

**THIRTY YEARS IN VOLUNTARY MISSION:
THE HUNGARIAN ALUMNI ASSOCIATION, "MAGYAR
ÖREGDIÁK SZÖVETSÉG – BESSENYEI GYÖRGY KÖR"
(1960–1990)**

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Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, was founded in 1766. It had 15 308 students in 1958 when a few dozen Hungarian students started and registered their organization under the name of "Hungarian Students at Rutgers University". Almost all of the founding members had left their country after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in which many of them participated and which was crushed by Soviet military intervention. They were continuing or beginning their studies at Rutgers with the help of scholarships, loans, and part-time jobs. Their organization's goal was to acquaint their university community with Hungary's culture and history and, especially, with the background, the events, and the meaning of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Their objectives had two sources. Their new experiences indicated to them that the American public, and even some intellectuals and most of their fellow students, were inadequately acquainted with Hungary. The Hungarian students concluded that such lack of familiarity could be the source — in the future, as it was in 1956 — of mistaken policy decisions at times when the United States could influence favorably the fate of Hungary. These Hungarian students also viewed their emigrants' role as a mission. They wanted to be unofficial ambassadors instead of nostalgia-ridden refugees. They strove to serve their former country's as well as their new country's people by helping to build bridges of better understanding between them.

They organized art exhibitions, concerts, poetry readings, history lectures, film reviews, panel discussions, and news conferences. They published and distributed translations of Hungarian literary, scientific, and documentary collections. They collected thousands of signatures demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops and free elections in Hungary and sent the petitions to the United Nations. In 1960, they also founded an organization which was to continue their work after they were graduated: the Hungarian Alumni Association.

Lecture Series

The Hungarian Alumni Association (which added the designation "György Besse-nyei Circle" to its name in 1977) initiated a lecture, conference, and exhibition series. To this day some six-to-eight writers, scientists, and artists meet their audiences each

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year, usually in the lecture halls of Rutgers University. In the past thirty years, 170 people were invited by the Association: 101 from Hungary, 34 from the United States, 14 from Rumania, 5 from West Germany, 3 each from Austria and England, 2 each from Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, and Switzerland, and 1 each from Australia and Yugoslavia. These intellectuals of the Hungarian mainland, the Hungarian minorities in the Carpathian Basin, and the Western Hungarian diaspora included some of the most outstanding representatives of Hungarian arts and sciences: poets like Sándor Csoóri, György Faludy, Árpád Farkas, György Gömöri, Győző Határ, Elemér Horváth, Gyula Illyés, Sándor Kányádi, Gyula Kodolányi, Gáspár Nagy, György Petri, György Somlyó, Géza Szócs, József Tornai, and Sándor Weöres; prose writers like György Berkovits, Zsolt Csalog, István Csurka, András Domahidy, Gyula Fekete, György Ferdinandy, Erzsébet Galgóczi, Rózsa Ignác, György Konrád, Miklós Mészöly, Dezső Monoszló, András Sütő, and Dániel Veress; literary historians and philosophers like Gyula Borbándi, Mihály Czine, Gyula Gombos, András Görömbei, István Király, János Kis, Csaba Könczöl, János Nagy, Béla Pomogáts, and Sándor Radnóti; historians and economists like József Antall, Kálmán Benda, Béla Borsi-Kálmán, Lajos Für, Péter Hanák, József Held, Géza Jeszenszky, Gyula Juhász, Gyula László, Tibor Liska, Sándor M. Kiss, Júlianna Puskás, Péter Püspöki Nagy, György Ránki, Konrád Salamon, and Ferenc Szakály; theater and film directors and representatives of the fine arts and the performing arts like Ferenc Béres, Tibor Csernus, József Domján, Katalin Gombos, György Harag, Adrienne Jancsó, Péter Korniss, Ferenc Kósa, Sándor Plugor, Zoltán Sellei, Pál Schiffer, Imre Sinkovits, Lajos Szalay, and Zsuzsa Szász; sociologists and linguists like Bálint Balla, György Csepeli, Tibor Fazekas, Károly Ginter, Elemér Hankiss, István Kemény, Kálmán Kulcsár, Lajos Lőrincze, István Szathmári and Aladár Szende; and critics, journalists and organization leaders like Gábor Demszky, Miklós Haraszti, László Hámos, János Kenedi, Imre Mécs, and Sándor Szilágyi.

In addition to their lectures, exhibits, and performances for Hungarian-American audiences, the Association organized opportunities for many of these personalities to meet with American academic and cultural groups and mass media forums, enabling them to expose the realities and problems of the world's sixteen million Hungarians to the American public.

Hungarian School

Responding to a widely-expressed need by the area's Hungarian Americans the Association initiated the Hungarian Saturday Classes (Hétfévi Magyar Iskola) for children and adults in 1960. The school functioned for 26 years. (The 1980 US Census counted 1 776 902 Hungarian Americans, 168 500 of them in New Jersey. The Hungarian Alumni Association's center is New Brunswick, N. J., the "Hub City" of a tri-county area including Middlesex, Somerset, and Union counties, with 28 116 Americans of Hungarian origin living there.) Every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. some 30 to 50 students attended beginner, intermediate, and advanced classes. The class-

rooms were provided by Rutgers University and, in the 1980's, by the New Brunswick Hungarian Reformed Church. Students learned the basics of Hungarian reading, writing, speaking, composition, history, literature, folk songs, and folk art. Most of the teachers had diplomas in education.

