

**„Ha levelem elolvastad, add tovább”: Bonczidai
Dezső kéziratos gyülekezeti levelei a két
világháború közötti Kide. [“Once you have read
my letter, pass it on”: Handwritten letters sent by
Dezső Bonczidai to his congregation in Kide
between the two world wars. Edited and with an
introductory essay by Emese Ilyefalvi].**

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BOOK REVIEW

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Nowadays, everyone and everything has a Facebook page, blog, podcast, and website. Reading the pastoral newsletters, written between 1932 and 1935, that are the subject of this volume, one might think that Dezső Bonczidai (1902–1946), a Calvinist minister in the Hungarian village of Kide (now Chidea, in Cluj County, Romania), invented the genre a hundred years ago. His small, booklet-style newsletters were handwritten for members of his congregation in the isolated village near Cluj-Napoca long before the advent of the Internet. (Of course, as one reads further into the volume, it becomes clear that the minister was by no means ahead of his era but

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was very much a man of his time.) These are not newsletters in the modern sense, but rather a means of evangelism, education, and moral guidance. Even today, it is uncommon for a minister to take such care of his congregation and offer “home delivery” of the Word. The minister’s vocation was brought to the attention of folklorist Emese Ilyefalvi, the editor of the volume, during her fieldwork in the village between 2007 and 2009. In connection with her ethnographic collecting work, she describes how “Endre Beke, a deeply religious and devout old man, spoke warmly about Dezső Bonczidai, the late Calvinist minister of Kide.” Since the minister’s letters were still preserved by several of the villagers after almost a century, and since his personality remained alive in the collective memory, the possibility for analysis naturally presented itself. The editor managed to collect and publish a total of forty numbered letters in her book.

So, what is there to know about the minister’s newsletters? For three years, starting on October 16, 1932, Dezső Bonczidai produced handwritten, eight-page, semi-official, semi-private newsletters in booklet format for his parishioners in the village. (He spent 18 years in the village and began producing the newsletters after four years, writing nothing in his last 10–11 years other than individual letters connected with atypical events.) He wrote the booklets by hand, even producing handwritten copies of them himself. Not everyone received their own copy, of course: it was understood that the newsletters were to be passed around the village. These facts alone raised numerous questions in the editor’s mind, since church use of the printed press in Transylvania had seen a huge upturn during this period. The question then, if Reformed periodicals were available in the region, why was there any need for a local, handwritten version? Was there a special demand for it? One might also ask why the minister wrote the letters by hand, and whether the fact that they were handwritten lent a particular quality to their contents. Or was it the subject matter that was unique? Were these booklets read and used by the villagers? Or was the writer simply an “oddball”?

Taking these questions as her starting point, Ilyefalvi begins her analysis with a description of the broader social context of the letters and of their place in the history of religion and the press, which is of enormous help in the interpretation of the source corpus. She briefly introduces the contemporary Hungarian church press, the career paths of ministers in the examined region and period, and the Hungarian/Transylvanian Calvinist home mission that forms the background to the letters.

From this, it becomes clear that although Dezső Bonczidai was an extraordinary character in many respects, he was by no means an oddball. His career is undeniably fascinating, and there is certainly something exceptional about him. Thus, for example, Bonczidai preached sermons in his own village church as a 14-year-old schoolboy, then stood in for the local minister on Sundays for six months. At the age of 15–16, he was taken by his religious studies teacher to visit congregations in Szilágy (Sălaj) County (a region of Romania to the north of Cluj-Napoca), where they delivered sermons and collected donations. Despite his evident talents, or perhaps because of them, the young minister was appointed to the particularly challenging parish of Kide.

It is here that the editor’s two brief, context-setting chapters come into their own. In the first, she describes the village, isolated due to its unfavorable geographical situation, while in the other, remarkable chapter, she explores the relationship between the minister and the village. What we discover in these chapters is that the minister was not welcomed, and that he encountered passivity and destitution. Unsurprisingly, he wrote of himself: “What more can I say? I have often despaired, often momentarily regretted becoming a priest, on seeing the conflicts and



materialism among them. ...You'll be left behind. You'll be left in Kide, from where everyone else always escapes." But, unlike his predecessors, Dezső Bonczidai did not move on; instead, he fulfilled his vocation as a minister for eighteen years, with self-sacrifice and devotion. He was a good preacher, a musician, and a choirmaster, and his parishioners became very attached to him. From the above, the author concludes that we are dealing here with a man who shaped the life of the settlement between the two world wars.

