

**In Memoriam Mrs. HANNA BOKOR-SZEGŐ**  
**(1925-2006)**

by Géza HERCZEGH<sup>1</sup>

An outstanding – and also in abroad well-known and recognized – Hungarian representative of the science of international law passed away. In Hungary, the history of the last decades of this discipline cannot be described without mentioning her scientific publications, her organizing and editorial activity and last but not least her tutorial life-work.

After withdrawal of the “greats”, (i.e. László Gajzágó, László Buza, Ernő Flachbarth), the first appearing member of the new and young generation was Mrs. Hanna Bokor-Szegő. In 1960 she defended her thesis on “Reservations to international treaties” (published in 1962), after which she was promoted to “candidate of jurisprudence”. She became a doctor of jurisprudence in 1973 after having defended her thesis on “The position of the United Nations in the international law-making”, which was published in 1976. To this topic – namely, the issue of relationship between international law-making and community of states – belong her writings on “The new states and international law” (1971), the “State continuity – state succession” (1984) and “Metamorphosis of the community of states and international law” (1993). Finally, I must mention her book called “Human rights in international law” (1994) written together with Viktor Mavi, and her textbook “International law” which was published in 1997. She was editor of several volumes of the *Questions of International Law*, series published by the Hungarian Branch of the *International Law Association*. For several years, Mrs. Hanna Bokor-Szegő held the position of Chair of the Hungarian Branch strengthening our relations with the organization involving most of the international lawyers of the world. She was professor of the Corvinus University and the Head of the Hungarian Centre for Human Rights from 1990. In order to encourage deeper and more extensive research related to human rights and to ensure publishing of its results, she founded the review *Acta Humana* and she was its Editor-in-chief until her death. In 1995 she was awarded with the Albert Szentgyörgyi Prize.

The extensive character of her life-work is already mirrored by these data of her life. She had always returned to certain problems till she felt that they were solved within the limits of scientific approach. On the other hand, these data demonstrate that her research activity lead her consequently to the topic of human rights which created the central subject of her late creative activity as well.

---

<sup>1</sup> Géza Herczegh is former judge of the International Court of Justice (1993-2003), member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The article was translated by Eszter Kirs, university assistant at the Department of International Law of the University of Miskolc

She was not only a researcher but also a lecturer to the core who wanted to transmit her own knowledge to the largest possible extent and to so many students as possible, who understood their doubts, their occasional objections and responded them to the best of her belief. Related to the “eternal” debate on the issue whether international law can be qualified as law, she concluded her opinion during one of her last discussions<sup>2</sup> as follows (citing her words abbreviated but consistently with the essence of her opinion):

“I divided rules of international law in two great categories. There are the ones which are born by a compromise [...] and the compromise can break down with changes of power-relations and the rules – such as the prohibition of aggression or the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs – can be weakened with these changes of power-relations [...]. Whereas, there is a great group of international rules which has total unity of interests of states behind. Thousands of these norms are enforced on a daily basis without being noticed [...]. Such rules are for instance, the Universal Postal Convention, numerous norms adopted by the WHO or the UNESCO [...]. I called these norms ‘everyday international law’.

Is ‘everyday international law’ universal or regional? There are certain rules in the field of human rights law which can definitely be categorized into this group on a regional level.” Finally, she closed the conversation with the following words: “[...] I am optimistic, so I think that ‘everyday international law’ will grow wider and wider.”

After describing her life-work with the help of a line of data (which might be incomplete in spite of my best intent), let me take some subjective notes as well. In the person of Mrs. Hanna Bokor-Szegő I lost such a colleague and good friend whom I shared the same research room within the Institute of Law and Political Sciences – we were debating with each other and laughing together –, besides, we worked together at the Department of International Relations at the University of Economics where she taught international law, and I taught history of diplomacy. Our friendship was not broken even when we were far from each other in a geographical sense. I truly respected her spiritual strength which made her able to bear all the difficulties given by her weaker and weaker health state. She tried to keep the relations with her students and to follow with attention the editing of the *Acta Humana* without any break. Because of her growing disease she could barely learn that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian revolution was made memorable by the clashing of truncheons on the streets of Budapest but it is sure that no pain or exhausting therapy could weaken her commitment to respect of human rights. I emphasize this central thought – the commitment to respect of human rights – of her extensive work and recommend to the attention of growing generation of young international lawyers.

---

<sup>2</sup> Professor emeritus Hanna Bokor-Szegő on Everyday International Law. *Miskolc Journal of International Law*, Volume 3. (2006) No. 1. pp. 56-58.