DOI: 10.55019/plr.2026.1.119-129

Pázmány Law Review
XIII. 2026. • 119–129

THE LEGAL THOUGHT OF JÁNOS ZLINSZKY

Reflections on Iul. D. 40, 4, 16 and Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6

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Abstract

This study examines János Zlinszky's legal thought through his interpretations of two Digest passages: Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6 and Iul. D. 40, 4, 16. In both cases, his interpretations led him to conclusions different from those preserved in the Digest. The analysis explores the relationship between legal entitlement and equity, the tension between intention and declaration, and the role of Roman law in legal education. Read alongside his writings on law and ethics, these interpretations suggest that his approach combined concern for the legitimate interests of others with an emphasis on precise legal formulation and responsible judgement. The study argues that Roman law served Zlinszky as a framework for developing both legal reasoning and the ethical responsibility of future lawyers.

Keywords: János Zlinszky; Roman law; legal interpretation; legal ethics; legal education

1. Introduction[1]

János Zlinszky (1928–2015) was a legal scholar whose life was marked by remarkable resilience and an unwavering dedication to academic work. Coming from a family with a strong legal tradition, he began his studies as an exceptionally talented and diligent

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1 An oral version of this paper was presented at the 78th SIHDA Conference, held in Budapest on 26–30 August 2025, in a panel devoted specifically to Roman-law scholarship in the region, with the participation of, and in close cooperation with, Polish colleagues, under the title „The Legal Thought of János Zlinszky: The Exegeses of Iul. D. 40, 4, 16 and Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6."

student, showing early academic promise. His flourishing academic path was abruptly interrupted in 1951, when, following a show trial, he was excluded from all universities and forced to work as a construction labourer. Eventually readmitted, Zlinszky obtained his law degree in 1957. He subsequently supported his family as a corporate lawyer and provincial solicitor, while continuing his scholarly work independently. His persistence eventually brought him back to academia in 1981, allowing him to fulfil, after three decades, his aspiration to teach and conduct research in Roman law. The establishment of the Faculty of Law and Political Science of Pázmány Péter Catholic University was to become one of the culminating achievements of his academic career.

Zlinszky also served as a judge of the first Hungarian Constitutional Court and played an important role as a mediator of legal culture. At the same time, he was remarkably generous in sharing his ideas and devoted particular attention to mentoring future generations of scholars.

Although I was not one of Zlinszky's direct students, I attended several of his lectures during my undergraduate studies, including lectures on the Law of the Twelve Tables, the trial of Jesus Christ, and the relationship between Christian morality and legal ethics, as well as in postgraduate education, where he spoke on Roman law in Hungary. His words also remained vividly alive in the recollections and teaching of those who had attended his Roman law seminars and lectures. It was partly through their recollections and teaching, shaped by his influence, that his approach was transmitted to subsequent generations of students. [2]

A personal recollection may serve to illustrate this dimension of Zlinszky's personality and academic outlook. In September 2013, the SIHDA conference was held in Salzburg. I was then a young doctoral candidate travelling with colleagues from our department and preparing to give a paper on the final morning of the conference. As my presentation was scheduled for Friday morning, I decided not to attend the Thursday evening programme and instead remained at the hotel to prepare and rest. That evening, while I was putting the final touches to my notes, there was a knock on the door. To my surprise, it was Professor Zlinszky. Having heard that I would not be attending the evening programme, he had come to make sure that I would not go without dinner and invited me to a small Italian restaurant nearby. His thoughtfulness helped me remain grounded and composed in the face of the nervous anticipation of the

