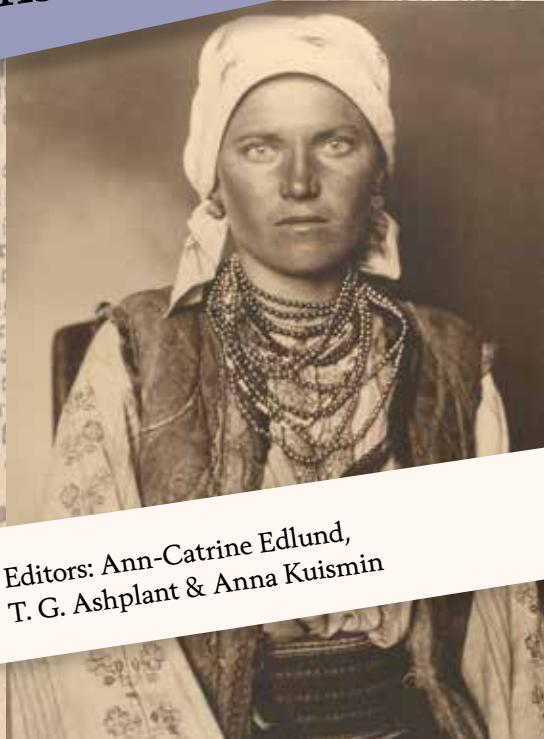




Reading and Writing from Below

Exploring the Margins of Modernity



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— Kdpmannen Wång från Kdpenhamn, bor på Ma...

EMESE ILYEFALVI

”When you have read my letter, pass it on!”

A Special Means of Communication by a Calvinist Minister Between the Two World Wars in Transylvania

ABSTRACT. Dezső Bonczidai (1902–1946) was a Calvinist minister in Kide (Chidea, Romania) between 1928 and 1946. From 1932 to 1935 he wrote regularly – every week or every two weeks – a hand-written newspaper of eight pages to the members of his congregation. This newspaper was called *A Pastoral Letter*. Such a form of communication was unique in Transylvania and also in Hungary at that time, because no similar pastoral activity has been found. The village was very small, consisting only of two streets, with 388 Calvinist believers; and although all of the people had daily connections, the minister chose a new form of communication. The paper examines this particular activity and the text-corpus in the contexts of the Transylvanian Calvinist Home Mission and the status of Hungarians in Transylvania after the Trianon Peace Treaty. The study analyses the author of the texts, his motivations, the ways these were realized in practice, and those settings and expectations in which this mixed genre was born: a newspaper written in the form of a letter. In addition it examines the attitude of the villagers to this new kind of communication, which made its contribution to the Transylvanian rural writing and reading culture.

KEYWORDS: handwritten newspaper, public letter, Calvinist religious communication, conversational community, reading habits from below, Transylvania

Dear Brother, when you read these lines, do not be afraid and do not turn away from it, because it is not a new tax book or a subscription list, which I want to test your wallet and patience with. No! This is only a letter, which I, your minister write to you with a brotherly heart, with brotherly love. From now on, every second week I will contact you with such pastoral letters, and I only ask you to accept them, and after you have read them, give them to others, so they can read them too. With these letters I do not want to disturb you, or give you a hard time, but I want to approach you with brotherly heart and love, as your minister. (*Pastoral Letter* No. 1.)

This paper is about Dezső Bonczidai, who lived from 1902 until 1946 and who was a Calvinist minister in Kide (Chidea, România) between 1928 and 1946. From 1932 to 1935 he wrote regularly – every week or every two weeks – a hand-written newspaper of eight pages to the members of his congregation. This newspaper was called *A Pastoral Letter*. This form of communication was unique in Transylvania and also in Hungary at that time, because no similar pastoral activity has been found. The village was very small, consisting only of two streets, with 388 Calvinist believers; and although all the people had daily connections, the minister chose a new form of communication.

