

ELEK BENEDEK WAS BORN 150 YEARS AGO



Opened at the end of January 2009, the National Széchényi Library's exhibition was the first to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Elek Benedek's birth, thus launching the year-long series of events in the Carpathian Basin.

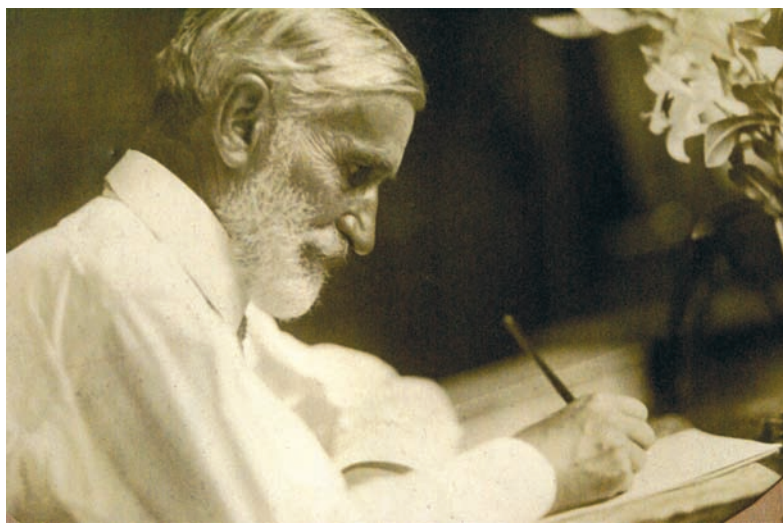
Elek Benedek is generally known as a writer of tales, as "Uncle Elek the story-teller". However, taking a closer look at his career, we see a many-sided and colourful politician, journalist, founder and editor of periodicals and even producer of calendars. Besides writing tales and stories for young readers, he produced fiction, reviews, translations and course books, worked for education, acted as an editor and organized literary life. He was always surrounded by many people and he discovered a number of young talents, who owe their start and career to him. Elek Benedek is a household name for Hungarians, as we meet him from early childhood. It is through his tales that as kindergarten and young school kids we plunge into the world of Hungarian tales and legends. His stories are used for teaching us how to read and write. His translations and renderings are so deeply soaked into our cultural conscience that sometimes it does

not even occur to us that they might have come from another nation. We often quote him, use his turns of phrase and pass on his stories to our children. We take all this for granted and never stop to think about what we owe him.

The exhibition introduced Elek Benedek's work and career. Besides the writings and documents about his life and youth, there were his first poems, which came out in the *Űstökös* ("Comet") under the pen-name *Kópé* ("Rogue") in 1877 when he was in his last year of the Székelyudvarhely (nowadays Odorheiu Secuiesc, Romania) college rather than during his university years, as it was earlier presumed.

Special attention was given to Benedek's political career reflected in his parliamentary speeches, in the political literature (as among other things, he edited the first volumes of Count Albert Apponyi's speeches), in his journalism and fiction.

The exhibition highlighted Benedek's activity as journalist and editor of periodicals and calendars. Research started in 2006 and conducted primarily within the Széchényi Library has found that Benedek edited at least thirteen periodicals and also founded a number of them. Among them, only three were intended for children, but they had a much stronger impact on future generations. The best-known magazine is *Cimbora* ("Chum"), the very first one was *Az én újságom* ("My own paper"), and *Jó pajtás* ("Good pal") was launched exactly a hundred years ago.



The writer Elek Benedek

In his fifty years of acting as a writer, he also worked on political, literary, review and educational dailies and weeklies. He was the columnist for numerous publications, editing children's as well as educational pages, parliamentary reports and, at one point, even an economic section.