[2] On Zlinszky's life and academic career, see, inter alia, András Koltay: In Memoriam János Zlinszky. *Pázmány Law Review* 3, (2015), 35–45. https://ojs.mtak.hu/index.php/pazmany_law_review/article/view/19537/16091; on the foundations of his legal thought and conception of values, Nadja El Beheiri: Grundlagen der Wertordnung bei János Zlinszky. *Pázmány Law Review* 6, (2018), 5–18. https://ojs.mtak.hu/index.php/pazmany_law_review/article/view/19410/15975; Nadja El Beheiri: Die Rolle der Tradition zwischen Legalität und Legitimität im ungarischen Staatsrecht: Die Anfänge des Ungarischen Verfassungsgerichts aus der Perspektive von János Zlinszky. *Pázmány Law Review* 7, (2019-2020), 5–16. https://ojs.mtak.hu/index.php/pazmany_law_review/article/view/8405/6936; and, on his approach to teaching Roman law and the formation of the next generation of scholars, János Erdődy: *Qui missilia iactant in vulgus: A nép közé történő pénzszórás a római jogban*. 11. Budapest, Pázmány Press, 2014. 7–8.

following morning. Shortly before my presentation, he introduced me to the professors attending the conference as his 'Enkelschülerin' – his academic granddaughter.

This combination of intellectual seriousness, humanity, and responsibility towards younger scholars was characteristic of Zlinszky. As the two cases examined below will suggest, this sense of responsibility towards the next generation was also an important aspect of his approach to legal education.

The immediate occasion for the present study was another SIHDA conference, held in Budapest in 2025 under the title *Centre and Periphery: The Jurists of Rome, Imperial Legislation, and Practice in the Provinces*. Its theme drew attention to the diversity and plurality of legal thought and practice within the Roman world and, in particular, to the shifting boundaries between 'exception' and 'rule'.[3] The two cases examined in this study do not concern the relationship between central Roman law and provincial legal practice. They nevertheless provide an opportunity to consider, from a different perspective, how different legal reasoners may arrive at different solutions to the same legal problem. Both cases have a solution preserved in the Digest, yet János Zlinszky, when discussing them with his students, arrived at a different conclusion.

The present study therefore examines Zlinszky's interpretation of two passages from the Digest, Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6 (33 ad ed.) and Iul. D. 40, 4, 16 (36 dig.), and asks what his divergence from the solutions preserved in these texts may reveal about his approach to legal interpretation and legal reasoning. Why did he reach a different conclusion from the Roman jurists, and can the reasons for these differences reveal broader characteristics of his legal thought?

2. Two Cases from the Digest

The two Digest passages share an important structural feature. Each concerns the interpretation of a clause contained in a legal act. Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6 concerns a contract for the sale of a house in which the seller reserved for himself either a right of habitation *(habitatio)* for life or an annual payment of ten. Iul. D. 40, 4, 16 concerns a testamentary provision relating to the manumission of a slave and a legacy of land. In the first case, the central question is whether the buyer may change the form of performance from one year to another; in the second, it is how the testamentary clause should be interpreted when the event referred to in its wording can no longer occur.

The two cases also formed part of the Roman-law material discussed with first-year students and were usually taught by Professor Zlinszky during his years of active teaching at the university. [4]

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[3] See the official Call for Papers for SIHDA 2025, *Centre and Periphery: The Jurists of Rome, Imperial Legislation, and Practice in the Provinces*. https://sihda2025.hu/#call-for-papers (Accessed on: 12 October 2026).

[4] Cf. for example, Róbert Brósz: *Római jogi gyakorlatok*. Budapest, Nemzeti tankönyvkiadó, 1999. , a widely used collection of Roman-law cases for teaching purposes, which includes both cases discussed here. See the case based on Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6 at 33. and the case based on Iul. D. 40, 4, 16 at 5.

2.1. Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6 (33 ad ed.)