In my paper, I will examine this particular activity and the text-corpus in the context of the Transylvanian Calvinist Home Mission and the status of Hungarians in Transylvania after the Trianon Peace Treaty. The study aims to analyze this literary practice as a social practice connecting it to research which argues that the socio-cultural context of literacy gives the meaning of reading and writing activities (Barton 1991; Besnier 1995:14; Lyons 2013). The case study also provides new material for understand reading and writing practices from below in the early twentieth century in Transylvania. My core questions are: Why did Dezső Bonczidai write these letters? How did he put them into practice? What kind of texts and genres can be found in his letters? What were the reactions of the villagers?

Sources

I found the first letter in the village, Kide, which was introduced to me by one of my main informants. After that I started to collect these *Pastoral Letters* and I managed to find 107 letters altogether, but of these only 40 are different. It means that there are letters which have survived in several copies. The letters are from three sources: I found 24 in the village of Kide from four different local people; then I found 22 further letters in the Transylvanian Calvinist Church District Archive in the city of Kolozsvár (to-

day: Cluj-Napoca, România);¹ but most of the *Pastoral Letters*, 61 in number, were found in the town of Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc, România), which are owned by Dezső Bonczidai's distant relatives. To imagine the volume of these 40 different letters, they are approximately 150 pages transcribed into a WordDoc text file with single spacing.²

For this research, besides the letters, I also used supplementary and control sources to understand the historical and social context of this letter writing activity. The two main sources were the documents on Kide in that period from the Archive of the Transylvanian Calvinist Church District,³ and the *Minutes of the Kide Presbytery* which are still kept in Kide, in the Calvinist parish.

In addition, I have also conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Kide since 2007. Specifically in relation to this research, I made semi-structured interviews about Dezső Bonczidai and the Calvinist religious life in that period, in the summers of 2009, 2010 and 2012. During these interviews I talked to nine locals who knew the minister personally and to three further people who have knowledge of Bonczidai from the local oral traditions.⁴ I also interviewed Dezső Bonczidai's nephew, called Lajos Bóné, who was also a Calvinist minister in Kide for twenty-two years between 1952 and 1974.⁵

Dezső Bonczidai

Since the author, the creator of the texts is the minister, Dezső Bonczidai, we have to examine him in order to understand the primary context of the letters. I will take a look at his brief biography, his role in the village, and his motivations.⁶ Dezső Bonczidai attended school in Transylvania. When the

¹ Letters with No. 2–23 and posters advertising religious and foreign mission soirée, from the parcel *Kide község vegyes ügyei* [Miscellaneous issues of Kide] (1927–1946) in the Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület Levéltára [Archives of the Transylvanian Calvinist Diocese] (hereafter: EREL) in the Kolozsvári Egyházmegye Levéltára [Archives of the Diocese of Kolozsvár] (hereafter: KEL)

² For the literal transcripts of all the *Pastoral Letters* see: Ilyefalvi 2012:75–141. All quotations from the letters are my translations from the original Hungarian.

³ EREL KEL *Kide község vegyes ügyei* [Miscellaneous issues of Kide] (1927–1946), EREL KEL Vízitációs Jegyzőkönyv 1913–1952; EREL KEL Belmissziói jelentések, 1927, 1940–1946.

⁴ A. F. (85-year-old, male, Calvinist); B. B. (86-year-old, female, Unitarian); Cs. I. (85-year-old, female, Calvinist); J. L. (89-year-old, female, Calvinist); J. M. (82-year-old, female, Calvinist); L. V. (86-year-old, female, gr. Catholic, Romanian); N. I. (82-year-old, female, Calvinist); B. E. (87-year-old, male, Calvinist); Sz. Á. (70-year-old, male, Calvinist). See all of the transcribed interviews in Ilyefalvi 2012:181–214.

⁵ Collected: 17–8 July 2009. B. L. (= Bóné Lajos, 1928–2010.) For the parts of the interview about Dezső Bonczidai see Ilyefalvi 2012:205–214.

⁶ See Barton 1991:9 on the importance of roles and networks in literacy practices.

