

ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION IN THE READING AND FARMER'S CIRCLES IN THE 1940s

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In the first half of the 20th century the rural society, the inhabitants of small villages and farms were in difficult situation in the field of adult education. The main problem was the deficient infrastructure and narrow circumstances. This gave a great importance to social organizations and civil associations in adult learning. So the reading circles and farmers circles played an important role in the organizing of the public and adult education. These small local communities, organised from below, carried out a significant task in raising the general knowledge of the society, development of the civic competence and the economic further education. A form of adult educational activity of the reading circles represented the public knowledge courses. These courses served the raising of the level of general knowledge and awareness, and partially the introduction of the social and political conditions to the inhabitants. The different economic courses were attended with great interest. Among the economic courses had the highest rank the so called "Silver Wheatear" education (of 3 months), and the course named "Golden Wheatear" of 1 year, the completion of which was acknowledged by the Ministry of Agriculture as a secondary agricultural qualification. The reading circles played a determining role not only in the increase of the general education and the extension and modernization of the economic expertises in the rural society, but they contributed to the results of the cultural socialisation by transmitting new community behaviours, forming the views to a large extent, in order to develop a more informed rural society having an opener view.

Keywords: public and adult education, reading circles and farmer's circles, rural society, public and economic knowledge, civil competences

Reading circles and farmer's circles

In the years after the World War II, the peasantry, the population of farms, villages, and small towns were in an extremely difficult position in cultural respects. Educational possibilities had been available only in a limited extent in former periods, but the events of war even destroyed a part of the existing infrastructure. The cultural administration only disposed of moderate financial resources, and the distribution thereof was more and more influenced by certain political preferences. These factors gave increased importance to social self-organizations, the self-motivated forms of public education and adult education, which became one of the main features of free culture in the period between 1945 and 1949.

The functioning of cultural associations had great traditions among the Hungarian peasantry. In the years between 1860 and 1940 a large number of reading circles and farmer circles were established in the rural settlements. The associations carried often differing names (reading circle, farmer's union, popular club, educational society, etc.); but their typical features were common: an autonomous social association organized on regional principle, each coordinating a small local community, and working according to inner rules and habits. The establishment of these organisations was the consequence of achieving middle-class status that had been starting in the peasant society. About 1500 circles and societies worked throughout the country in the period between 1945 and 1950, with a membership of approximately 100 000 persons (Vadász, 1998:653).

This particular form of associations conformed well to the special structure of settlements of the Hungarian provinces, to the self-organizing needs of the peasantry, and it could effectively serve the social and cultural ambitions of the small local communities rising into the middle-class. The different forms of adult education, the libraries, the training sessions organized by the associations, the amateur artistic activities provided cultural opportunities of urbane nature for the inhabitants living away from urban centres. The reader circles affected a much wider association than their own membership, because their books, organized programs have reached the neighbours and friends of their members, almost every people living and working in the surrounding country, and thus exerted a significant influence on the cultural habits of the broader regions (Szathmáry, 1947:243-245).

The reading and farmer's circles played an important role not only in the field of the organization of public education, the acquisition of knowledge and spending of leisure time, but were of great importance from the aspect of social and cultural socialization, too. They transmitted norms, formed visions, developed and distributed social behaviour patterns. Townspeople living in urban environment were influenced by such cultural effects from many sources. Educational and cultural institutions, various associations, community events, means of mass communication were widely available. For the people living further away from the city centre or for suburban residents, however, such cultural opportunities were provided only by the reading and farmer's circles. The circles took the culture to the people living far from urban centres, and being lost in agricultural work throughout the day. The circles provided cultural and adult educational opportunities always in a form (homely environment, easily understandable language, a pragmatic approach) that the local population could accept and easily join in (Gunst, 1987:132).