The curricula, the textbooks, and other instructional and audio-visual materials were experimental and innovative. There was no available professional material for once-a-week, thirty-hours-per-year Hungarian language and culture instruction for different age and language ability groups. (The available instructional material was structured for everyday education and contained much blatant political propaganda and falsified history.) Therefore, as one of the teachers, I started correspondence with other similar part time, week-end, and summer school teachers and conducted a survey of their functions. I published the results of the survey of Hungarian education in the United States ("Magyar iskolák az Egyesült Államokban", *Új Látóhatár*, München, March–April, 1965; "Hungarian Schools in the U. S.", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Winter, 1965) and sent the results to some leading writers and pedagogues in Hungary: Gyula Illyés, Zoltán Kodály and Mihály Váci. I requested them to initiate a process by which experts in Hungary would help the educators beyond their country's borders so that they could teach Hungarian language and culture with better methods and material. Their responses resulted in an international meeting in 1970 in Debrecen. This assembly established the Native Language Conference (Anyanyelvi Konferencia) an international professional movement functioning to this day, assisting Hungarian language and culture maintenance and instruction beyond Hungary's borders with specialized books and workbooks, audio-visual aids, teachers' seminars, summer courses for children, a professional periodical: *Nyelvünk és Kultúránk* (Our Language and Culture), and quadrennial conferences.

The Hungarian Native Language Conference movement has, in 20 years, significantly increased the motivation for and the level of Hungarian language and culture instruction and maintenance in many countries, utilizing many of the educational experiences of the Hungarian Alumni Association's Hungarian Saturday Classes.

History Makers Testify

In 1977 the Association launched an oral history project. The objectives of the "History Makers Testify" (Tanúk–korukról) program are to enable some of those who actively participated or played leading roles in changing or influencing Hungarian (and in some cases the world's) history to talk about their actions in an open forum — almost like testifying in a court — and, thereby, to preserve their experiences for posterity. In the past 13 years 22 such key witnesses have "testified" by Hungarian Alumni Association invitation: Lajos Boros, Miklós Duray, Péter Gosztonyi, János Horváth, Mihály Hógye, Pál Jónás, Béla Király, Sándor Kiss, Sándor Kopácsi, Andor Kovács, Imre Kovács, Elek Nagy, Zoltán Nyeste, László Papp, Gergely Pongrácz, Sándor Püski, Sándor Rácz, Pál Somody, István Szent-Miklósy, Miklós Vásárhelyi, Gyula Várallyay, and Eugene Wigner.

Eight of these lectures were published by the Association in book form as well. Three of these books were republished in facsimile editions by clandestine, "samizdat" publishers in Hungary. These eight books are now frequently cited and used as source material by historians in and beyond Hungary. The "Tanúk-korukról" books of the Association are the following: Király, Béla: *Az első háború szocialista országok között: személyes visszaemlékezések az 1956-os magyar forradalomra* (The First War Between Socialist Countries: Personal Reflexions on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution) (1981) and *Honvédségből Néphadsereg* (The Sovietization of the Hungarian Army) (1986); Kiss, Sándor: *A magyar demokráciáért. Ifjúsági mozgalmak, Magyar Parasztszövetség 1932–1947* (For Hungarian Democracy. Youth Movements, the Hungarian Peasant Alliance, 1932–1947) (1983); Kopácsi, Sándor: *Az 1956-os forradalom és a Nagy Imre per* (The 1956 Revolution and the Imre Nagy Trial) (1979, 1980); Kovács, Andor: *Forradalom Somogyban: az 1956-os forradalom és előzményei a csurgói járásban* (Revolution in Somogy County; the 1956 Revolution and its Background in the Csurgó District) (1988); Kovács, Imre: *A Márciusi Front* (The March Front) (1980); Nyeste, Zoltán: *Recsk, emberek az embertelenségben* (Recsk, Man in the Midst of Inhumanity) (1982) and Papp, László: *ÉMEFESZ, az amerikai magyar egyetemisták mozgalma az 1956-os forradalom után* (ÉMEFESZ, the Movement of American Hungarian College Students After the 1956 Revolution) (1988).

Membership, Political Activities

In 1990 the Hungarian Alumni Association had 73 members. Six of them are engineers, seven are historians and literary historians, five are chemists, two are publishers, and one each is an anthropologist, architect, artist, clergyman, economist, musicologists, poet, printer, and sociologist. Nine teach in colleges and universities, five in high schools, others work in college and corporation offices, libraries or laboratories. Four are college students.

The Association works in close cooperation with many other organizations which serve similar functions such as the American Association for the Study of Hungarian History, the American Hungarian Foundation, American Hungarian Educators' Association, Anyanyelvi Konferencia (Native Language Conference), Atlantic Research and Publications, Hungarian Chair–Indiana University, Hungarian Chair–University of Toronto, Hungarian Human Rights Foundation, Hungarian Protestant Academy in Europe, Institute on East Central Europe at Columbia University, International Association of Hungarian Studies, Irodalmi Újság (Literary Gazette), Magyar Baráti Közösség, Itt-ott (Hungarian Community of Friends), Magyar Műhely (Hungarian Workshop), Nyugati Magyarság (Hungarians of the West), Püski–Corvin, Recsk Association, Szepsi Csombor Circle, Szivárvány (Rainbow), The International P. E. N., Új Látóhatár (New Horizon), and Young Hungarians' Political Action Committee, among others.

The Association also conducts political activities including information distribution, publicity, lectures, publications, lobbying and fund raising. Some of these actions are

aimed at the protection of the nearly four million Hungarians who live as minorities in the countries surrounding Hungary. Others foster truth, freedom, self-determination, and democracy in Hungary and the spiritual, cultural integration of the world's sixteen million Hungarians.