

PROFESSOR GHEORGHE BILAȘCU'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENCE AND CULTURE IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

When speaking about Professor Gheorghe Bilașcu (1863-1926) and his major contribution to the establishment of Romanian medical education in Cluj, he should be considered not only in terms of scientist and creator of the Dental School, but also through his commitment to the development of science and culture in Romania. A wealthy dentist in Budapest where he graduated from the Dental School, he supported a lot of Romanian students to attend schools and universities in the Budapest, thus contributing to the development of culture in his own country. Finally, he left his private practice in the Capital of Hungary to come to Cluj to support the efforts of building the Dental School and profession in Romania.

This paper illustrates the contribution that Professor Gheorghe Bilașcu made to the development of higher education in Romania, as well as his support of the local culture.

Keywords: history of dentistry, development of dental profession, Gheorghe Bilașcu

When referring to Professor Gheorghe Bilașcu (1863-1926) (figure 1) and his major contribution to the establishment of Romanian medical education in Cluj, our judgement seems to stop at the local dimension of his medical educational personality. He should be considered not only in terms of a scientist and creator of university dental school, but also through his commitment to national ideals.

His concerns for the fate of Romanians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were already present during his university studies in Budapest. And then they grew much stronger after graduating from the Faculty of Medicine, when his material welfare and social position were strengthened, even becoming prominent. Being the most appreciated dentist in Budapest, Gheorge Bilașcu treated in his office in Budapest the Hungarian aristocracy [1]. Magnates, bankers and lawyers, the entire university elite in the metropolis, appreciated and enjoyed his specialized

services, thus sparing the costs of their travels to Vienna for those services.

Under those circumstances, from his own earnings, Gheorghe Bilașcu began supporting the education of Romanian children and youth at school or college if they proved to have qualities that deserved investing in.

As a student and even after graduation, he was active in the "Petru Maior" Student Association as a member of the Literary Committee, along with other prominent Romanians who were studying in the metropolis on the Danube [2].

Dr. Bilașcu kept in touch with members of the "Young Romania" Association in Vienna that was active during 1871 – 1919. Its objectives were resistance to the process of denationalization by keeping the Romanian language, culture growing and by creating national academic institutions where Romanians could develop science and education.

Once graduated, Dr. Gheorge Bilașcu came into a material and socially enviable position, supported both morally and materially by Romanian young scholars that

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were studying in Budapest.

In his book, “Sentimental Memories”, Professor Valeriu Bologa, underlined the wonderful character of this native from Maramureș: His kindness was tested by many unimportant guys, who were scared by the unknown in Budapest and were coming to him for support or a piece of

advice. None of them left empty handed or disappointed [3].

It was common knowledge that he received in his office not only the Hungarian aristocracy but also young Romanians, who were lacking financial support, looking for a way to survive in the Hungarian Capital under those difficult historical circumstances (figure 2).

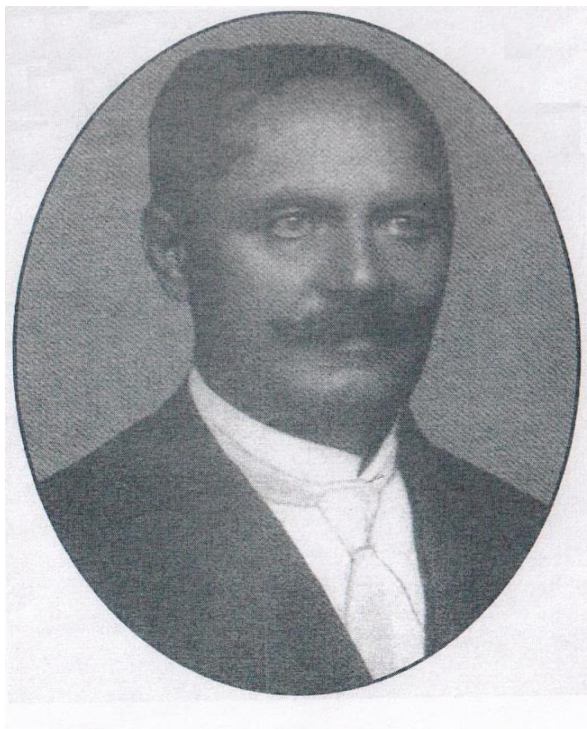


Figure 1. Prof. Dr. Gheorghe Bilascu.



Figure 2. Young people from Maramures supported by Dr. Bilașcu: Al. Bălin, V. Filipciuc, Gh. Bârlea, Al. Filipescu. In the middle, with a book in his hand, Dr. Gheorghe Bilașcu. To his left, standing, Dr. Gheorghe Bârlea [1].