Paul. D. 19, 1, 21, 6 (33 ad ed.) provides:

> *Qui domum vendebat, excepit sibi habitationem, donec viveret, aut in singulos annos decem: emptor primo anno maluit decem praestare, secundo anno habitationem praestare. Trebatius ait mutandae voluntatis potestatem eum habere singulisque annis alterutrum praestare posse et quamdiu paratus sit alterutrum praestare, petitionem non esse.*

In Watson's English translation, the passage reads as follows:

> "The seller of a house withheld for himself the right of occupancy for as long as he lived or ten per year instead. In the first year, the buyer preferred to pay the ten, in the second year, to proffer the right of occupancy. Trebatius says that he has the power to change his mind, and each year he can offer either one, so long as he was ready to offer one or the other, there are no grounds for action."[5]

The passage concerns a contract of sale (*emptio venditio*) containing a clause under which the seller reserved for himself either a lifelong right of habitation or an annual payment of ten. In the first year, the buyer chose to pay the ten; in the second, he offered habitation instead. The resulting question is whether the seller may nevertheless claim payment of the ten.

2.1.1. The Legal Qualification of the Clause

A preliminary issue concerns the legal qualification of the clause. One possibility is to regard it as establishing an alternative obligation. In such an obligation, two performances are contemplated, while performance of either releases the debtor. Unless otherwise agreed, the right of choice belongs to the debtor. On this qualification, the seller must accept the habitation offered by the buyer.[6]

Another possible qualification is *facultas alternativa*. In this case, one performance is primarily due, while another may substitute for it under the relevant conditions. Applied to the present case, the right of habitation would constitute the primary performance, while the annual payment of ten would constitute the alternative. On this

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[5] Cf. Alan Watson – Theodor Mommsen – Paul Krueger: *The Digest of Justinian I-IV.* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

[6] See inter alia Ulrike Babusiaux – Christian Baldus – Wolfgang Ernst – Franz-Stefan Meissel – Johannes Platschek – Thomas Rüfner (ed): *Handbuch des römischen Privatrechts Band I–III.* Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2023. 584–585.

approach too, the seller could not reject the offered habitation and demand the monetary payment instead.[7]

The wording of the passage appears to support the first qualification. In particular, the use of *aut* points towards an alternative obligation, whereas a formulation such as *si non* might be expected in a case involving *facultas alternativa*. [8]

2.1.2. The Right to Change the Form of Performance

The preliminary classification, however, does not resolve the central problem raised by the passage. The crucial words are *in singulos annos*. The dispute arises in the second year, when the buyer no longer wishes to provide the same performance as in the first. The more precise question is therefore whether the buyer may change the form of performance from year to year.

The Digest gives a clear answer. Paul reports the opinion of Trebatius, according to whom the buyer has *mutandae voluntatis potestatem* and may provide either performance in each year (*singulisque annis alterutrum praestare posse*). As long as the debtor remains prepared to provide one or the other, there is no ground for an action.

Zlinszky accepted that the buyer was entitled to make the initial choice. He nevertheless took a different view of the possibility of changing the form of performance year after year. According to his interpretation, the possibility of changing the form of performance from year to year would constitute an abuse of rights and should therefore not be permitted. Such repeated changes would make the seller's position dependent from year to year on the buyer's changing choice and would deprive the performance arrangement of a reasonable degree of predictability. On this view, the exercise of a right expressly granted by the agreement could nevertheless become abusive where the manner of its exercise disproportionately affected the legitimate interests of the other party.

This position may be considered in the light of Zlinszky's broader understanding of the relationship between strict law and equity. In *Roman Law and Rule-of-Law Legislation*, discussing the maxim *summum ius, summa iniuria*, he writes:

> "There can be no doubt that, if the law is applied with absolute rigidity, it may become unjust and lose its underlying value. *Summum ius summa iniuria.* Legal norms also require a degree of flexibility: law is *ius aequum*, and it is the norm that we all perceive as equitable that lends legitimacy to the legal order. *Ius est ars boni et aequi.* Yet in this art, as in every art, sound judgement must be able to discern precisely when recourse may be had to equity without thereby causing injustice to the

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[7] See Güzide Burcu Günveren: The Concept and Performance of Alternative Obligation (Obligatio Alternativa) in Roman Law. *Hacettepe Law Review*, 2 (2021), 838–839., especially on the distinction between *obligatio alternativa* and *facultas alternativa*.

