

The Past and Present of Self-education in the Bethlen Gábor College

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Abstract. The past and present of the self-educational type of organisations in the Bethlen Gábor National College including present achievements.

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1. The Past

The tradition of self-education goes back for several centuries in the Bethlen Gábor College of Nagyenyed, founded by Gábor Bethlen, prince of Transylvania in 1622. The first attempt of such kind was made in 1791, when a group of students led by Thoroczkay Pál undertook the task of cultivating the mother tongue. The students translated dramas to Hungarian nevertheless they also wrote style practices in prose and public speeches. The society was dissolved by the authorities. From 1820 on the youth of Enyed regularly commemorated the founder Prince of the college and the speeches and the odes were not only delivered and recited but also printed. In 1830 the students resolve again to found a school literary and debating society. Since they debated politics too, it dissolved itself in 1836 because of the persecutions of the authorities just like the 1833 founded Society of Reading by Debating. Public opinion holds the year 1859, as the founding year of the first school literary and debating society. This was the founding year of the Comprehensive School Literary and Debating Society for Youth, led by Professor Károly Herepei. Their determination was to publish a student's magazine entitled *Haladjunk* (Let's Progress). At the beginning they held weekly meetings, then every other week and delivered speeches on literature, science and philosophy. As well as this they recited poems and presented their endeavours in literature. In 1872 The Theological Literary and Debating Society is founded as a part of the Comprehensive School Literary and Debating Society for Youth, which became independent from 1879 and between 1887 and 1889 published the *Teológiai Közlöny* (Theological Journal) and a yearly memorial volume. In 1893 a school literary and debating society is founded for secondary-school students, at first as part of the Comprehensive School Literary and Debating Society for Youth. From 1898 this was known as the Kemény Zsigmond School Literary and Debating Society. In the 1906-7 school year the

Bethlen Gábor Society was founded with a religious agenda. In 1893 the students of the teachers' training section established their own school literary and debating society called from the 1899-1900 school year as the Gáspár János¹ School Literary and Debating Society. These societies all thrived till 1920. The teaching staff and the Permanent Board supervising these societies conducted several competitions for the members of the above-mentioned organisations. Between 1885 and 1920 approximately 300 code-named papers were written. The thoroughly prepared trips also played an important part in the physical and spiritual self-education of the students.

Our college was destroyed several times. In 1658 the Turkish troops, in 1704 and in 1707 the Labanc (pro-Austrian) soldiers and in 1849 the Romanian revolutionaries burned it down. It was always reborn from its ashes! On the other hand there were two destructions, which did not touch the buildings of the school, but nevertheless caused an even greater spiritual damage! The first disaster was the "school reform" after the Peace of Trianon (1920); the second was the nationalization under the communists in 1948. As it is beyond the scope of the present paper to analyze the effects of the two heavy blows on the educational system, I will limit myself to the brief description of the changes in the life of the self-educational type of organisations. The increasingly crowded national programme leaves less and less room for self-education. In the 1921-22 school year there was a trial to fill vacant teaching positions with the students of the teachers' training section. Albert Juhász, religion teacher made an attempt to continue the traditional students' societies but the authorities did not favour those activities, which were not centrally organised. In 1929 the scouting movement was launched, in 1930 the Christian Association of the Youth was started and the János Gáspár² School Literary and Debating Society, led by Attila T. Szabó, one of the most distinguished Hungarian linguists, was resurrected for a brief period. In 1945 the Kőrösi Csoma Sándor Reading Society was founded on the initiative of Ferenc Deák and they restarted publishing the *Haladjunk* (Let's Progress) students' magazine. In the 70s self-education was realised through the Áprily Lajos Literary Association and through the debates in the students' club. Soon after the 70s the teachers' training section is closed, the number of secondary school classes is reduced and in the whirling of the communist educational system less and less time remains for the traditional type of self-education.

2. The Present

After the changes of 1989 a return to the old values began, as Hungarian teaching was reintroduced in classes where previously Romanian teaching was used, the teachers' training section re-opened. We could speak and write again about the past of the college, about former famous students and teachers. The *Haladjunk* (Let's Progress) students' magazine was published again followed later by the *Lárma* (Row) then by the *Firkász* (Scribbling). In October 1990 a literary society for the lower secondary students is started

¹ Gáspár János founded the teachers' training section at Nagyenyed in 1853-ban

and soon a Literary Café is established for secondary school students, which has invited several prominent representatives of contemporary literature. At the end of the 90s our students entered the scientific students' competitions organised in the Székely Region as well as those organized by the RKTDK (Protestant Secondary-school Students' Scientific Conference) at Kunszentmiklós, Hungary. Although scientific research and papers were made before 2000 and our students succeeded at several Transylvanian and Hungarian scientific conferences held for students, we realised that it is more effective to work within an organised framework. On 27th September 2000 the "Fenichel Sámuel" School Literary and Debating Society was founded. At the beginning it was meant only for students with an interest for science but then we decided to help and offer our support to every student from our school who wishes to research, write or deliver a paper no matter of his interest in science, arts or else.