His generosity was beneficial not only for the Romanians of limited material means studying in Budapest, but also for the people from his beloved Maramureș. He was concerned about schooling in his native village Petrova, for which he brought in a teacher of Tarna Mare (Oaș). With the same purpose, he gave the school plots of land so that the students could experiment scientific farm work [1].

In order to defend those close to him, in 1906 he became a candidate in the Hungarian Parliament for the constituency Vișeu.

When Dr. Bilașcu was enjoying his professional success in Budapest, the premises for the First World War became apparent. In those respective historical circumstances, Dr. Gheorghe Bilașcu was to be called to the battle front, from where he was not sure he would return. Taking into account such a risk, he made his will, that once again stands proof of his wonderful character, the nobility of his soul and commitment to national ideals, desire and confidence in the resurrection of the Romanian people.

He noted in his will: "I leave all my fortune to the authorities of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș from Blaj County, in order to support the establishment of a Confessional School in Romanian. The School is to be established in Petrova, my native birth place. I would also provide for the young people, lacking financial means, to pursue any kind of career. The first and foremost to benefit from this allowance are the young peasants because they are the healthy part of the society from which will spring the greatness and the power of the Romanian people. The first condition in order to benefit from my allowance is to be a young Romanian of good behavior, showing all the early signs of potential, good natured, because what we are lacking are real men with strong character and a noble heart." [4].

In its time, the document was not agreed by the narrow sighted relatives wishing to grab a part of his fortune, therefore a lot of heated debates followed. Dr. Bilașcu resisted those narrow sighted views and opposed the adversaries interested only in their wealth. Anyway, he was expecting that response from his entourage.

The most undeniable proof of his attachment to the national ideals is that Professor Gheorghe Bilașcu gave up all the rare privileges he acquired in Budapest due to his professional abilities. He gave all those up in order to return to Cluj, to establish the Superior Dental teaching education, leaving all the Budapest aristocracy appalled. Nobody expected that to happen and rightly so, because few are those who choose hard work over comfort and privileges that he enjoyed in Budapest. He made that unusual choice joining great personalities, all in the name of national ideas. Of getting freedom by science and culture. According to him "those qualities were much needed by the Romanian people". Through education and culture, they were fulfilling the expectations of his countrymen who wished for centuries to surface above the historical vicissitudes. That was something forbidden to the Romanians living in the

occupied territories.

Before considering the establishment of a medical education, he thought much further, to the health of the population that was going to solve this problem through education and health knowledge. It is worth mentioning that at that time Romania had only 6 dentists, who were educated abroad [5]. The so-called dental treatments were performed by unprofessional individuals like artisans, waiters, farriers, war charlatans, who were heading from all directions toward Romania, and especially in Russian territories through Basarabia [6].

This arrival of unwanted so called professionals was observed especially in the southern part of the country and in Moldova, so Dr. Bilașcu, in his capacity of Chairman of the Dentists Association, tried very hard to support the endeavor of Dr. D. D. Niculescu and others, to establish dental medical schools within the medical universities not only in Cluj but also in Bucharest and Iași.

This objective was on the agenda of the IVth Congress organized by the Dentists Association that took place in Iași, 5- 6 July 1925. They all agreed on that occasion that "the education will be organized following the model of dental education in Cluj" [7].

The ideal pursued by Professor Bilașcu was received with enthusiasm in the Romanian Senate but it was blocked by Minister Negulescu, although the budget for this purpose, says Professor Bilașcu, "was assured by Mr Titulescu, a man with a modern conception" [8].

Besides the idea and efforts to give the country specialists dentists absent to date, Professor Bilașcu engaged in a constant and especially difficult struggle to keep out the intruders and unprofessional and charlatans who had no regard for other than their own welfare with no concern for the health of the population. For this reason it was necessary to gather around the idea supporters of the national interest, sanitary specialists or people in the state administration with open minds and motivated by good intentions. Unfortunately, they were few and, from this point of view, they have faced difficulties in some cases, defying not only laws but also any measure of reason. Corruption had come to be the main trait of key decision makers in the state, who counteracted the efforts of well-meaning professor Bilașcu and of the people he managed to gather around him. Corruption was installed by a willingly erroneous interpretation of Mârzescu Act of 1923 and those interested have added a disastrous "Amendment" that provided so-called "low Dentistry". This addition to the initial law, opened the gate for unprofessional and unlawful practice of dentistry.

There were moments when even the Romanian Academy admitted that Romania was under the tyranny of mediocrity [9].

Dilettantes, impostors, charlatans who were polluting the profession, had money and material means, and even more, gathered in associations to guild particular

line union, through which they exerted all kinds of pressure on officials, even the King, strictly in their interest and not for the medical advantage of the population.