Trianon Peace Treaty was concluded in 1919, he was seventeen years old. He attended the Calvinist Theological College⁷ in Cluj-Napoca between 1922 and 1926, when he graduated. He never studied abroad. After the university he ministered in four places in Transylvania as an assistant minister. At his last post, in a small town called Szék (Sic, România), he met Sára Ajtai, a Calvinist teacher, and they got married. They did not have children of their own, but they raised an orphan boy from the streets of Bucharest.

Dezső Bonczidai and his wife went to work in Kide in 1928, when the bishop, Sándor Makkai appointed him as a deputy minister of Kide. Kide was not a very easy parish at that time. This can be seen from the very frequent changing (coming and going) of the ministers. The previous ministers in Kide (and the Catholic priests also) stayed only for one or two years, and after that they requested their relocation.⁸ Kide was a poor, dead-end village, the only village with a Hungarian majority within the nearby region (H. Csukás & Kecskés 1997). After Bonczidai arrived, he wrote a confidential letter to the dean, in which he described his initial situation.⁹ The congregation was not welcoming, because the minister had been appointed in Kide without asking their will or opinion, which was unusual. In this letter can be read all the problems that the young minister and his wife had to cope with. Firstly, the congregation was poor, and hence had difficulties with paying the minister's salary and the congregational tax. Secondly, the Calvinist school in Kide was threatened constantly by the Romanian government.¹⁰ Thirdly, there were difficulties in looking after the daughter churches of Kide (in neighbouring villages often difficult to reach), which was also among Bonczidai's responsibilities.¹¹ And finally, the stubborn, conservative and passive nature of the members of the Kide Congregation. Despite all of these difficulties, after Bonczidai arrived in Kide he immediately started his very active ministry. For example, according to *The Minutes of the Kide*

⁷ Today: Protestant Theological Institute of Cluj.

⁸ *Pastoral Letter* (hereafter: PL.) No. 18. (with the listing of the Calvinist minister of Kide); EREL KEL Kide község vegyes ügyei. Bonczidai Dezső: *Ref. papok életrajzi adatai*. Transcribed in Ilyefalvi 2012:144–154. The situation was the same with the Catholic priests, which was sensitively depicted by József Nyírő in his novel *Isten igájában* [God's yoke] (which is partly about Kide): Nyírő 1990:174–175.

⁹ EREL KEL Kide község vegyes ügyei. 562/1928. See the entire letter in Ilyefalvi 2012:158–159.

¹⁰ For more about the situation of the Transylvanian Hungarian religious schools after the Trianon Peace Treaty see Boldizsár Zeyk 2011:39–44; Mikó 1998:116–122.

¹¹ In that period Kide Calvinist Congregation had many daughter churches, where Bonczidai had to hold the services and perform other tasks too: to bury, to baptize, to teach children, to maintain the churches and so on.

Presbytery, in the same year, he established the *Kide Calvinist Women's Association*.¹²

Nevertheless Bonczidai did not have an easy start in Kide, and if one reads his formal letters in the archive, his letters with the dean or other people from the church leadership, one can see that he also wanted to go away from Kide; he asked for it and tried it several times, but he could not manage to do so. From the time when he started to write his *Pastoral Letters* to the congregation in 1932 there also are documents showing that he wanted to leave Kide, even if he remained without a job. But the congregation started to get used to Bonczidai and in 1934 the congregation itself invited him to be their normal minister, not just a deputy, as he had been until then.¹³ (See figure 1.)



Figure 1. Minister Dezső Bonczidai (middle, seated row) with the Church Elders of Kide, 1930s.

Pastoral Letters

After the description of the background it is time to take a closer look at the *Pastoral Letters* themselves and to examine how this system of correspondence worked. Starting on 16th of October in 1932, Dezső Bonczidai wrote his *Pastoral Letter* to the congregation for three years regularly – which meant

¹² KRE Pj. 1928. augusztus 12.

¹³ EREL KEL Kidei egyházközség vegyes ügyei 92/1934.



Figure 3 & 4. Poster 1 and 2 Advertising Foreign Mission evenings in Kide.



So far the letters number 27, 29 and 33 have not been found, but it can be concluded that his intensive letter writing lasted from 1932 to 1935.

