years, it reached the level of a clinic equivalent to those of the avant-garde countries of the specialty.

Dr. Bârlea began his activity as principal lecturer, and soon he was promoted to assistant professor. The good professional training, the didactic talent and the professional skills that he had, made him very valuable to his master, Prof. Bilaşcu. With these skills, both personalities committed themselves to achieving major aspirations for Romania's specialty education and medical assistance. Among these goals were: creating dental education at university level, recognition of Dentistry as discipline and medical practice, meeting the needs of the population with trained and specialized physicians in Romania for the specialty of Dentistry, official achievement of the law and practice of Dentistry, the removal of non-professionals and intruders who were legally or illegally practicing and spoiled the specialty, causing great harm to the population's well-being. Thanks to the efforts, talent and devotion of Professor Bilaşcu and Dr. Bârlea, the whole problem-solving mechanism was put into motion. The first three objectives have entered rapidly. In a short period of time, the Dental Clinic became a true higher-education

institution, sought by both patients and students or doctors in medicine who required specialization in Dentistry.

The teaching program was compiled at the standard of schools in the avant-garde countries of the specialty: France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, England and the U.S.A., a fact that allowed the institution to be officially certified by both the University and the state forums [6,7,8]. Dr. Bârlea made sure that this program was planned and distributed to all teachers so that it could be done rigorously, in terms of both didactic and scientific activity. It is worth noting that, in this regard, both the University and the Faculty of Medicine supported the efforts of the discipline. Illuminated minds were found, such as professors Iuliu Hațieganu, Iacob Iacobovici, Iuliu Moldovan and even Emil Racoviță, who intervened with their prowess at the political decision-makers who were opposing for many reasons, more or less justified [9].

In this context, it is worth noting that the achievement of the last two objectives outlined above encountered difficulties beyond expectations. These concerns were in particular related to legislation on dental education and the organization of dental medical care for the population. The decision-making bodies represented by the Ministries of Education and Health not only did not understand the new specialties, but they were also populated with numerous corrupt individuals pursuing personal interests contrary to national interests. To overcome this resistance, in 1922, was established, first in Cluj and then extended to the national level, the Association of Doctors in Dental Medicine, which that brought together all dental specialists, even if they were few in the country, at that time. Through this association, it was possible to obtain a unity of ideas and principles for specialized health care. The President of this Association was elected Prof. Dr. Gheorghe Bilașcu, and its Secretary General, Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea from the Department and Clinic of Dentistry in Cluj.

In order to be able to work, this Association needed a press body. To this end, in 1923, the "Stomatological Journal", a bilingual magazine in Romanian and Hungarian, was set up to facilitate the communication of the members of society among themselves and with them, civil society and decision-makers at the level of the two ministries, or even at the level of the Parliament. The editorial board of this magazine also included Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea, as Secretary General. He played an important role, not only in the organization of the regular and extraordinary national congresses of specialty, Bucharest 1921, Cluj 1923, Timisoara 1924 and Iasi 1925, but also in the relation with the Ministry of Health, regarding the rehabilitation of the specialty of intruders and dilettantes, who, in co-operation with senior health officials, practiced Dentistry unprofessionally, harming the specialty and endangering the health of the population.

At the congresses of the National Associations of Dentists and other specialties held in Cernăuți in 1923,

Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea led the Dental Medicine Doctors' Delegation and had a meeting with the Minister of Health, G. G. Mărzescu, invited to the two events. On that occasion, Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea presented to the Minister, on behalf of the specialized association, the shortcomings and errors contained in the Law on the Revision of Dental Practice of 1923. A law that equaled doctors in dentistry with the other practitioners without medical education or, at most, with secondary education, many of them even without those studies [10,11].

In order to get the necessary support on this issue, Dr. Bârlea addressed the participants to the Congress of Physicians of other specialties, which, as already stated, was also held in Cernăuți, along with that of the Dentists. The result was that the Minister understood the problems, although he was not a physician, and ordered the collection of the necessary data by dentists to justify the revision of the 1923 Law. In this regard, Dr. Bârlea presented an ample Report in front of the congress participants, making a thorough history of the problem of the practice of Dentistry. This speech was intended to motivate all dental specialists in the provinces of Romania to gather the necessary data to review the above-mentioned law.

Aware of the serious problems of the dental care of the population, Professor Bilașcu and his collaborator, Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea, in their capacity as President and General Secretary of the Association, were empowered to send letters to doctors in dental medicine from all over the country, suggesting them to compose a table listing the name of the person who illegally practiced Dentistry on their own and be specified on what the basis they practiced the profession [11,12]. As a result, the Minister of Health, Mr. G.G.Mărzescu, issued the resolution on the classification of practitioners [13].

Unfortunately, the issues remained unresolved. This happened because of lack of interest, especially that of the Ministry of Health, so they continued to be topics of discussion on the agenda of the congresses that followed. Meanwhile, the President of the Association, Prof. Bilașcu and its Vice-President, Dr. D.D. Niculescu died, in 1926 and in 1928 respectively, at the age at which they were still able to perform professionally. In the position of President of the Association was elected Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea and in the position of Vice-President, Dr. Aurel Dumitraș. Both had problems to solve that seemed to be never-ending. In the next 10 years, they worked as hard as they could and did everything in order to clear all the issues that were blemishing the specialty.

Extensive work, the permanent stress and the total involvement of Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea in his specialty problems most likely contributed to his premature death, at the age of only 51, in July 1936. With him disappeared a valuable specialist and supporter of the interests of the Romanian dental guild [14].

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