

## *What Can Be Said: The Jenő Janovics Archive in Cluj*

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the documents kept in archive of Jenő Janovics, an artistic director in Hungary and Romania for 30 years. The rich archival materials, kept in Cluj, of this important public figure reflect the turbulent times of history of Hungarian Theater in Cluj in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The study presents a possible approach to this material, also introducing Janovics's diary's hermeneutical problems.

**Keywords:** Jenő Janovics, Hungarian Theater Cluj, diary, Hungarian theater history, Jewish

*The archive is first the law of what can be said.*  
Michel Foucault

Jenő Janovics was one of the most important directors of Hungarian and later of Romanian theater history whose oeuvre belongs to both countries. Born in 1873 in Ungvár (today Uzhgorod, Ukraine), Janovics studied theater arts in Budapest, and moved to Kolozsvár/Cluj to become a theater leader first in Hungary then in Romania. Between 1940-1944 he was persecuted as a Hungarian Jew, yet, he died as the artistic director of the Cluj theater in 1945. His was a very prolific career of a person of high moral standards who tried to be faithful to the "cause" of theater in difficult times.

Thanks to two Hungarian state funded Eötvös Postdoctoral Research Fellowships (2008 and 2011), I had the opportunity to do research and collect data from the Jenő Janovics Archive in Cluj. The results of this research

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period I already presented in various publications in different genres from scholarly papers to novels.<sup>2</sup> After the opening of this archive the most important publication from his archival material Jenő Janovics *The Hunyadi Square Theater* [A Hunyadi téri színház] in 2001 originally written in 1942, the author was unable to publish his book his Jewish origin and new perspective on the of idea of the National Theater promoted by the Hungarian state. While that research focused on the moments of trauma and transition in Janovics's career, the present paper offers a general historical, descriptive presentation of the archival materials followed by a closer look at the hermeneutical problems represented by a significant piece of archival material, the so called Janovics diary. In other words, the first part of this paper aims to offer an introduction to the archive's physical reality, while the second tackles its symbolic value.

The Jenő Janovics Archive represents a rarity in both countries. There are not many similar archives of Hungarian theater makers, and, on the other hand, no other Hungarian theater leader has such a rich archive in Romania. The archived materials came in the ownership of the Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület (Transylvanian Museum Society, from now on TMS), Cluj through Lajos Jordáky, a former dramaturge of the theater in Cluj and the author of a biography on Janovics and his wife, the actress Lili Poór<sup>3</sup>. After Lili Poór's death Jordáky bought the belongings of the couple and subsequently discovered the manuscripts, which he gave to the TMS.<sup>4</sup> The material's archival catalogue was created in 2006 by the historian Nándor Bárdi, and it is still part of the Jordáky's archival heritage.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the contents of this archive there are some further Janovics documents, e.g. letters, in different archives in Hungary,<sup>6</sup> including the National Library, the Hungarian Theater Museum and Institute, the National Film Institute and the National Archives of Hungary.

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2. Scholarly papers: Andrea Tompa, "Ami Megszakad," *Színház*, September 2013.; Andrea Tompa, "Az Üres Hely," *Korunk*, November 2021. Janovics's story made part of my novels, too (*A hóhér háza*, 2010; *Fejtől s lábtól*, 2013).

3. Lajos Jordáky, *Janovics Jenő És Poór Lili* (Bucharest: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1971).

4. I am expressing my gratitude to the historian Nándor Bárdi who provided the details.

5. See the archive here: <http://adatbank.transindex.ro/cedula.php?kod=357>

6. I am expressing my gratitude to theater historian Tamás Gajdó, researcher of the Hungarian Theater Museum and Institute, who provided details about other archival materials.

Jenő Janovics was born in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as the fifth son of a poor Jewish Hungarian family. In his childhood the family moved to Budapest, where he later studied acting at the Academy of Theater Arts. After his studies he received a contract from the National Theater in Kolozsvár/Cluj in 1896. From that time on his whole life, both his good and bad fortune were linked to this city. From 1905 he held the position of the National Theater's artistic director and remained the leader of the institution for three consecutive decades – and under different consecutive state formations.

