

To Erzsébet Borbáth,  
with many thanks for all that I have learnt from her

This essay was written by a teacher. All teachers - and among them I myself - would prefer dealing with educational and methodological questions and concentrating on children rather than politics and political aspects of education. However, teaching Hungarian to Moldavian Csángó children is not free of politics at all. It was not like that in the 1950s, and after 1990 it became a political question again<sup>1</sup>. I myself - similarly to twelve of my colleagues who, in January 2002, still cannot choose but teach Hungarian to Moldavian Csángó Hungarian children outside school in their homeland - would like to teach my subject (Hungarian language and literature) in the official Romanian state school.

However, this is not possible despite the will of many Csángó parents. In fact, Romanian authorities do all to put an end to the extra-curricular teaching of Hungarian language<sup>2</sup>.

But the task of teachers is to teach, so we found the way to teach the language of their parents to children in Moldavia, as well as those teachers in Transylvania who taught Hungarian to lots of Csángó students in the last ten years.

In this essay I try to summarize the events leading to the presents situation and also outline the possibilities and chances of teaching Hungarian in Moldavia today.

It seems necessary to mention several historical facts to make the antecedents of the present educational conception clear. Thus we have to refer to the attempts at education made by the Magyar Népi Szövetség (Hungarian People's Association) in the 1950s. In 1948 and 1949 Hungarian classes started all over Moldavia. It occurred that the only language of instruction in a village was Hungarian, but in many cases Romanian and Hungarian education ran parallel. There used to exist a Hungarian teacher's training college in Bákó (Bacău). However, these were all brought to an end from the mid-1950s. Most schools were ordered to be closed in the autumn of 1953. In 1956 Hungarian became a subject in Romanian schools in many towns and villages, but two years later, in 1958 and 1959 Hungarian was expelled from schools<sup>3</sup>. Teaching Hungarian has not been allowed since then, but even speaking it in the school yard had been forbidden for many years. Lots of people in Csángó villages can talk about the brutal punishments for using Hungarian at school<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless the lesson drawn from the Hungarian instruction at that period, though it existed only for a few years, might be useful for us. The then students are still with us, and although they are grandparents now they remember their school time. The conclusion drawn from talks with them is clear: those who like to recall the memories of their teachers (mostly primary school teachers) and remember them as good teachers are willing to take a stand for their Hungarian origin and identity and are ready to act in the interest of the survival of their language and culture<sup>5</sup>. Of course, there are lots of other factors influencing people's attitude: family traditions, relatives' attitudes, workplace, connections within the Carpathian Basin etc. At the same time the opposite of the above-mentioned behaviour can also be observed: in villages where the Hungarian teacher's work was not very conscientious, many of the students became hangers-on of the Romanian ideology. This is a lesson we have to draw and learn from.

Now, thirty-five years later, the issue of teaching Hungarian to the Csángós and teaching them in Hungarian is the question of the day again. The silencing decades of communism have been followed by a series of chaotic Csángó-rescuing actions of liberated Hungarian efforts.

As the Csángós had not had any interest group for a long time, then later when it was established it worked with a very low efficiency, there was no organization to coordinate the tasks in the field of education. The Hungarian government and civil sphere were ready to help as well as Hungarian people in Western Europe and Transylvania. These intentions and actions at the beginning of the 1990s were imbued with strong national feelings but mostly lacked professional competence.

What were these attempts?

I. There was a naive initiative in Moldavia which tried to satisfy the demands for teaching Hungarian in Csángó villages but without professional teachers and unsystematically - which makes all kinds of instruction impossible in the long run. Such attempts were that of Mihály Perka in Szabófalva (Săbăoani) and that of József Fazakas and Katalin Fehér in Lészed (Lespezi)<sup>6</sup>. András Duma in Klézse (Cleja) also tried to teach Hungarian to Csángó children for a short time. All these attempts failed, partly because of the objections of the Romanian authorities, and partly because of the shortcomings of the method. The energies put into it were wasted. The efficiency, or rather the inefficiency of this kind of instruction is shown by the fact that only a few of the participating students continued their studies in Hungarian.

