

A Dream Come True.

The New Beginning of the Budapest-Fasori Lutheran High School in September 1989

PROLOGUE

From the beginning of Lutheran presence in Hungary in the early 16th century, one of the strongest public services of *Hungarian* Lutherans has been education. When I speak about Hungarian Lutherans in the 16th century, I must add, that these people regarded themselves as subjects of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom, but their ethnic background and mother tongue was often other than Hungarian, mainly German or Slovak, but we also find among the significant Lutheran reformers people of Serbian, Croatian or Romanian origin. Two hundred years later, when the first Lutheran citizen was allowed to settle in the city of Pest, now a part of Budapest, and the Lutheran community started her life here, this community was also comprised of German, Slovak and Hungarian speaking Lutherans. This three-language community established the Lutheran school in the city, which reached the rank of a high-school by 1823. So, this community had to learn and practice a delicate cooperation within its different parts early on. Within the greater society, this community was regarded a minority with less social possibilities in two senses, both as non-Catholic and non-Hungarian speaking people. They recognised early on that moving upwards from their minority status was served best by educating their children.

Pursuing their purpose, Lutherans in the city of Pest got a powerful ally in the rapidly growing Jewish community. Jews in Pest, similarly to Lutherans, were in a double minority situation, both for their different language and for their different religion, and their strategy to leave their disadvantageous situation behind, was similar to that of Lutherans too, that is, education. Since the Jewish community did not establish her own school for a long time, it became an obvious choice for Jewish families to send their children to the Lutheran school. So, Lutherans and Jews, who believed in education, made the Lutheran school in Budapest a high school of high reputation. By the beginning of the 20th century, the building of the school had been outgrown, and the Lutheran Church decided to build a brand-new second building for the male pupils. From that time on girls attended the old Deák square school and boys attended the new Fasor school.

Buildings of worship and of schools clearly signify this development. When the first Lutheran and Jewish citizens settled in the city of Pest, in the last decade of the 18th century, there were only Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches behind the walls of the city – just as they are now. Outside the walls have the sacred buildings of the new religious communities been built, the Lutheran Church at Deák square at 1811, the Reformed Church at Kálvin square at 1830, and the Synagogue at Dohány street at 1859. These buildings are now connected by Little Boulevard, an iconic street of downtown Budapest. During the coming decades the city was rapidly growing. The building of the Fasor school was erected at 1904, well beyond Grand Boulevard, place of summer houses and gardens at that time, close to City Park. I think, the idea behind the selection of the place of the school was to find the closest possible location which is still empty enough to house of the ambitious combination of a church and a school. Around the church also a new Lutheran congregation started to be formed.

At first the main income of the schools was the tutorial fee paid by the families of the pupils. In 1894 the Lutheran Church, alongside the Reformed Church and the Israelite Community, become established churches by Hungarian Law, from that time they got finances from the state as well. In 1924, for example, the 87.5% of the salaries of the teachers came from the state, the remaining 12.5% from the Lutheran Church.¹

¹ Gyapay 1989: 108.

The golden decades for both schools lasted up to the 1940s, with several of their former pupils earning an international reputation. I mention only one pupil by name here, who will later play a crucial role in our story: Jenő Wigner, the Nobel-prize winner nuclear physicist, part of the Manhattan project.² After the Communist takeover, the Lutheran Church was deprived of all of its schools, except of the two high-schools of Pest. Being much smaller than the Catholic and the Reformed Church (at that time there were some six million Catholic, two million Reformed and four hundred thousand Lutheran believers in Hungary), by 1952, the Lutheran Church had to give up the last two remaining schools too, because of her lack of finances. This situation was in full comfort with the policy of the Communist Party: churches should not meet young people outside the walls of church buildings and parishes. Thirty years later, in 1982, our story began.

1982

First, I share two stories from the early autumn of 1982, that happened about the same time. In the first story I introduce myself to you: I was a student, age 20, just beginning my theological studies at the Lutheran Theological Academy, the only University of the Lutheran Church, located in the 14th district of Budapest. As it was customary at the Academy, freshers were introduced to the older students during an excursion. As a part of the excursion, the fourteen freshers of the Academy were made to stand in front of the building of the Fásor School, and were asked whether this building had any connection to the Lutheran Church. None of us knew about the connection. Thirty years of silence in a Communist dictatorship was long enough to wash away the memory of the school, making it unknown for the younger generation.

Around the same time, a delegation of the Lutheran Church was travelling from Budapest to Bratislava by train. The delegation consisted of four people: the Presiding Bishop (the elder bishop among the two Lutheran bishops at the time), Zoltán Káldy; two Professors of the Lutheran Theological Academy, Tibor Fabiny and János Selmeczi, and the Foreign Secretary of the church, András Reuss. All the four men belonged to the church leadership that was carefully chosen and severely controlled by the Communist government. As the only person still alive of the four, András Reuss just recently told to a rather big audience,³ that professor Fabiny kept pushing the bishop Káldy during the whole round trip to try to ask back the Fásor School from the state, and the bishop kept arguing with him, saying, that it was impossible, there was nothing to do with.