Janovics not only had a long and rich career as a theater and film director and producer, he was also a very prolific researcher and theater historian, especially in those periods when he was not active as a director. He had completed two major books on the history of Hungarian theater in Cluj, and at least three others on the history Hungarian drama, his first book being his doctoral dissertation on the playwright Gergely Csiky.<sup>7</sup> Besides, Janovics was an important public figure, which is also reflected in this archive. During his long career Janovics could experience what it means to have a leading position as a responsible and very well-organized cultural actor, but also experienced the subaltern position<sup>8</sup>. He acted as a responsible theater leader in turbulent historical moments too: in 1919 did not leave the new country, Romania, but stayed with his company as a leader of the theater until he resigned in 1932. In 1940, when Northern Transylvania again became part of Hungary, Janovics aspired for a leading position once more; but due to his Jewish origins he got rejected. Also because of his Jewish background his achievements as a cultural leader were erased from public spaces<sup>9</sup>, including museums and articles and exhibitions on theater history. Still, Janovics became a theater leader again in 1945; moreover, he was the

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7. Janovics's published books: Jenő Janovics, *Csiky Gergely Élete És Művei* (Budapest, 1900); Jenő Janovics, *A Magyar Dráma Irányai* (Budapest: Révai, 1907); Jenő Janovics, *A Farkas-Utcai Színház* (Budapest: Singer és Wolfner, 1941); Jenő Janovics, *A Bánk Bán Nyomában* (Kolozsvár: Minerva, 1942); Jenő Janovics, *A Hunyadi Téri Színház* (Kolozsvár: Korunk Baráti Társaság, Komp-Press, 2001).

8. I use the notion of subaltern according the Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for describing a situation when somebody is becoming silenced or voiceless.

9. I studied how Janovics's 'official memory' is disappearing from public space in my research *Ami megszakad*.

first Hungarian artistic director to premier a play on the Holocaust, Ignác Weinréb's *Cowards and heroes*, opened in the Hungarian Theater in Cluj in July 1945. Thus, Jenő Janovics became a subaltern twice due to dramatic historical changes: in 1919 he found himself and his company within a dramatically changed environment in the new position of a minority theater, and in 1940 he became a persecuted Jew (although he was admitted to Christianity in 1895<sup>10</sup>). Among the archive's most interesting and rich materials are those, which concern Janovics's efforts to exempt himself from under the oppressive anti-Jewish laws; lots of petitions, appeals, applications, letters to officials can be found in that section.

The archive consists of 9 different document types: I. Personal and family documents (182 pages); II. Manuscripts (1110); III. The theater's administrative documents (1221); IV. Film direction and production related documents (426); V. About Jenő Janovics (1004); VI. Letters (192); VII. Photographs (416 pieces); VIII. Miscellaneous documents (18 pages); IX. Index of names and institutions. Altogether the archive holds 4.569 documents. The original manuscripts, the copies of manuscripts, clippings, and published articles are held in boxes. Most of the manuscripts are typewritten.

Having surveyed the archives I established that thus far their most important publication was Jenő Janovics's *The Hunyadi Square Theater* [A Hunyadi téri színház] published in 2001, a theater history book. Although it was originally written in 1942, the author was unable to publish his book partly because of his Jewish origins and partly because of certain Hungarian state-promoted new views on the role of the National Theater.<sup>11</sup> The archive holds further unpublished important documents concerning the Hungarian theater in Cluj, the situation of Janovics as a theater leader, as well as his exchanges with different institutions, ministries and authorities.

But there are also things one cannot find in this archive. As Michel Foucault, the theoretician of the archives stated: "The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events."<sup>12</sup> What can be said is there at least partly. What cannot, is

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10. According to his letter of baptism, copy issued in Budapest in 1941.

11. This context I analyzed in my paper Andrea Tompa, "Ami Megszakad," *Színház*, September 2013.

12. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129.

missing. Having this in mind in the followings I will present a few major findings and also some possible directions for future investigation. A major future task concerning this archive would be its digitalization and its opening for the larger public.