II. There were no connections between the instruction mentioned above and the education of the Csángós in Transylvania. The point of the latter system, started at the beginning of the 1990s and still existing, is that Moldavian Csángó children are taken to Hungarian schools in Transylvania. This form is much more efficient since children are taught by professional teachers. However, these teachers were not prepared and made prepared for this special task. An outstanding figure of that period was Erzsébet Borbáth, then head teacher of József Attila Primary School in Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc). It was due to her professional skills, vocation and organizing ability that the whole system escaped failure. Of course, lots of teachers played an important role here, but it is her who unquestionably deserves the credit for the survival of this process for so many years. She was the first to recognize that this was a special educational task and could not be dealt with separately. It was also her who realized that giving lessons to these children was not enough, also their life and fate had to be followed with attention. Thus hundreds of Moldavian Csángó children could learn in Hungarian in schools in Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc), Udvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc), Kovászna (Covasna), Régen (Reghin), Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe), Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia) and Bukarest (București). The enormous expenses of the instruction were covered by the church, the Hungarian government, individuals and entrepreneurs from Romania and abroad. Unfortunately, the task of organization got into the teachers' hands because there was no strong Csángó interest group to take up this job.

I deliberately do not recite statistics showing how many students went to Hungarian classes, how many of them dropped out and how many of them were successful. Numbers seem irrelevant if we think of those children (unfortunately not one, not a dozen, but more than a hundred) in the life of whom this attempt meant a break. A lot of them could not bear the consequences of the careless step of adults and Csángó-rescuers: they were sent to (usually very good) Hungarian schools after the weak Romanian classes. The recruitment of the children was accidental, and we cannot even say now who exactly convinced their parents and assembled the children. The criterion for the pre-selection in the villages was not children's abilities, but in many cases family relations or social conditions. Thus the preparatory summer camps organized by Erzsébet Borbáth and her colleagues meant a secondary selection from a restricted group of children. It must be mentioned that there were some years when there was no pre-selection at all.

At best Csángó classes were set up, in worse cases Csángó children were put among Szekler (Hungarian) pupils to learn. However, the time for transition to and preparation for learning in Hungarian was very short in both cases. Teachers could not pay enough attention to the linguistic, social and cultural closing up of the Csángó children. In such circumstances only the best students could satisfy the requirements<sup>7</sup>.

Teaching Hungarian to Csángó children needs special methodology, lots of attention, skilled teachers and enough time. Experience shows that the more complex an educational problem is the more effort it requires from the teacher, that is the more difficult the language acquisition is the more prepared teachers are needed<sup>8</sup>. In many cases the Csángó dialect of Hungarian language is spoken incorrectly in Csángó villages because of the advanced stage of assimilation. It varies with families and villages whether we can speak about mother tongue, bilingualism, intermingling of languages or language loss in connection with Hungarian<sup>9</sup>.

Pedagogical failure in this field costs dearly, which multiplies the responsibility of teachers and organizers. Moldavian Csángó children at home go to Romanian schools, which are, deliberately, of very poor educational quality. Students leaving these schools are far behind the requirements in each subject. That means that teaching them Hungarian, reading, writing and spelling in Hungarian, and filling up the gaps in their knowledge about Hungary are just some of the problems. These children must be brought to the required level in the other subjects, too. There is another problem with these weak Romanian schools: if a child leaves his or her school let us say at the age of twelve and goes to a Hungarian school on a scholarship, he or she can never come back to the Romanian school later. This leads to a break in many children's life who have to give up their studies in Hungarian schools for some reason, but this cannot be acceptable in any case. Unfortunately, there are lots of sad examples: especially attempts in Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe) and Kovászna (Covasna) ended in failure.

Despite all the difficulties and fiascos, there are some well prepared Csángó students, who, after having left the above-mentioned schools, gave good accounts of themselves at universities in Romania and Hungary, and who will be the Hungarian-speaking intellectual class of the Csángós.

Hungarian-speaking primary school teachers have been instructed at the Teacher's Training College in Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc), most of whom teach in Transylvania, but three of them came home to Puzstina (Pustiana) and one to Dioszén (Gioseni)<sup>10</sup>.

III. A third way of instruction was to send children to secondary school to Hungary. There have been only a few attempts, but it seems that these were even more inefficient than those in Transylvania, since children were not given special attention and it was much more difficult for them to adjust to the world of Hungarian towns and schools.

IV. An international preparatory institute (Nemzetközi Előkészítő Intézet) was also established, but especially in the first few years the drop-out rate was very high, mostly due to the new and entirely different culture and milieu. However, similarly to the instruction in Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc), this school could also escape complete failure owing to the teachers' attitude and work. Ten children could start their studies here every year, but there were terms when these vacancies (with Hungarian state scholarships) were not filled because of the shortcomings of organization. After a preliminary training in Hungarian language and different subjects in this institute, students were given the opportunity to choose a university or college in Hungary where they could start their studies without a real entrance exam. Drop-out rate was really high because, though they could avoid measurement at the entrance exam, later the requirements were the same for everyone. This meant a great trial to the Csángó students, who were far behind the others in

their knowledge of their subjects. Moreover, they found themselves face to face with a totally different new culture in Budapest, Debrecen, Szeged or elsewhere.