By now we know of 250 periodicals where he published his writings, but with further research this number is likely to increase. Exploring his journalism is made more difficult by the fact that he used over fifty or more pseudo-names. He had some very well-known ones as, for example, *Székely Huszár* ("Seclar Hussar") and *Elek apó* ("Uncle Elek"), but only careful research can identify a large number of others. Here is an incomplete list of his pen-names: *Góbé* ("Seclar"), *Kópé*

("Rogue"), *Zeke, -k, Egy olvasó* ("A Reader"), *A fordító* ("The Translator"), *Igazmondó* ("The Truthful"), *Griff* ("Griffin"), *Bús Székely* ("Sad Seclar"), *Fotográfus*, ("Photographer"), *Huszar Benedek* ("Hussar Benedek"), *Huszar Zoltan* ("Hussar Zoltan"), *Gyorsiro* ("Stenographer"), *Senki* ("Nobody"), *Szekely* ("Seclar"), *Szokimondó* ("The outspoken"), *A tárczaíró* ("The Journalist"), *Vándor* ("The Wanderer"), *Veto* and *Zeke Benedek*. He used many of them only once or twice, others at certain stages of his life, and some others to the end of his life.

When preparing for the Millennium, he thought he would live up to the expectations of the celebrations by collecting the treasures of Hungarian folk tales and legends, which his contemporaries deemed an impossible undertaking. He managed to complete the first considerable collection of Hungarian tales and legends through two years of hard work. The work in several



Guiding visitors in the catalogue space on the seventh floor

volumes has seen a large number of editions and edition variations and is still regarded as a decisive source. The exhibition had several edition versions on display. It is less known that in honour of the Millennium he issued another popular collection, which was to see many editions and was also on display: *The Pearls of Hungarian Folk Poetry. A Collection of the Best Folk Songs*.

Benedek's fiction seems to be overshadowed by his role in children's literature. Nevertheless, it should not be ignored. One of his most remarkable works is the *Testament*, which was first printed in the *Magyar Hírlap* newspaper and has since seen many editions. In addition to all this, Elek Benedek was a noteworthy critic. One of the best critical periodicals of the age is associated with him: *Magyar Kritika* ("Hungarian Critique") was forced to stop because of the press suits against him.

It is noteworthy that he was one of the first in Transylvania to understand and to defend in writing Ady's poetry. This is witnessed by his 1927 pamphlet also featuring at the exhibition: *The bishop and the bishop's son: The fate of the Hungarian tree*.

One of Elek Benedek's lasting achievements is the translations and interpretations or "transplantations into Hungarian", as they would call them at the time, through which the general public read several tales and other pieces of world literature almost as if they were Hungarian by birth. Among them there were the tales he borrowed from the *Arabian Nights* and his *Grimm* translations, which nurtured generations to come. He was also the Hungarian translator and first publisher of *Cooper's* famous book for young boys, the *Red Rover*. He collected, translated and adapted tales from all over the world, selected primarily from a collection in the English-speaking world, which he then issued in his *Golden, Silver and Red Books*.

Elek Benedek tried to educate people through his own fiction, edited volumes and readers about history and ethnography. His articles on educational matters and his stand on the side of school teachers and young learners were widely known in his age. He and his colleagues were first commissioned to write school books by cultural minister Albert Apponyi, as a result of which a whole series of books came out for the different types of schools and age groups. With the intention of eradicating illiteracy, textbooks were produced for both children and adults, as well as for teaching

the language to non-Hungarians. Some of the forgotten very rare textbooks were on display at the exhibition.

Elek Benedek launched his own *Kis Könyvtár* ("Small Library") enterprise primarily for young people, which required considerable efforts at organizing literary life. In a few decades, over two hundred volumes came out in the series, including pieces by such young authors as Gyula Krúdy, Zsigmond Móricz and Margit Kaffka, *who later became very famous*. This is where the much loved *Dörmögo Dömötör* ("Grumbly Bear") books also saw light.

His Kisbacon house had been built by 1898, the year from which he spent most of his time in his village home. Because of the Romanian incursion, in 1916 he was forced to flee his birthplace, and in 1921 when two hundred thousand refugees came facing him, he returned to his native soil from where he continued his struggle for organizing literature to the end of his life.