[8] See for example Iul. D. 36, 2, 19 pr: „*Si decem legata fuerint et, si parum dedisset, fundum, decem peti non poterunt, nisi fundus peti non possit.*"

> other party – or parties – who have placed their trust in the stability of the legal order. Equity serves to remedy disadvantages for which the disadvantaged party bears no responsibility; it cannot, however, serve to assist those who are inattentive, foolish, negligent, or in breach of their duties."[9]

This passage does not, of course, provide a direct explanation of Zlinszky's interpretation of D. 19, 1, 21, 6. It does, however, reveal a broader conception of legal reasoning that is consistent with the solution he proposed in this case. The decisive point is not simply whether the buyer's repeated exercise of the choice can be reconciled with the wording of the agreement, but whether the exercise of that right, although formally available to him, remains acceptable in view of its effects on the other party. In this sense, Zlinszky's solution may be understood as reflecting the very concern expressed in the passage above: the application of a legal entitlement should not become a source of injustice to the party who relies on the stability and predictability of the legal relationship.

2.2. Iul. D. 40, 4, 16 (36 dig.)

The second case is preserved in Iul. D. 40, 4, 16 (36 dig.):

> *Si ita scriptum fuerit: "Cum Titius annorum triginta erit, Stichus liber esto eique heres meus fundum dato," et Titius, antequam ad annum trigensimum perveniret, decesserit, Sticho libertas competet, sed legatum non debebitur. Nam favore libertatis receptum est, ut mortuo Titio tempus superesse videretur, quo impleto libertas contingeret: circa legatum defecisse condicio visa est.*

In Watson's translation, the text is rendered as follows:

> "If it has been written in the will, "when Titius reaches the age of thirty, let Stichus be free and let my heir give him a farm," and if Titius has died before reaching his thirtieth year, freedom belongs to Stichus, but the legacy will not be due. For by the principle favoring freedom, it has been accepted that after Titius's death a period of time evidently remained on whose expiry freedom accrued; regarding the legacy, the condition is thought to have failed."[10]

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[9] János Zlinszky: Római jog és jogállami jogalkotás. In: Miklós Király – Péter Gyertyánfy (ed.): *Liber amicorum. Studia Gy. Boytha dedicata. Ünnepi dolgozatok Boytha György tiszteletére*. Budapest, ELTE ÁJK Polgári Jogi Tanszék, 2004. 369–376. Also available online at the Zlinszky János Research Workshop website. https://me-l.co/xy4yq5v7 (Accessed on: 12 October 2026). English translation by the author.

[10] Cf. Watson – Mommsen – Krueger op. cit.

2.2.1. The Testamentary Clause and the Sequence of Events

The passage concerns a testamentary provision under which Stichus is to become free when Titius reaches the age of thirty, and the testator's heir is to give Stichus a piece of land. Titius, however, dies before reaching the specified age. Julian concludes that Stichus obtains his freedom but is not entitled to the legacy. In the version of the case presented in Brósz's collection of Roman-law exercises, Titius is expressly identified as the testator's heir. Zlinszky's reconstruction of the case appears to have followed this version.[11]

The reference to Titius reaching the age of thirty raises the question whether the testamentary provision should be understood as a *condicio* or as a *dies*. The distinction becomes particularly relevant because Titius dies before reaching the specified age. The sequence of events is therefore essential to understanding the problem: Titius dies before his thirtieth birthday, but the date on which he would have reached that age can still be determined.

Julian's solution reflects a distinction between the two dispositions contained in the testamentary clause. In favour of freedom (*favor libertatis*), the period of time is treated as continuing after Titius's death, so that Stichus obtains his freedom when that period has elapsed. With regard to the legacy, however, the condition is considered to have failed, and Stichus is therefore not entitled to the land.