Based on this archival material Janovics was primarily a public figure. The whole archive reflects his professional activities and career, i.e. one cannot find here any personal material without relevance to his activity as a theater leader, film and theater maker, researcher. Two – very different – interpretations seem plausible for his heritage’s exclusively public and professional nature. The practical explanation would be that his relatives did not give their consent to expose their member’s personal life, feelings, troubles, relations etc., i.e. they tailored the archive to preserve the image of the “big national theater director”. The other possibility is that Janovics did not have private materials or manuscripts to be archived: that his attention and life activity was indeed exclusively focused on professional issues. In either case Foucault was right: private life cannot be expressed and archived.

Materials informing on Janovics’s political attitude and activity are also missing; they are part of what cannot be expressed. Documents referring to Janovics’s political activity and affiliation are not to be found here, although after 1918 he was a leader of the Hungarian National Committee (*Magyar Nemzeti Tanács*)<sup>13</sup>. Unlike the private documents, the documents concerning Janovics’s political activities are missing for a known reason: after 1949 the original donor of the manuscripts, Lajos Jordáky, as a member of the Social Democratic Party was persecuted and subsequently imprisoned. When Janovics’s wife died, in 1962 Jordáky was still in a delicate situation; documents of political nature might have been harmful for him, too.

There are some historical questions, which I also tried to find answers to among the archival documents, but to no avail. For instance, it remained a question whether Jenő Janovics was a freemason. Although there are at least two items – an object and a document – hinting to his involvement, it is well known that freemasonry could offer grounds for very tough accusations in the 1940ies that could easily lead to somebody’s persecution or arrest.

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13. See Péter Sas, “Janovics Jenő Feljegyzése 1919. Február 27–28-i Beidőzéséről És Kihallgatásáról,” *Lymbus, Magyarságtudományi Forrásközlemények*, 2014.

Besides, it is in the very nature of freemasonry to be secretive, too. What we know for a fact is that there were denouncing articles in the newspapers claiming that Janovics was a freemason, and that he could have had good reasons to hide his affiliation while others could have had good reasons to falsely accuse him. Tellingly, materials concerning his affiliation to freemasonry are kept in a different archive – in the National Archives of Hungary.<sup>14</sup>

There is one important document I would like to focus on. In the archive under number 81 I came across 84 pages of Janovics's diary. The typewritten manuscript was placed among the documents detailing the situation of the theater in Cluj through different decades. The "beginning" of the text, i.e., the first 6 pages do not belong to the diary, it is mistakenly put there. The text is not identified as a diary, but as a "Summary of theater conditions after 1918". The document contains reference to the destiny of Janovics's diary. The typewritten diary pages are typed probably by a professional person, with few mistakes. The author had commissioned somebody to complete it in order to present the text in a certain situation. The 84 pages cover a short period of time: the turbulent spring and summer of 1919 when Janovics was the artistic director of the Cluj Hungarian National Theater soon to become Romanian National Theater. It describes the struggle of the director and his company to keep the theater and not to hand it over to the Romanian authorities. The leader of the theater did not acknowledge the new Romanian administration, claimed the rights of the company and the director itself to the Hungarian National Theater's building and belongings. The text is obviously not a private diary, but it is meant to document a certain historical situation from the perspective of the leader of an institution.

Janovics states at the beginning of the text that he kept the diary hidden for 22 years (i.e., the period of Romanian rule from 1918 to 1940). During this time the diary was either in the attic folded among clothes or stuck between logs of firewood. As it is apparent from his opening remarks the text has two-time layers: the unfolding events of 1918-19 and the "present" of September 1940 when the Hungarian army arrived to Cluj and North Transylvania got

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14. See the study of Árpád Kupán, "Az Erdélyi Magyar Szabadvőművesség Története a Két Világháború Közötti Időktől Napjainkig," *Várad* 3, no. 2 (2004).

under Hungarian rule again. Some names are deliberately concealed in the text but Janovics indicated that the original of the diary would disclose these. This remark suggests that the copy stored in the Janovics Archive is not the original. In my understanding it was created in 1940, while the original went missing.