So, with these two memories begins my narrative just to show in advance where it ends: in less than a seven years' time from this beginning, on the 2 September 1989, still during the time of the Communist dictatorship, seven weeks before the Republic of Hungary was declared instead of the People's Republic, and ten weeks before the wall in Berlin came down, our school started its school-year again. The opening ceremony of the school was declared as the national opening ceremony, broadcasted on TV, whose speaker was Ferenc Glatz, the Minister of Education. The whole country watched, and some of us, who followed the way to this event, regarded it as a miracle. In the following paragraphs I will share you some details of this miracle.

1984

This year brought one of the most important events in the last hundred years of the Lutheran Church in Hungary: the Lutheran World Federation held her World Assembly in Budapest. The LWF, established in 1947, includes over 50 million Lutherans in the five continents, has her World Assemblies in every seventh years. Before 1984 the LWF never had an Assembly on the eastern side of the iron curtain. Its leaders were quite sensitive to oppressive regimes, they rejected, for example, the invitation of the Lutheran Church in Brazil in 1970, considering the political climate of Brazil not free enough to host a community as pluralist as world-wide Lutheranism. So, a decision

² To name some other famous pupils: the mathematician János Neumann, also part of the Manhattan project, the poet György Faludy and the Nobel prize winner economist János Harsányi.

³ At the memorial service of professor Tibor Fabiny on the 100th anniversary of his birth, in Deák square Lutheran Church, the 22 September 2024.

in favour of Budapest during the Cold War was also a sort of hopeful statement on the part of the leadership of the LWF, that a country, east of the iron curtain, might be open and tolerant enough to host an Assembly. The preparation of the Assembly began years before 1984, involving thousands of people of the participating church leaderships, their contacts in the respective governments, and naturally, officers and agents of the secret services on both sides of the iron curtain. To put it very simply: those in favour of the Budapest Assembly in 1984 had apparently a clear knowledge of the still severe control of the whole society and also the churches in a Communist country, but they had also some hope to gain something important by this endeavour. In the East people hoped for a presentation of socialism with a human face that is able to tolerate some degree of freedom and public religious belief, while in the West people hoped for some inspiration of practices of liberty smuggled behind the iron curtain and leave them there to find their own way among the citizens of the so-called Peoples' Republic. In short, both hopes were fulfilled and the Assembly was regarded a great success. In Hungary, our Presiding Bishop, whom I introduced to you as the chief opposing leader of asking back the Fásor School from the state, succeeded in having elected as the president of the Lutheran World Federation. On the other hand, Hungarian participators, myself, as a student among them, and people from countries of the Eastern bloc could gain personal experiences that were otherwise out of their reach. We could rarely travel to the Western side of the world that time, but people from the West travelled to us and stayed with us for weeks to share experiences and enjoy personal relationships.

Beyond these hopes something unexpected happened that overruled the visions of those who wished for a slow process of change. A Hungarian Lutheran pastor, New Testament scholar Zoltán Dóka, who spent some research time in West Germany during the weeks of the Assembly, wrote an open letter to the leaders of the LWF in which he pointed out the oppressive character of the leadership of the Hungarian Lutheran Church, and especially the heavy-handed leadership style of the bishop Zoltán Káldy. The leaders of the LWF ignored the letter, but it was soon translated into Hungarian and distributed in hundreds of copies, thanks to, significantly, the very first photocopy machine, which the LWF administration brought to Budapest and made available for our church. After the Assembly ended and the foreign visitors left the country, bishop Káldy tried to punish pastor Dóka, but his village congregation supported him, and also a significant number of Lutheran pastors expressed in an anonymous voting, ordered by the Presiding Bishop, that they did not agree with punishing him for his open letter. The public statement of this single pastor became a starting event for a lot of discussions, carried out in informal circles in several Lutheran congregations all over the country.