The declared aim of the educational attempts in the last decade was to create a Csángó Hungarian intellectual class. Despite all failures, several very estimable young people graduated from Hungarian universities and colleges. Some of them returned home, but most of them did not since their degree is not accepted in Romania. After graduation provision and scholarship guaranteed them for a long time is over, and what remains is the expectation of their returning home and working for Hungarian culture and identity. They must find the way of how they can do it.

Nevertheless, there are good examples. President of the Moldvai Csángómagyarok Szövetsége (Association of Moldavian Csángó Hungarians - hereinafter MCSMSZ) András Bartha, vice president and teacher Jenő Bilibók, teachers Szilvia Róka and Valentin Ghiurca, ethnographer and leader of MCSMSZ in Pusztina (Pustiana) Tinca Nyisztor live and work in their homeland, and this is of greatest importance from the point of view of the Csángós' interests<sup>11</sup>.

The major changes in the state of education of the Moldavian Csángó Hungarians around the turn of the millennium were the following:

1. With the retiring of Erzsébet Borbáth the Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc) centre of the education of Csángó children ceased to exist. This centre was transferred to Gyimesfelsőlök (Lunca de Sus), where parish priest Lajos Berszán (now head teacher) started a school, to which dozens of Csángó children have been coming to learn for three years.
2. Instead of amateur educational attempts extracurricular courses were started in Moldavia in Klézse (Cleja) and Pusztina (Pustiana) in term 2000/2001, with the instruction of specialized teachers. This means mostly teaching Hungarian language in private form, which is considered illegal by the Romanian authorities.
3. Fortunately, recruitment to Hungarian secondary schools is over.
4. A system of summer courses has developed in several villages in Moldavia (e.g. in Magyarfalu /Arini/, Külsőrekecsin /Fundu-Răcăciuni/, Somoska /Șomușca/), in which Hungarian is taught with the participation and help of university students mostly from Hungary.
5. There have been summer camps for Csángó Hungarian children, but these have not been coordinated yet. Some of these camps are of educational character.
6. Interest in higher education in Hungary has increased due to better propagation and the "ripening of the fruits" of the process started in Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc).

The chances or rather the lack of chances of adjusting to official Romanian educational system must be mentioned, too. After 1990 parents in Klézse (Cleja), Pusztina (Pustiana) and Lészped (Lespezi) requested several times that their children could learn Hungarian language at school either as an optional language or as their native language, in 1-4 lessons a week. They did not want education in Hungarian but teaching Hungarian language to their children. At best their petition was registered, but in most cases it was ignored. With the help of various forms of intimidation and humiliation, the Moldavian Romanian nationalist triumvirate (church, state authorities and school) achieved their aim: in no Moldavian village did parents made any request for term 2001/2002. Seeing the possibility of organizing Hungarian courses outside school they gave up the humiliating process of writing requests without results but causing lots of troubles. The MCSMSZ maintains its standpoint according to which the community should claim their legal right, but parents are not so determined. Leaders of the school inspectorate in County Bákó

(Bacău) as well as the authorities and the church declared at a meeting that they do not want to give any chance to the official instruction of Hungarian in Csángó villages<sup>12</sup>. In their opinion the Csángós are of Romanian origin, and some sporadic requests for teaching Hungarian at schools reflect not real parental demand but Hungarian nationalist ambitions all around the Carpathian Basin.

What and with what purpose do we, Hungarian teachers want to teach to Moldavian Csángó Hungarian children?

The aim of teaching might be dual. One is to give a basic experience of "Hungarianness" as wide as possible, sufficient for the children even if they do not continue their studies in Hungarian later to be able to decide what identity they want to choose. It means that we offer another alternative beside Romanian culture by showing the Hungarian one. This "demonstration" must be interesting, taken from life and positively strengthening. Another aim is to bring up an "elite class" by selecting children for further education. In this case children's life should be followed with attention and they should be supported until they are adults. This demands very serious work both from teacher and student, and can be carried out only in a tutorial system.

According to the two aims above, the themes of instruction must be broadened. Topics should vary from the Hungarian alphabet to all sorts of information about Hungary and Hungarians. At each level the main character of the educational process must be the student and not the syllabus. Children should set the pace of instruction, but only those can take part in the so-called "elite" education whose pace is fast enough.