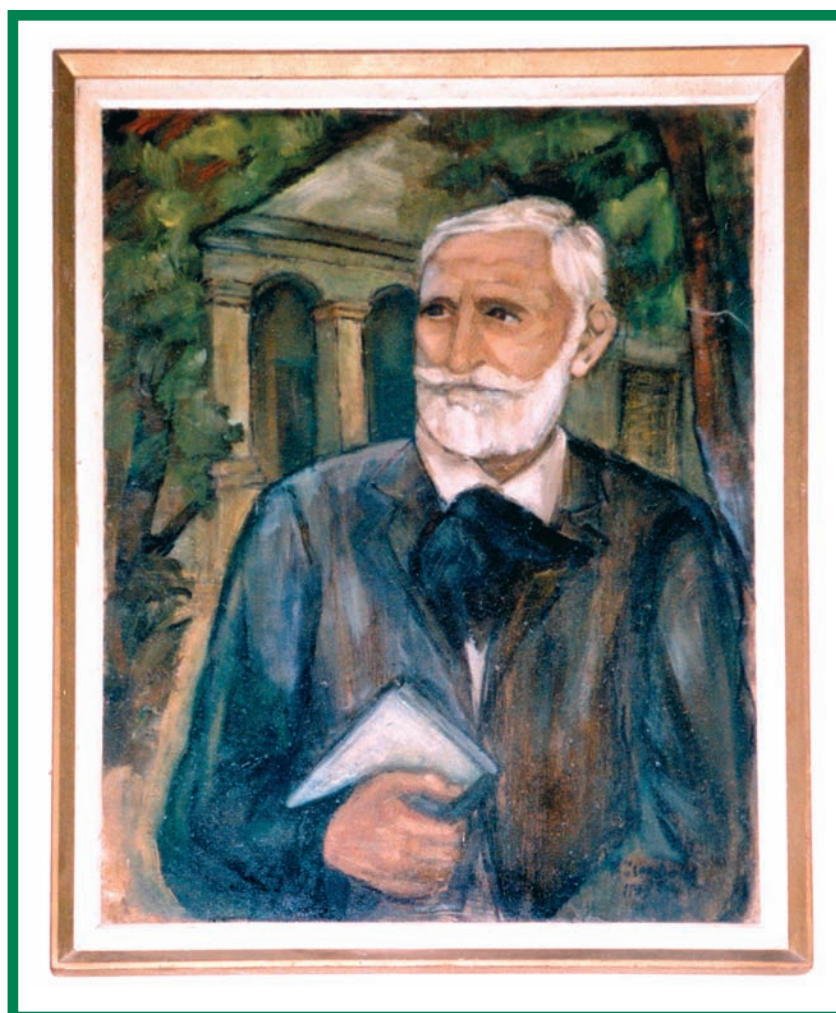
The way he managed literary life in his last decade made him resemble Francis Kazinczy, and the fervent activity there made his home similar to Széphalom. On returning home, he realized that everyone was concerned about their own problems, but nobody cared about educating future generations, namely the children. This is why he accepted the request that he should be the editor of the picture magazine, *Cimbora* (“Chum”), one of the most popular publications for children in the Carpathian Basin.

The National Széchényi Library’s exhibition paid special attention to presenting Elek Benedek’s afterlife. In addition to various document types (electronic, audio records, slides, etc.) his numerous biographies were on display. In 1920 Benedek was the first to give his own life story in the novel *My Dear Native Land*. One of his first biographers shortly after his death was his son, Marcell Benedek. The first notable summary of his activity is by

Erzsébet Vezér, who also compiled the first bibliography of his works. Among the monographic reviews, those of Dénes Lengyel and Imre János Hegedűs stand out. We owe the first collection of his journal articles to Edgár Balogh, who published them in more than one volume in the 1950s and 60s. The next such collection nearly half a century later was compiled by Sándor Perjámosi, who under the title *The Unknown Elek Benedek*, has so far introduced Benedek’s works in three volumes. Orsolya Bardócz was the first to collect Elek Benedek’s poetry, recently published as *Kisbacon Poems*.

The exhibition’s curator was the author of the present review, who was assisted by Erika Földi in realizing the exhibition. Professional support was received from experts of the Institute for the History of Hungarian Sciences, István Gazda and Ágnes Sipos.

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Portrait of Elek Benedek from his memorial house in Kisbacon