Functions and Topics of the Pastoral Letters

Dezso Bonczidai's letters kept the connection with local oral traditions and everyday life, because they were about Kide and they were addressed to its people; but at the same time pieces of religious and historical literature were also incorporated in the texts. The minister gave these letters multiple functions. They were a new channel of communication; a way of reporting news, giving information, circulating notices; they helped in the preservation of the past (for example with local narratives); but they also functioned as a way of preaching and evangelisation. In total they strengthened the feeling of belonging to the Kide Calvinist spiritual community.

The texts existed in a very specific relationship, because they were written by a respected, prestigious member of the local community, the Calvinist minister. Therefore this 'one-man editorial' as an external institution represented and mediated the Calvinist Church. The genre of the letters was similar to denominational or congregational newspapers at that time,¹⁵ but they were much more personal and even further more direct which was implied by the frame of the genre – an interesting combination of the private letter and public letter – and also the person of the author.

In the letters, by using a similar structure and style to the Sunday service (he built on the liturgical tradition: short exegesis, instructive stories, congregational news, acknowledgement to supporters, songs, prayers), he inserted his texts into the sacred space and he also legitimized them. Beyond the composition, this was confirmed by the language of the texts, because the author used a ritualized Christian language, addressing his readers as "thee/thou", whereas in everyday, profane life he used the formal mode of address. The initial form of address always was "Dear Brother / Dear Brethren". The author used such rhetoric in his letters through which his aim of the simple communication of facts, his own opinions, feelings and attitude – according to the genre of letters¹⁶ – was obvious in every case. Several times the examples which he used for the exegesis were closely related to local happenings; the locals often knew whom the sermon / letter was about.¹⁷ With this rhetoric, the minister wanted to form public opinion.

¹⁵ The author follows the style and structure of *Református Naptár* [Calvinist Calendar] and *Református Ifjúság* [Calvinist Youth].

¹⁶ The *letter* is a form of self-representation, but here it represents his role as pastor, too. See Keszeg 2008b:247.

¹⁷ Confirmed by several informants.

Dear Brethren, I speculate a lot about why there is so little show of the speech of God, why the benches in the church are so vacant, why our singing is so drowsy, why there is so much apathy, why people don't turn to God, why they don't repent, why there are fathers who set a bad example, drunken presbyters, fallen maidens, why there are so many sins and so much weakness that has been revealed since my last letter? [...] We don't take seriously the vow that we give to God. Last time you vowed next to the holy table of Jesus Christ that "In the grace of God appeared in Jesus Christus you will devote your whole life to Him and in this world you will try to live impeccably and saintly as his redeemed one." Did you do that? Did you keep your vow? If you had done this, if you had kept it, then you would not have been mocked in front of your children and others, you would not have fallen, there would not have been rumours about you, and your life would not have been so miserable, cursed, and burdened. (*Pastoral Letter* No. 6.)

The author in his letters often employs the rhetorical genres also used in preaching, where a real conversation is imitated. In the letters the use of dialogues or pseudo-dialogues was typical. He answered questions he had previously been asked orally under the heading "the minister answers questions addressed to him".¹⁸

The question arises, if practically the same was written in the weekly letters as was told on Saturday at the service, at the Bible circle or in personal meetings, then what was the use of writing it down and circulating it? The letters of the minister created a new occasion to talk about the gospel and Church matters within the family circle, so he thereby established a new *literary event* too.¹⁹ Although Dezső Bonczidai's letters seem like a one-sided format, every communication is a social and mutual interaction, and never only the sending of a message. Communication researchers have argued that church communication is a form that "primarily wants to discuss issues concerning the people's faith" (Szilcz 2007:78).²⁰ The problem of church effectiveness is therefore a communication problem too. The special sense of mission of the Church is essentially to "communicate the gospel," so the primary issue is "how the various churches and denominations can represent and make understandable their cases" (Szilcz 2007:78).²¹

The particular communication practice of Bonczidai gives a close picture of the relationship of the village and the minister, and the ways of

¹⁸ PL. Nos. 4; 10; 14.