Now I would like to set down to the description of the system which, in my opinion, is essential to the success of teaching Hungarian to Moldavian Csángó children (under the prevailing conditions). The whole system counts on Hungarian help since it is an illusion to expect Romanian state support in cases concerning the Moldavian Csángós. When there is a real chance of the Romanian authorities' considering the question, official instruction will be invited and welcome at once. It is recommended that children from of kindergarten age to the sixth class should be educated in their village. The possibility of extracurricular Hungarian courses must be ensured in each considerable Csángó village.

Professional teachers living (or staying) there would teach children in rented houses. In term 2001/2002 this can be organized in nine villages. Here children will be divided into groups according to age and knowledge of Hungarian. Adults can also take lessons if they want. Courses will be based on a skeleton syllabus, but teachers can adjust them to the actual demands. I would like to emphasize that these points of education and these teachers will be in constant touch with each other, and methodology training and meetings will be held regularly. We hope that we have to rent houses for the courses just for a short time and soon there will be a well-equipped community centre in each village where the lessons can take place.

The basic ideas and the methodology of this kind of instruction are the following:

1. The declared aim in the first year of instruction is to teach the Hungarian alphabet to the children, to teach them to write and read in Hungarian by themselves on their level, and to improve their speaking skills. A secondary aim is to give them an elementary knowledge of Hungary, and also some religious education in Hungarian (words of prayers and the mass, religious songs etc.).
  - a. The alphabet: Compare the Hungarian letters to those in the Romanian alphabet (which is already known). Notice the similarities and differences in writing and

pronunciation, both in the case of vowels and consonants. After going through the whole alphabet (relatively quickly, depending on the group's responsiveness) the new knowledge must be fixed by lots of practice.

- b. Writing skills must be developed in parallel with teaching the alphabet. It is important that children write down quite a great extent of Hungarian texts (they might as well copy them) so that they get familiar with the characters and written forms, then gradually they must pay more and more attention to spelling and correctness. At first children do not have to be corrected except if they make a serious mistake in pronunciation. For instance confusing a and o does not have to be corrected because these sounds are very close to each other in the Moldavian Csángó's language and they can be distinguished from each other only by dint of lots of practice. Lots of exercises must be done concerning the difficult sounds and letters. The principle of gradience must be followed in each case so that the mass of new pieces of information do not seem too much and chaotic.
- c. Reading skills start to develop after getting familiar with the alphabet by means of practising. At first we train by reciting simple but pleasant-sounding poems together. Children can learn to sing the musical version of some of these poems even if they do not understand the content perfectly.

Firstly they have to make friends with the strange sounding - similarly to the strange characters in writing. Children should come to like the sounding of Hungarian language and it should echo in their ears as they hum the songs. When reading together each child needs the text of the poems, possibly decorated with colourful drawings. Gradually the texts can be more and more difficult, and by this we can start extending vocabulary. However, it is important that there be only a few unknown words at one time. These words (got into the language at the time of the language reform, or modern words) are good to be recorded in a vocabulary book.

- d. The point in developing speaking skills is to strengthen children's self-confidence. Children who understand Hungarian but speak it rarely or who have only a passive knowledge of it should learn to speak it confidently, at first just giving short answers to questions, then creating whole sentences.
2. Children must be divided into groups according to age and knowledge of Hungarian.
- Recommended grouping:
- o children of kindergarten age and in the first class
  - o from second to fourth class
  - o from fifth to eighth class
  - o adult groups can be set up where needed

Beginner and advanced level groups can be formed according to the knowledge of the children, the date of their starting the course (many of them join during the term) and their progress.

It is good if children in the kindergarten and in the first class of school are taught by skilled kindergarten teachers. If it is not possible, teachers should apply kindergarten methods. These children are really responsive to learning Hungarian, they do not have any prejudices yet, and they are not influenced adversely at school. Children going to the

first class should come to this group because they do not know the Romanian alphabet yet, but we teach the Hungarian alphabet by comparing it to the Romanian one.

Since the instruction is optional, it is crucial that children want to go to the lessons and enjoy them and themselves.

Application of frontal method, which treats teaching new things as publication of data, is not recommended. The co-operation between teacher and student must be creative and entertaining on each lesson.

The educational character of these lessons is also very important. Mainly those children who are going to continue their studies in Hungarian schools or classes must be prepared for the new, strange, Hungarian environment.

It is also of primary importance to get the children acquainted with the local traditions. It can be carried out with the help of local singers and musicians in each village.