Our decision was based on the answer to the question: What is in fact a self-educational type of organisation? I found the answer of my fellow teacher and co-organiser of the debating society comprehensive and relevant to our case: *"a spare-time school, on many occasions without walls, where there is no lesson hammering in, no compulsion or stressful recitation, but there is an even greater curiosity, initiative and originality. Here the joy of creating, discovering and of a good fellowship thrives. The students' self-esteem grows and their personality develops in an autonomous way"*.

Our goals are to:

1. **Popularise and offer our support to any scientific activity of our students.** To meet this we permanently search for the gifted students, popularize their prizes in the school, present their achievements through the written and electronic media, and publish their papers and students articles in magazines. We also provide financial support for the preparation and presentation of their work.
2. **Offer proper working conditions to our organisation's students.** The Budapest based For Researching Students Foundation and the Bethlen Foundation helped us purchase two modern computers, a CD- and a DVD-writer, a scanner and a printer.
3. **Organise scientific conferences for students and find the financial support for these.** We organised three local scientific conferences to meet this goal. In the autumn of 2003 the Transylvanian TUDEK 2003 (The Conference of the Transylvanian Scientific Students' Clubs) was held here.
4. **Popularise our college's famous personalities and their collections.** The students researched the works of the famous students and teachers of our college (Pápai Páriz Ferenc, Benkő Ferenc, Ifj. Zeyk Miklós, Fenichel Sámuel, dr. Sáska László, Áprily Lajos, Vita Zsigmond etc..) and the collections of the National History Museum, of the History Museum and the Bethlen Library.
5. **Present the important natural, ethnographic, historical and architectural sights.** The students delivered papers about Torockó and its surroundings, the Szkerice-Bélavári preserve, the Szabaderdő from Nagyenyed, the Bottomless Lake from Magyarbagó, the castle from Bethlenszentmiklós, the salt mine and

bath from Marosújvár, the surroundings of Magyarlapád and Tövis etc. Since our students come from several regions of our country other areas and natural rarities were also presented like: the Hargita Mountains, the Vargyas Valley and its gorge, the Rétyi Nyír, the Szilágyság, the Mezőség, the Gyergyó Basin, the Gyimesek region, etc.

6. **Organise and support students' activities related to the protection of the environment.** In this respect we participated in the Norwegian Acid-Rain project and analysed the water of the Enyed River and the state of the segregation pool at the soda-works from Marosújvár.
7. **Offer financial support for the travels and trips related to the various activities in the students' organisation.** For this purpose we applied for and received support from various foundations³. As well as this several local and Transylvanian companies, businessmen, organisations and private people responded positively to our requests.

The students of our society regularly enter the RKTDK conferences held in Csurgó (previously in Kunszentmiklós), the student-article competition organised by the Természet Világa (World of Nature) from Budapest, at the TUDOK (The National Conference of the Scientific Students) Clubs conferences organised by the Student Researchers National Association and the related regional TUDEK conferences. They also entered the Innovator Competition in Budapest, the Inspiration Exchange in Bucharest, the Young Writers' and Poets' Festival in Sárvár and other similar events in Hungary and Transylvania. Without entering the competition they were present at other events, too at the following venues: at Titu Maiorescu College from Nagyenyed, (in 2001 in Romanian), the Piarist Secondary School from Szeged (2002), the Csíki Gergely Secondary School from Arad (2003), the Secondary School of the Reformed College from Debrecen (2003), the Free University in Torda (2005), the Free University in Aranyosgyéres (2006) and the Hungarian section of the Secondary School in Aranyosgyéres (2006).

Up to the present, the members of our organisation wrote 93 papers. It would take too long to detail all their achievements; however, the summarized achievements are the following: 69 prizes received in Romania (21 first prizes, 19 second prizes, 15 third prizes and 14 special mentions), 66 prizes in Hungary (12 first prizes, 16 second prizes, 11 third prizes and 27 special mentions). Our members published 48 articles and scientific papers.

Hopefully, our activities will be successful in the future too, under the shelter of the Prince who has been protecting his favourite school for 400 years.

Translated by Elemér Fodor, English teacher at the Bethlen Gábor College, Aiud

³ Természet-Tudomány Alapítvány, Budapest, Kutató Diákokért Alapítvány Budapest, Communitas Alapítvány Kolozsvár, Bethlen Alapítvány, és Pro Scholae Alapítvány Nagyenyed

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