The passage also raises further doctrinal questions, including the legal structure of testamentary manumission and the form of the legacy. For present purposes, however, the relevant issue is narrower: the interpretation of the testamentary wording and the different approaches taken to that wording by Zlinszky, his students, and Julian.

2.2.2. Intention and Declaration: Different Approaches to the Testament

According to recollections of Zlinszky's teaching, students approached the passage by emphasising the testator's intention.

Their argument could be based on the principle *in testamentis plenius voluntates testantium interpretamur*.[12] On this view, the primary task is to give effect to the testator's intention. It might be inferred that the testator intended Stichus, after the passage of the specified period, both to obtain his freedom and to receive land from which he could support himself. The argument could further be connected to *favor libertatis*, under which questions concerning a prospective manumission may be resolved in favour of freedom.

According to the same recollections, Zlinszky approached the passage from a different starting point. For him, interpretation had to begin with the text of the legal act. The clause states: '*Cum Titius annorum triginta erit*.' On his reading, the relevant condition was not fulfilled because Titius died before reaching the age of thirty. He therefore concluded that neither freedom nor the land should be due to Stichus.

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11 See Brósz op. cit. 5.

12 Cf. Paul. D. 50, 17, 12 (3 ad Sab.).

Julian's solution differs from both positions. Invoking *favor libertatis*, he treats the passage of time relevant to the manumission as capable of continuing notwithstanding Titius's death and consequently recognises Stichus's freedom. In relation to the legacy, however, he regards the condition as having failed and therefore denies Stichus the land.

One possible explanation for this distinction may lie in the protection of the heir's patrimonial interests. While the principle of *favor libertatis* justified granting Stichus his freedom, extending the same reasoning to the legacy would also have required the heir to transfer a piece of land. Julian's solution thus secured Stichus's freedom without imposing this additional burden on the estate. It is conceivable that consideration of the heir's interests played a role in drawing this distinction, although the text itself does not expressly identify such a concern.[13]

The disagreement between Zlinszky and his students over the interpretation of the testamentary provision can thus be understood, at least for analytical purposes, as a tension between two approaches to the interpretation of legal acts: one emphasising the underlying intention of the testator and the other giving priority to the outward declaration embodied in the text. While the students' reasoning focused on the presumed intention of the testator, Zlinszky insisted on the wording of the testamentary clause and the legal consequences attached to it.

According to recollections of the classroom discussion, Zlinszky and his students did not reach agreement before consulting the Digest. Zlinszky eventually proposed: "Let us see what the Digest says." Julian's responsum then revealed that neither position corresponded entirely to the solution preserved in the Roman source: Stichus obtained his freedom but was not entitled to the land.

This episode also illustrates an important aspect of Zlinszky's approach to legal education. Rather than simply providing the solution, he allowed different interpretations to emerge and encouraged his students to develop and defend their reasoning. The subsequent examination of the Roman source demonstrated that even carefully argued interpretations might lead to conclusions different from those reached by the Roman jurists. In this way, the discussion became not merely an exercise in finding the correct answer, but also an opportunity to reflect on the methods and responsibilities of legal interpretation.

3. Conclusion: Legal Interpretation, Equity, and the Education of Lawyers

The two cases reveal different forms of disagreement between Zlinszky's reasoning and the solutions preserved in the Digest. Their significance, however, extends beyond the fact that Zlinszky reached different answers from the Roman jurists. The cases therefore provide an opportunity to examine the considerations that informed

[13] See for example Jakob Fortunat Stagl: Favor libertatis: Slaveholders as Freedom Fighters. In: Martin J. Schermaier (ed.): *The Position of Roman Slaves: Social Realities and Legal Differences*. Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter, 2023. especially 209.

his interpretation of Roman law and the role that Roman legal sources played in his understanding of legal education.