The most important aim is to make children feel positively towards Hungarian language and culture: to make them interested in it (with playfulness), to make them have good experience of it (with preparedness), to make them sure that the language they speak is really Hungarian (with positive feedback), to get them acquainted with elements of Hungarian culture they have not been familiar with so far (during excursions, competitions etc.), and gradually make them prepare for a wholly Hungarian instruction.

Selection of children can be started from the sixth class. They can be chosen and sent to schools to Transylvania according to their knowledge, family background, suitability etc. If we choose and send students attending the sixth or seventh class to learn Hungarian somewhere else, the main point in choosing the destination school must be how willing they are to receive our children. If an educational centre, satisfactory both pedagogically and from the point of view of infrastructure, develops in Gyimesfelsőlök (Lunca de Sus) we will certainly send our children there.

In my opinion, these children could be admitted to a Hungarian school under the following conditions:

1. Possibly students should come from villages where private instruction described above already exists, and they should have a recommendation given by their Hungarian teacher.
2. They should take part in a preparatory summer camp before starting the new school. This camp should be run with the help of specialized teachers and it should last at least a month. During this period students should meet some sections of each subject they are going to learn at the new school so they could acquire the special vocabulary of that field and also improve their knowledge. They should be tested at the end of the camping, and they could be chosen to continue their studies in a Hungarian school on the basis of the test results and also of teachers' opinion.

Students should not change school just before they go to the eighth or twelfth class.

From the ninth class the procedure can be the same as with younger children, but in this case there cannot be one centre of education. Schools must be chosen according to the students' fields of interest and abilities. Thus children starting the ninth class in a Hungarian school, coming either from the Gyimesfelsőlök (Lunca de Sus) centre or from any Moldavian village, must be

given the chance to choose either a grammar school or any kind of vocational or technical school.

In each case the following two conditions must be fulfilled:

1. Students must have daily extra lessons with specialized teachers at least in the first two years of their studies.
2. A private tutor must be appointed to each of them to follow their life with attention and help them work out their problems until they have finished their studies.

This careful provision is essential so that not to lose any child during the educational process, because that would mean a final ending of their studies and a break in their life. That might be an experience which would later turn children against Hungarians and not into spokesmen for them in their community (negative compensation).

The next step after the secondary education and the school-leaving exam is university education, which also must be of free choice. Students, according to their knowledge and ability, should be allowed to continue their studies at a university either in Romania or Hungary.

The budget of the system must be worked out, too. If the expenses cannot be wholly covered, the number of the participating students must be reduced instead of a decline in the quality of education. Financial resources should be granted firstly by the Romanian government but they refuse to subsidize us, so further on we have to rely on financial support by Hungarian cultural spheres.

I hope that a good system can be set up instead of the chaotic confusion of the recent past, and in this educational process Moldavian Csángó students will be the main characters and the winners. And I also hope that the country of which we are minority citizens will understand sooner or later that the Hungarian education of the Csángós is European value and essential to maintain Romania's richness.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Kapalo, 1993 and Pálffy, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For the events of this field in 2001 see Gazda, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> For more data and copies of authentic documents see Vincze, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> For a collection of these see Sylvester, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> For the characteristic features of Csángó identity see Hegyeli, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Csapó, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Summaries of the secondary education in Transylvania: Borbáth - Erőss, 1993; Pálffy, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> In spite of their little knowledge of Hungarian, children can make rapid progress if well-prepared teachers work with them conscientiously. This can be reflected by an anthology of compositions written by Csángó Hungarian children studying in Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc). See Borbáth, 1994a.

<sup>9</sup> Borbáth, 1994b.

<sup>10</sup> They have to teach at official state schools in Romanian. In Pusztina (Pustiana) Silvia Scripcaru and Margit Nyisztor teach only in Romanian at the official school, while Simona Barnat teaches only in Hungarian but outside school. In Dioszén (Gioseni) Mónika Farkas teaches in Romanian at the state school and in Hungarian at home.

<sup>11</sup> Jenő Bilibók, Szilvia Róka and Valentin Ghiurca take part in the extra-curricular educational program as teachers of Hungarian.

<sup>12</sup> It was the first meeting of Dumitru Martinas Society, in which the author of this essay also took part (incognito). The aim of this society is to make the culture of the Csángós as similar to that of the Romanians as possible, that is total assimilation as soon as possible. The leaders of this society are of Csángó origin, and its wide membership (recruited with the help of the church) is not really aware of the true aims of the society. The society and its aims are openly supported by the Romanian government, as it was stated by the prime minister in a television interview.