Besides the Assembly and its outcomes, one more important event happened at 1984. For the first time after 1952, several former pupils came together in the parish building of the Fásor Lutheran Congregation. The meeting, full of hopes and emotions, eventually led to the formal establishment of the Fásor Alumni Society, consisting of about 40 people, most of them persons of standing. The Alumni Society joined the Patriotic People's Front, an organisation created by the Communist party to make room for those people who did not want to be members of the Party but wanted to do some voluntary public service for their local community. The Alumni Society made his basis in the 7th district of Budapest, where the school is located, thus making himself part of the public life that was tacitly supported by the Party. The Society, while cannot mention the plan for re-opening the Fásor School in his public messages, held regular meetings for nurturing the memory of the school. In a way, he became a rather effective pressure group for keeping the topic of re-opening the school alive.⁴

1986

Bishop Zoltán Káldy, the president of the Lutheran World Federation, got a stroke in the winter of 1985, and from this time on he was unable to fulfil his leading role until he eventually died in the spring of 1987. From the beginning of his illness, bishop Gyula Nagy, the other bishop led the Lutheran Church (he ordained the eight young pastors, myself among them, who finished their

⁴ Gábor Gyapay, the first principal of the new Fásor school, gave a detailed account of the role of the Alumni Society in the re-opening of the school. See Gyapay 1997 and 1998.

studies in June 1987, out of the fourteen freshers of 1982). In the spring of 1986, a public reform community was established around the pastor Zoltán Dóka, calling herself "Brotherly Message" (Testvéri Szó in Hungarian). This reform community issued a brief memorandum about changes in the inner life of the Lutheran Church in Hungary, for a more democratic practice. As one of its points the memorandum mentioned the re-opening of the Fásor School as well. The memorandum was signed by 19 people, 10 pastors and 9 civil members of the church, it was regarded as quite a big number of people of public opinion at the time. The organizers of the community were cautious enough not to allow students of theology and young pastors still without a mandate given by a congregation to sign the memorandum, because they could have been easily removed from the church by the authorities. So, young people, inspired by the events of the Assembly two years earlier, followed the life of the reform community from the outside. Among the pastors, my sister signed the memorandum, through her I had some more personal view of the inner life of Brotherly Message.

The plan of re-opening the school got a visible support also from abroad. Jenő Wigner, one of the most famous alumni of the Fásor School, age 84 that year, published a short article in the United States, in which he wondered whether the school might be opened again. This article received considerable attention both abroad and in Hungary.

The reform community and his message had not got any reflection in the official mediums of the church, but became a topic of several informal discussions. The church leadership organised a co-ordination between the reform community and themselves, but there was no result, neither did the public get any relevant news about it. The message, considering the Fásor School, was able to reach official church life eight months later, at the National Assembly of the Lutheran Church. National Assemblies during the Communist Party State happened once in every three years. They lasted half a day, and loyal delegates usually accepted all the suggestions coming from the church leadership. At November 1986 it happened the usual way. Although a member of Brotherly Message community could convince bishop Nagy to put the question of the re-opening the school into the agenda of the Assembly, no advance was made. The leadership recognised the request and decided to answer it at the next National Assembly, that is, November 1989.

However, the usual way of the Assembly got an unexpected challenge. Students of the Lutheran Theological Academy were obliged to take part at the Assembly. We sat at the gallery of the assembly hall, joined by a civil member of the Brotherly Message community, who started clapping when the decision about the Fásor School was declared. All the thirty students joined him in clapping, so we made a considerable noise in the gallery. When we came down from the gallery after the Assembly ended, a young but influential Lutheran pastor was waiting for us and threatened us one by one for being part of such a noisy unrest.

1988

The year 1987 was spent with several attempts to move the issue of the Fásor School forward. Both the Alumni Society and the Brotherly Message community tried to convince the bishop Nagy and the church leadership about the possibility of the school. The church leadership, backed by the State Office of Church Affairs and the Ministry of Education, was successful in raising objections against the school. It was obvious, that the Communist Party did not want to give up its monopoly of teaching young people, and they raised financial problems that made, in their opinion, a school run by the Lutheran Church, impossible. The church leadership accepted this argumentation, and, it seemed, the issue of the school got into an impasse. However, members of the reform movement, as well as, the alumni, could talk to more and more influential and reform minded leaders of the Communist party state. Some alumni were members of the Parliament, that did not make sovereign decisions that time, nevertheless, it served as a forum for sometimes challenging ideas. These talks finally reached the highest level of the leadership of the Party. According to the historical reconstruction⁵ of a civil member of Brotherly Message community, professor Róbert Frenkl,

5 Frenkl 2000.

who later became the first lay leader of the Lutheran Church in Hungary, the decision in favour of the Fazor School was made by the Head of the Party's Department of Agitation and Propaganda, in February 1988. Since there is no written document of this decision available to us, Frenkl thought that, according to the typical ways of the time, János Berecz, the Head of the Department, gave an oral command to Imre Miklós, the Head of the State Office of Church Affairs and Béla Köpeczi, the Minister of Education to start new negotiations with the leadership of the Lutheran Church which would lead to the re-opening the Fazor School.

In the summer of 1989 the State Office of Church Affairs, a frightening department of the Communist Party State for decades, was disbanded. On 2 September the Fazor School started her new period of life. The details of the start, and also the 35 years of this the new period are parts of a different story.

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