¹⁹ For *literary event* see Barton 1991, especially 4–5. This phenomenon can be described by the *conversational community* concept of Salmi-Niklander, 2013:79. For the importance of oral dimensions of literary events see Besnier 1995:13.

²⁰ My translation.

²¹ Also see: Kádár 2005:80, 164, 192.

forming a community. His letters are excellent sources for understanding everyday religious life of Kide in that period too.²² To examine the letters I used the method of content analysis (Krippendorff 2013), through which I found the following key patterns: 1. letter, correspondence; 2. caring for the spiritual life, transmission of the gospel message; 3. Church expectations: good and proper Calvinist behaviour – local habits; 4. reading the Bible, reading culture, reading distributions; 5. sharing information: religious occasions, organization of the congregational life; 6. local narratives; 7. the world we live in – the problems of modernity.

Dezső Bonczidai in his letters reflects on the form of communication he has chosen, the writing of letters. He explains its purpose in the first letter (cited above). In the second year of writing he again formulates the substance of his effort, that “I want to be a resounding word for you through these pastoral letters, that through them every week my word may be heard in your house and heart. If you are ill I will stand beside your bed. If you keep away from God’s house, let your house be the church. Let me greet you every week, God’s blessings on you and yours!”²³ He asks for feedback in the 18th letter: “Do you read my letters? Do you think about them? If you do, have you tried to go on the pathway I laid down?” At other times, he calls attention to how to read his letter, that one should do it slowly, thinking about every line of it.²⁴ In favour of the rapid flow of information and the coverage of the whole congregation he often asks the addressees to forward it as soon as possible.²⁵ Here implicitly the village itself appears, because according to the 13th letter many have been complaining that the letters do not reach them, so it was important for these villagers to get them regularly and in time. In another letter, however, Dezső Bonczidai himself requests that if someone is disturbed by his letters, then they should contact him, and he will stop sending them.²⁶

The main part of the letters is about caring for the spiritual life of his people and communicating the Gospel message. In fact, that is the main purpose of the letters, and that is why the minister took the trouble to write, edit, copy, and distribute the letters week by week; because he wanted a more vital, and a better Christian life in the village. The letters always begin with a short sermon, but other genres are also related to this main

²² The institutional ethnographic researches from the 1940s show a totally different picture of Kide. In this article I cannot explain it in detail, but to understand the problem theoretically see Beyer 2011.

²³ PL. No. 18.

²⁴ PL. No. 1.

²⁵ PL. No. 1.

²⁶ PL. No. 21.

intention, such as: golden sayings, prayers, psalms/hymns, aphorisms, parables, pieces of good advice and edifying stories.

Another goal of the *Pastoral Letters* is to give an example of good and proper Calvinist behaviour. These parts have a very important ethnographic relevance, because from these one can get to know what was and what was not allowed for a Calvinist, and what norms a Calvinist had to live by. Of course, this is the view of the Calvinist Church, but the personal tone of the letters and the examples that Bonczidai gave in them let the attitude of the villagers also be seen. For example, Bonczidai expounded how a Calvinist girl²⁷ or a good elder has to behave,²⁸ what the proper form of the offerings is,²⁹ how people have to behave during church services,³⁰ or what behaviour is expected at the village festivities.³¹

A very important part of the letters concerns religious reading habits, because one of the missions of the minister is to make the habit of reading an integral part of the villagers' life. The letters provide excellent information about what books and periodicals were available in the village in the 1930s, how the peasants read, and how the distribution of these written texts worked.

The importance of reading the Scripture is the main topic of three letters. Immediately in the second letter, the minister – saying that many do not read the Bible regularly because they do not know where to start it – tries to help the believers to read the Holy Writ together every day by the introduction of a Bible-reading guide. Accordingly he published Bible-reading guides in the 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th and the 7th letters, and in the last one he writes that he thinks it is no longer needed because one can find a similar one in the Calvinist calendar from the 1st of January. From this, we can predict that many have subscribed to it. In the letters, however, the calls before the Words, psalms, hymn still remain: "Read it!"