During the Congresses that followed, the Association of Doctors of Dental Medicine, led by Prof. Dr. D. George D. Niculescu and Professor Bilaşcu devoted a lot of time to the subject of illicit practice of dentistry. These congresses revealed compromises, blunders and disasters of healthcare professionals that were provoked by these illegitimate doctors practicing licit or illicit dentistry. Finally, they had accumulated unequivocal evidence for the examination and they called even on Senator Prof. Emil Racoviţă from University of Cluj, the Romanian prestigious Academy member whose moral status was not challenged by anyone in Romania [6].

Following these findings, there was a revision of “amendments” of the Mârzescu Law of 1923, distorted by corrupt health authorities. Consequently, the “Săvianu Law” was elaborated in 1924, which made possible to send fraudulent business to Justice, in July 1925 [10].

In this context, the valuable professionals in the country gathered around Prof. Bilaşcu’s personality were able to start a cleanup process in an effort to reclaim their specialty. It was just the beginning of the struggles with dilettantes, crooks, charlatans and corruption in the system. The fight would continue and their exclusion was a hard task to accomplish, as it sometimes involved great effort, worthy of admiration.

In order to increase the efficiency of the battle against all these difficulties and many others besides them, it was necessary to impose a doctrine referring to the medical and not technical status of dentistry. It is surprising to see that famous doctors and surgeons, even geniuses, hardly joined the idea of integrating Dentistry in to Medicine. From this point of view, it must be recognized that they met a certain lack of support or even resistance from the medical and surgical guild, let alone the corrupt administrative institutions in this field. Only the prestige, the high performance and reputation around Professor Bilaşcu, D. D. Niculescu, Dr. C. Dimitrescu and a group of doctors managed to break the mental barrier of opponents, built of preconceptions and, of course, a narrow professional horizon.

However, there have been some medical personalities whom the Dentistry owes recognition. Among these personalities was Professor Iacob Iacobovici. He was the founder of surgical education in Transylvania and he should be listed as one of the most fervent supporters of Prof. George Bilaşcu and D. D. Niculescu. Also, Dan Teodorescu in Bucharest, was a personality who deserves wider appreciation by posterity for his views.

To keep up the idea of the medical status of dentistry, it was necessary to spread the scientific dental acquisitions not only among the population, medical students, and medical practitioners, but also among their guilds of medical dentists. Joint scientific sessions, journals or books were

the most effective ways to certify dentistry as a medical profession. In this respect, Professor Gheorghe Bilaşcu demonstrated his professional, scientific and organizational skills. We could only mention the magazines *Clujul Medical* and *Sztomatologiai Szemle* that were publishing scientific articles, getting the attention of all medical branches from all over the country. The Dentistry Review was a Romanian – Hungarian bilingual publication, edited in Cluj starting with 1923. The editor in chief was Prof. Dr. Gheorghe Bilaşcu and through his valuable contribution it was highly appreciated abroad, since its inception. Dr. Düringer Bad – Kreunznach from Germany, referent for the German Dentistry Review, requested from Prof. Bilaşcu the address of the magazine that he considered to be of great scientific value [11]. Through this magazine, specialists from all over the country had access not only to scientific articles but also to professional local or national events that were to be organized, or debates taking place in the interest of the profession.

The professional poise and his organizational talent secured Professor Bilaşcu national recognition. As a result, in 1926 the Romanian Government delegated him to represent the Romanian Medical Corps at the International Congress of Medicine in New York. Unfortunately, Dr. Bilaşcu did not cross the ocean because, on 22 July the same year, in spite of his robust nature, he passed away, and thus the activity of the national symbol of Dentistry came to an end. The famous surgeon Iacob Iacobovici expressed unforgettable thoughts on Professor Bilaşcu eulogy: “When we finally became a united nation, Professor Bilaşcu came to Cluj to be the cornerstone at the foundation of the state, creating more and more value. Professor Bilaşcu shared his knowledge and his soul. Founder of the Romanian Dentistry, Professor Bilaşcu will forever bear the merits of a path opener in his capacity of forerunner.” [12].

To conclude, nothing seems more suitable than the words of his younger colleagues: “Gheorghe Bilaşcu was the first teacher of dentistry in the Romanian Provinces. When a real compendium of medical and scientific history will be written, the chapter on “Romanian Dentistry Education” will begin with the name of Gheorghe Bilaşcu. Therefore, the one we are mourning today will find his place in the Pantheon of our great scholars, along with Cihac, Turnescu, Herăscu, but also Davilla and Babeş” [3].

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