Zlinszky was a Christian legal thinker whose approach to law was strongly informed by historical experience and tradition. As El Beheiri has observed, Zlinszky's own intellectual outlook may be characterised by a tendency to seek the present in history and practice in theory. This connection between past and present was not confined to his work on Roman law: El Beheiri also points to the importance of Hungarian legal tradition in his reasoning as a constitutional judge.[14] Against this broader intellectual background, Roman law may be understood in Zlinszky's work not merely as an object of historical inquiry, but also as a means of reflecting on contemporary legal problems and on the responsibilities of lawyers.

The reasons for Zlinszky's divergence from the solutions preserved in the Digest appear to differ in the two cases. In the case reported by Paul, his objection to allowing the buyer to change the form of performance annually may reflect a practical conception of contractual responsibility and of the limits placed on the exercise of legal rights. His long experience in legal practice may also have contributed to this approach. His characterisation of repeated changes in performance as an abuse of rights is, in any event, consistent with his published reflections on the limits of rigid legal entitlement and the proper role of equity.

The second case brings the didactic dimension of Zlinszky's approach more clearly into view. His insistence on the wording of the testamentary provision may be understood as part of a broader concern with the formation of lawyers and their professional responsibility. Zlinszky expressly regarded ethical education as a necessary component of legal education, and his conception of legal training extended beyond the transmission of doctrinal knowledge to the development of responsible legal judgement.[15] Against this background, his treatment of the testamentary clause may also have conveyed a more specific lesson: legal acts must be formulated with precision, and lawyers must remain aware of the consequences attached to the words they use. In this respect, Zlinszky's approach may also be seen as echoing the Roman-law maxim '*ius civile vigilantibus scriptum est*'[16]: the responsibility of the lawyer extends not only to the interpretation of legal texts, but also to the careful formulation of legal acts and an awareness of the consequences of the words employed.

Despite these differences, the two interpretations may have a common foundation in Zlinszky's conception of the education and responsibility of lawyers. Teaching Roman law was not merely a matter of transmitting doctrinal knowledge. It was also connected with the formation of lawyers capable of exercising legal rights responsibly, interpreting legal texts carefully, and recognising the relationship between law, fairness, and individual responsibility.

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14 El Beheiri (2018) op. cit. 5–6.; 17.

15 János Zlinszky: *A XII táblától a 12 ponton át a magánjog új törvénykönyvéig: Válogatott tanulmányok*. Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 2013. 11–12.

16 Cf. Scaev. D. 42, 8, 24 (lib. sing. quaest. publ. tract.).

This dimension of his thinking is particularly visible in *Christian Morality and Legal Ethics*, a textbook connected to a course that he taught for many years as part of legal education. There he wrote:

> "The law expects more from a person performing a contract than mere compliance with its literal terms. It expects more from an owner than simply disposing of his property as he pleases. It not only prohibits the abuse of rights and conduct of a destructive nature, but also requires us properly to assess the consequences of our actions, to exercise careful and reasonable management of the assets entrusted to us, to perform contracts reasonably and in good faith, and likewise to cooperate in good faith in the enforcement of debts."[17]

Read together with the two Digest cases examined above, this passage suggests that Zlinszky did not treat Roman law exclusively as an object of historical reconstruction or doctrinal analysis. The Roman sources also provided a framework within which questions of legal responsibility, fairness, precise legal formulation, and the professional formation of lawyers could be explored. His willingness to depart from the solutions preserved in the Digest should therefore not necessarily be understood as a rejection of the authority of Roman legal thought. Rather, the two examples considered here suggest a mode of engagement in which Roman law remained a living instrument of legal reasoning and legal education. In Zlinszky's approach, practical experience, sensitivity to equity, precision in legal drafting, and the education of future lawyers thus appear to have been united by a common concern: the responsibility of lawyers for the legal and human consequences of their decisions.

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