The minister also wrote about the proper way of reading the Bible. He said that one should read the Bible before going to bed, but never in bed (!) and before and after reading the Bible one should pray, and should think about the given gospel passage. He also recommended reading the Bible as a whole family occasion.³²

In the *Pastoral Letters* Bonczidai also dealt with the Transylvanian Calvinist press, journals and books, he advertised them and made summaries of

²⁷ PL. No. 34.

²⁸ PL. No. 3.

²⁹ PL. No. 5.

³⁰ PL. No. 4.

³¹ PL. No. 14.

³² PL. No. 2.

their contents. He operated a small library too, from which the people could borrow these books. He drew attention to the real value of these written texts: he emphasized that one should not use them to light a fire, but instead keep them for later reading. “Brother! Do not use the *Harangszó* [Bell-Peal] to light a fire, to pack bacon, but collect it, so as you can read it years later!”³³

Dezső Bonczidai in his letters also deals with the distribution of Calvinist newspapers and other documents. From the texts we know that the congregation of Kide regularly purchased the Calvinist children’s journal *Az Én Kicsinyeim* [My Little Children] (twelve copies in 1932), and in January 1934 the minister ordered 25 copies of the *Református Újság* [Calvinist Paper] which had come out since 1933. In addition to these, it was mostly the *Református Naptár* [Calvinist Calendar] and the *Harangszó* [Bell-Peal] which reached the people of Kide. Several times there is a call or an encouragement to buy and read them. According to his opinion, no “thoughtful” Calvinist can go without the Calvinist calendar, and should not buy any other calendar.

The letters also had a function, to share information. There are many examples of the religious and other kinds of events in the village, and other news that affected the community, such as the introduction of a new church tax book or the deadline for registering for a confirmation etc. In some letters he even included the detailed programme of the events.³⁴ Through these, the former members of the congregation come alive for today’s reader: for example, who recited a poem and what that poem was or who sang a hymn. Based on the letters we can reconstruct the religious events of the congregation. Bonczidai also published the participation rate of these events.³⁵

A very interesting part of the letters is the local narratives. The minister also used his letters to collect data from the local oral tradition about Kide’s history, so that he could construct a local history about Kide with which the villagers could identify then and in the future. He published it in serials: firstly, the history of the village;³⁶ secondly, the different church histories, such as the Calvinist, Unitarian, Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Church History of Kide; and thirdly, the description of these churches.³⁷ He made the former community of the village visible by lists of names, includ-

³³ PL. No. 14.

³⁴ PL. No. 7; 11; 17.

³⁵ PL. No. 21.

³⁶ PL. No. 2.

³⁷ PL. Nos. 3; 4; 6; 9; 10.

ing those of noble families in Kide,³⁸ the Calvinist ministers,³⁹ clerks and curators in Kide,⁴⁰ and the main supporters of the church.⁴¹

However these *Pastoral Letters* were not only about Kide. In his letters Bonczidai referred to the problems of the modern world, too. One can see, that for him it was important to write about the history of Kide, but he placed the life of the Hungarians in Kide into a wider, global context. Several times he referred to the minority status of the Hungarians in Transylvania, the problems of modernity such as wars, alcoholism, the situation of orphans and servants, the Great Depression etc. Headlines, news, current events, true stories, tales, anecdotes, dreams from Paris to Mexico, from Manchuria through Russia to Budapest appeared in his letters. From the informants it is known that in the 1930s only the Unitarian and Calvinist ministers and the Catholic priest had a radio, and there were villagers who never left Kide in their whole life. What did these news items mean for someone from Kide? Among the educative purposes of the pastor we already have seen the dissemination of knowledge and information. With this aspect of the letters he helps in shifting the horizon from the enclosure of the homeland, by establishing the possibility of breaking out from the uniformity of the place.⁴² From this point of view it can be seen why his letters were so significant.