This biographical sketch is supplemented by all those brief chapters that situate the minister within his own contemporary milieu. These are the sections of the book in which the editor introduces the particular features of the ministerial vocation in Transylvania between the two world wars, as well as the Calvinist Church press, thereby contributing to our understanding of Dezső Bonczidai's role as a minister. We learn that he was an ardent and committed supporter of the emerging Hungarian protestant home mission efforts and a perfect embodiment of the pastoral ideal of the 1920s. His most significant pastoral challenge was the village itself, situated "in the back of beyond" and served by a succession of ministers who regarded being sent there as a kind of exile. Initially, Dezső Bonczidai shared this sentiment and was keen to leave, although in the end he decided to stay, and by means of his letters he struggled against conditions in the village in order to foster the growth of a more vibrant, truly Christian community, in keeping with the ideals of the internal mission. (In fact, this "written missionary activity" lasted for just three years, and we have no information as to why it ended.) He hoped that his letters would improve the effectiveness of his pastoral work and help his parishioners to adopt the behavior expected of Calvinists. His letters offer an insight into local religion and the village community's attitude towards the church's expectations, shedding light on specific aspects of both official and local/folk religiosity. 1. The impact of efforts to renew denominational life in the early years of the century (counterbalancing the tendencies towards secularization); 2. The Hungarian community's new situation as a minority, as a result of the Treaty of Trianon that brought to an end the First World War; in this context, religion became an important means of maintaining, preserving, and propagating national identity, while the minister became a kind of village apostle, an educator of the people; and 3. The missionary functions of the church press and printed materials.

These introductory sections are perhaps key to an understanding of the book and of the "Dezső Bonczidai phenomenon," revealing as they do that we are not dealing with an eccentric but rather with a minister marked by the characteristic features of the period, the perfect embodiment of the Transylvanian pastoral ideal of the 1920s.

Before presenting the letters themselves, the editor makes some brief observations concerning literacy. Here, Emese Ilyefalvi highlights the important role these letters played in enhancing the effectiveness of local church life and in presenting the issues for which the local church representative was responsible. Thus, for example, we learn about weekly and annual church events (*Religious occasions – The organization of congregational life*); behavioral problems, difficulties, and conflicts among members of the community (*Church expectations – local customs*); and the role of the priest in popular education and cultural mediation (*Bible reading, book culture, and knowledge dissemination*). The booklets also cover issues such as *Letters and correspondence* and *Nurturing the spiritual life, the message of the Gospel*. The editor also points out that it is not only local religion but sometimes also local historical narratives that are discussed in the letters (*Local stories*). Lastly, the editor highlights the minister's reflections on modernity in her overview of the contents (*World news – The problems of modernity*). As the author



emphasizes in her analysis, these themes might also be a means of expanding the horizons mentioned by Bausinger and breaking free of the confines of one's own birthplace. Emese Ilyefalvi's sensitivity to the anthropology of reading is reflected in her attention to the recipients' perspective, and her focus on how these letters were read and used.

After the introductory sections, which constitute approximately one-third of the book, we find the forty letters written by Dezső Bonczidai. To whet the reader's appetite, I quote here two short but typical excerpts from the letters. The first message featured in the pastoral letter written on August 6, 1933, and is couched in the form of short, straightforward, succinct questions: "*Have you paid your church tax? Why not? When did you pay it?*" Assertive directives of this kind can be found throughout the letters, providing an insight into the minister's struggles with his flock. Written at Christmas 1933 on the subject of maternal love, the second excerpt, from letter 29, testifies to the modernity of the minister's views and his appreciation of the domestic work performed by women:

"In the holy miracle of Christmas, *God* used a *mother*, Mary, to carry out his plan. Thus, on this feast day, you too should remember your mother and her great love.

A French minister once calculated how much work was performed by a mother in a family of six. He calculated that in the course of 20 years she peeled 87,000 potatoes, mended 10,400 stockings, made 29,300 beds, buttered 175,200 loaves of bread, and kissed the members of her family 45,000 times."

The last third of the volume contains documents closely related to Dezső Bonczidai's work: a brief autobiography of the minister, written in 1943; a 1930 issue of the journal *Út* [Road], with the title *Rules of Church Discipline*; official letters written by the minister, his wife, and a Unitarian assistant pastor to the dean (the pastoral president of the diocese); and, finally, extracts from the minutes of the presbytery of the parish of Kide. These sources clearly corroborate the more general phenomena described in the introductory chapters (the relationship between priest and parish and priest and diocese, and the situation and condition of the parish).

The source edition ends with a list of sources, a bibliography, an index of placenames, and illustrations. These illustrations deserve a detailed examination, since they reveal that Dezső Bonczidai not only handwrote his pastoral letters to his congregation but also wrote, and even illustrated, posters and flyers for his programs. The volume ends with an English- and Romanian-language summary.

Emese Ilyefalvi's fieldwork, source exploration, and related archival research began in 2007 and took many long years to complete. The length of this process may well have contributed to the creation of a source publication that is exemplary in its methodological approach and the diversity of its perspectives. Although this is a relatively small source corpus, the editor has demonstrated an excellent understanding of the literacy-related, historical, pastoral, and ethnographical aspects that make this analysis a suitable means for grasping larger and more comprehensive phenomena. As a result, the publication can serve as a methodological model for the examination of other, similar texts that have been less researched.

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