From a footnote the reader can learn that another copy of the diary was handed over to the University Library of Cluj, but according to the author's will it can be opened only after 25 years. However, there are no traces of the Janovics diary in the Cluj University Library, nor in Sibiu where the library was evacuated after 1940. There is no Janovics diary in the Hungarian archives either, thus we may assume that the only pages preserved are those held in the Janovics Archive. If a copy of the diary was indeed kept in the Cluj University Library, it was there probably only until 1944/45, when either Janovics himself withdrew it or the authorities took it away together with many other manuscripts.

Janovics told many times the complex story of how he resisted giving up the theater to the Romanian authorities in the spring and summer of 1919. His efforts, conflicts, diplomatic proceedings, the closing of shows, and the different forms personal and institutional persecution took can be followed in a day-by-day account in his diaries. According to his diaries a key moment of his persecution was when in order to flee the Romanian authorities Janovics took refuge in the Cluj Psychiatric Hospital, an institution lead by the legendary doctor, Károly Lechner. He was there from March 30 to May 3, 1919, when one of the most theatrical moments of the persecution occurred. When Janovics was eventually taken away by the police (later identified as the court-martial), a doctor gave him a powder, which would allegedly calm him. But this was all deception and theater: the powder made him very weak, he started strongly sweating and made the impression of a very sick man. Seeing that the police took him back to the hospital, thus he was saved.

The reason why two decades later, in 1940 Janovics recounted this story of struggle and resistance against the Romanian authorities was twofold: Janovics wanted to return to the position of the artistic director of the new Hungarian National Theater and he also wanted to prove his patriotism and readiness concerning the "Hungarian case". It is telling that he, among many other Hungarian intellectuals, was also issued a proof stating his loyalty to

the Hungarian community during the Romanian administration; this certificate issued by the Hungarian Party is preserved in the archive. Janovics did not necessarily know at this point that soon his life would be at stake as a Hungarian Jew. The certificate – together with many other documents – indeed became very needed when Janovics was trying to convince Hungarian authorities that the Anti-Jewish laws should not apply to him. After a long and futile struggle, to survive deportation, Janovics fled to Budapest – in vain.

His diary – if ever existed in a more complete format, then these 84 pages – was meant to reach the public. This diary is far from being a private one, but in accordance with the autobiographical pact (Lejeune<sup>15</sup>) it was meant to shape the image of an exclusively public figure of strength, resistance, correctness. No private persona is pictured here, no dilemmas, fears, uncertainties. At a closer look at the wording and rhetoric of the diary it becomes clear that all events were recorded quite some time after they happened; there are no traces of notes taken during the events, thus no trace of dilemmas or hopes for different outcomes. Small details, wanderings are not part of these pages; all is very straightforward. Only the situations, decisions, public relations of a public figure were deemed important enough to be recorded. The fact that the narrative unfolds around historical-political events further emphasizes the retrospective nature of the diary. Hungarians in Cluj generally perceived their situation in 1918/19 in a different way than later: in 1919 they considered the newly established Romanian administration a temporary situation. In Janovics's diary, the events of 1919 were heavily reworked (reformulated) from the perspective of later events. The language often reaches heroic heights as he details the story of a community ready for sacrifice, i.e., the way he wrote was tailored for the new Hungarian era of the 1940s.

But the new power, the Hungarian administration and cultural leadership did not need his service, his name disappeared from the history of the theater, and it was also missing from the events and exhibitions celebrating

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15. Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography, Theory and History of Literature*, v. 52 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

the 150 years of Hungarian theater in Cluj. The public space was increasingly transformed into a national space where Janovics, not being Hungarian enough, had nothing to do any more.<sup>16</sup>

If his diary ever existed as a whole it could be openly accessed only after 1990 in Romania as well as in Hungary. Till then it contained that “something”, which, as Foucault has formulated, “cannot be said”. Janovics’s resistance toward the Romanian administration was something to hide, as was his persecution as a Jew during the war. And the two communist countries made a silent pact not to touch the “minority question” especially after their deal made in 1956. However, his diary still did not surface, although it could be of a great value. And such great values are indeed threatened.

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16. This process of erasing Janovics’s memory and transforming Transylvania into a national space I have analyzed in detail in my article *Ami megszakad*.

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