What was the villagers' reaction to this new form of communication? How did they read the letters? Unfortunately, very little is known about this. From the first letters it can be seen that a few families complained that they did not get a copy of the *Pastoral Letters*, which in my opinion implies that they would have liked to get them, that is, they were interested in them.⁴³ However, there were also families or persons who were even against them, so it divided the community. For example, there was an anonymous writer, who in his letter to Bonczidai criticized his ministry and in particular his *Pastoral Letters*. We know that from the 22nd *Pastoral Letter* because Bonczidai answered this anonymous writer in public. The anonymous villager confronted the pastor in many respects. It is significant that he chose the form of a letter, maybe because of the habit of communication started by Bonczidai.

Is there any information about how the villagers did read the letters? For this, only fieldwork interviews can give proper answers. For example,

³⁸ PL. No. 3.

³⁹ PL. No. 18.

⁴⁰ PL. No. 19.

⁴¹ PL. Nos 2; 14; 19; 21; 22; 23; 24; 25.

⁴² See Bausinger 1986.

⁴³ PL. No. 13.

one of my informants could quote from the letter literally, so I assume that he read the letter several times in his life. Also, this same informant said that his father used to read it aloud to the whole family.⁴⁴ It is also significant that many of the villagers kept the letters, but everybody (including those who did not) considered them important because of the parts about the Church and village history in them. When Dezső Bonczidai died in 1946 the Church Elders of Kide summarized what he did for the congregation. In this summary they commemorated his *Pastoral Letters*: “for years he edited and wrote informative and valuable *Pastoral Letters* to the families of the congregation and he did it with his own hands.”⁴⁵ Since they wrote it eleven years after the last *Pastoral Letter* was circulated, I assume they still considered them important.

Understanding Dezső Bonczidai’s Pastoral Letters

At the beginning of this article I stated that Bonczidai’s *Pastoral Letters* were unique. This seems to be true, because no similar Hungarian pastoral activity from that time has yet been found. But was Bonczidai an exceptional minister? Was he an eccentric graphomane? Where did he get these ideas, and where did he get the samples and patterns for his letters? If we look at Bonczidai in his immediate context we can understand it. In the Protestant village communities of that time, ministers always had a key role in everyday religious life: they were the intellectual leaders of the villages (Kósa 1993:20; Keszeg 2008a:17–19; Keszeg & Becze 2001:16). In the nineteenth century, as a counter to secularization, every historic Church carried out missionary activities with inner reforms (Szigeti 2004). In the Hungarian Calvinist Church the “home mission” began in the first third of the twentieth century. Their aim was to deepen the religious life through regular Bible reading, praying, singing and other forms of home worship. In accordance with this the role of the pastor changed. Later, after the Trianon Peace Treaty, the roles of the Transylvanian ministers extended further (Kósa 1993:22). Between the two World Wars, the Transylvanian Calvinist Church not only undertook the cherishing of the Hungarian folk traditions, but also the improvement of the standard of village life, and the education of the peasants (Ozsváth 2011:241). With the institutions of the home mission they made a unified system for each age group and sex. They set up Sunday Schools, Bible circles for girls and boys, Women’s Associations, Men’s Associations, Camps and Conferences and so on (Nagy 1991:330; Buzogány 2000). This unified system was very important because in Romania after Trianon the

⁴⁴ For reading aloud see: Szabó 1981; Keszeg 2008b:69; Lyons 2013:250.

⁴⁵ Pj = Presbiteri jegyzőkönyv (1928–1946).



Figure 5. Cover page of the *Erdélyi Református Naptár* [Transylvanian Calvinist Calendar], 1933.

existing Hungarian organisations of civil society became illegal, but within the Church they remained legal. The Church and the minister had become the symbol of national survival (Keszeg & Becze 2001:16).

Contributing to this, after Trianon, the Calvinist press went through an explosive development (Sipos 2002). They launched periodicals for each age group and sex, from children to women, from boys to men, from peasants to university students. This can be well illustrated by the cover page of the *Erdélyi Református Naptár* [Transylvanian Calvinist Calendar], which depicts a rural family where every figure – from the father to the children – holds a book or booklet and reads. (See figure 5.)

László Ravasz, a prominent figure of the Calvinist Home Mission said “The pealing bell is

the press, the press is the church, and whoever supports the Church press, builds the Church.”⁴⁶ A good example of this press craziness is that just for a three-day Calvinist camp the participants launched a handwritten newspaper called *Tábortűz*, which means *Campfire*. (See figures 6a & 6b.)

Dezső Bonczidai attended the Calvinist Theological College at a time when great figures and deep thinkers of the Transylvanian Calvinist Home Mission were teachers (Kozma & Hatházy 1996). He learned the patterns of how to be a “bonus pastor” from these teachers (Imre 1922). He thought that it did not matter if the Kide Congregation was not able to afford the Calvinist periodicals. He started to compose his own handwritten free newspaper based on the religious periodicals, and he did it in such a brilliant way that it met all the requirements and ideals of the Home Mission. He

⁴⁶ This slogan by László Ravasz was used in Calvinist newspapers between the wars as an advertisement to buy more of the Calvinist religious press; see, for example, *Református Ifjúság* [Calvinist Youth] 1936. III (9–10). Pp. 76.

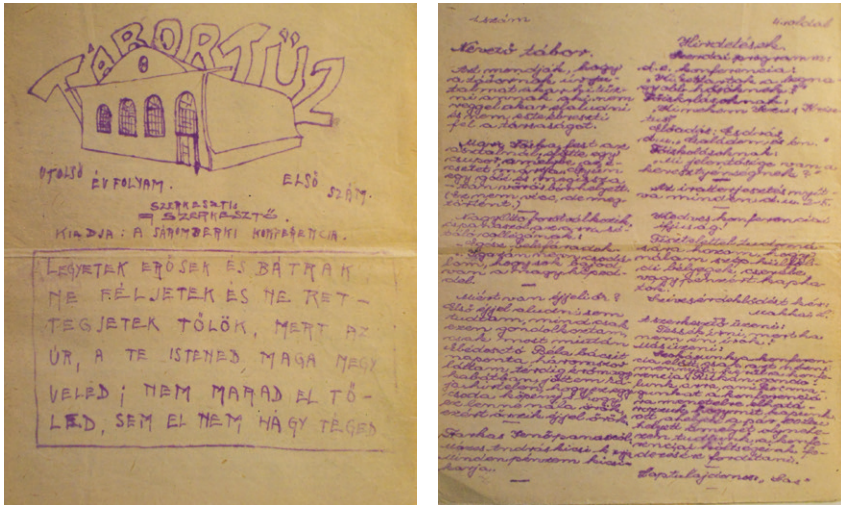


Figure 6a & 6b. *Tábortűz* [Campfire] launched for a 3-day camp.

chose the genre of letter by which he achieved the most important goal of the Home Mission: he made religion more personal, because everybody felt themselves spoken to.

From the ministers it was also expected to write about the history of their congregation (Nagy 1938; Imre et al 1937–1938) and Bonczidai chose his Letters to do this. He educated the people by providing information about the world in his letters, and by setting up a library.

Dezső Bonczidai was a “normal exception” as the microhistorians use this term (Levi 1989; Szijártó & Magnússon, 2013:149–150). In his figure and in his activity, the life and problems of an era and a very new form of a religious communication system were brought together and crystallized. His case also illustrates how a small godforsaken Transylvanian village reacted to this innovation/reform at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ Today this kind of activity is common, almost every congregation has its own newsletter or newspaper, but back in that time with his *Pastoral Letters* he was a pioneer in Transylvania.

⁴⁷ See also the newest book of Martyn Lyons where he explains how literary practices from below can give us a “new history from below”. He argued that “writings of the individuals concerned help us to address some significant issues” (Lyons 2013:16).

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 Vizitációs jegyzőkönyvek (1913–1952) [Visitation Protocols]
 Belmissziói jelentések (1940–1946) [Home mission reports]
 KRE = Kidei Református Egyházközség irattára [Records of the Calvinist Parish of Kide]
 Pj = Presbiteri jegyzőkönyv (1928–1946) [Minutes of the Kide Presbytery]
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