Library, reading, self-education

The association libraries played a significant role in the public and adult educational activities of the reading and farmer's circles. With awaking and keeping the demand on books and regular reading, preserving the skill of reading, and forming the taste of the readers, the reading circles significantly contributed to the educational customs of the rural society to become more open and modern, to rise its general and professional cultural level. The activity of the reading circles' libraries, such as provision of book and press reading, lending of books, presentation and recommendation of books, discussion of the read books, organization of other cultural programs in connection with the books (meetings of writers and readers), was similar to the efforts of public libraries in cities, even among their moderate financial and material conditions available. In many settlements, villages and farm centres, the library material of the circles meant the largest (and sometimes the only) book stock available for the inhabitants of the settlement (Jobbáné, 1999:469).

The composition of the book stock of the reading circles was generally varied. In some places purely economic or literary book stocks could be found, however, the library of most associations offered a wide selection of books on various topics. In addition to the economic and literary works, historical books, publications in the subject matters of law and civic education, works of natural history, travel books, some works on public health, publications concerning techniques, domestic industry, do-it-yourself works, and several handbooks, encyclopaedias could be found almost everywhere. In the circle libraries, the average proportion of the main thematic groups was as follows: literature 55%, economy 25%, history and social sciences 15%.

It happened many times that a great part of the circles' literary materials was accused to be worthless works. In reality, owing to the fact that the associations obtained a great part of their books from state institutions, social or cultural organizations, the standard of their library materials did not significantly fall behind that of the public libraries of towns, however, they were often more valuable than the book stocks of the rural people's libraries. About 2/3 parts of the books were written by classical authors of the Hungarian and world literature. The other 1/3 part included works which were acknowledged from the point of view of literature and were popular at their own times; and the proportion of the less significant literary writings, sentimental, romantic, folksy works was only about one third of these; however, only a smaller part could be considered as expressly trash-like publications (Gábor, 2005:396).

The annual division of borrowings from the circle libraries reflected the specific structure of economy, the characteristic features of country lifestyle. In summer, relatively low numbers of books were checked out, because, in addition to agricultural work, people had little time to read. In the winter evenings, however, it was one of the most popular activities. Even the school-age children read books mainly in autumn and winter months, because in summer they also had to help in the farms. According to contemporary statistics, 40% of the books were checked out during the three winter months, while in the three summer months the total turnover of libraries was only 15%.

The reading circles, however, were not simply rental offices, but real interest-arousing and taste-forming communal libraries at the same time. The members themselves were also involved in the development of the stock. They were informed by their acquaintances, the newspapers or the radio, and

often gave ideas to the librarians, what publications should be obtained next time. The members regularly offered the books read to each other. In case of the most circles it was a common practice that the works already read by several people were discussed at the gatherings of the association. The more cultured, better educated members exerted significant influence on the interest and reading habits of the others. In addition to books, this personal effect formed also the cultural taste, general attitude and mentality of people (Perneck, 1981:73).

Public education

Through almost a hundred years, as a result of their wide-ranging public educational and adult educational activities, the network of reading and farmer's circles across the country had been the most important local social partner of the state educational network, the most significant rural basis of out-of-school education and the free culture in the years after the World War II. At the beginning of the 20th century the reading circles played an important role in forcing back illiteracy and providing the skills of reading and writing for the adult society. In the period after World War II, the major activity of the associations was to preserve and practice the reading skills, perform public and economic further trainings, or disseminate professional knowledge (T. Kiss, 2000:19).

The popular educational activities of the reading circles were intense; regular lectures were given on different public and cultural issues. The associations usually held 6–8 popular educational lectures annually. Issues concerning the current political events, and information relevant to the everyday administration were included in the general topics. Programs dealing with health and the way of living were often organized. Lectures were held on folk culture, traditions; and the reports on journeys and presenting remote landscapes were well-attended. Whatever the topic, the lecturers were usually asked to speak not only in generality, on theoretical level, but with clear, practical approach, and to provide up-to-date information and practical advice. Thus, the programs were usually finished with common conversations, discussions.

The public knowledge courses initiated by the Free Culture Inspectorates represented a higher level of public educational and adult educational activity of the reading circles. These courses served the raising of the level of general knowledge and awareness, and partially the introduction of the social and political conditions changed after the World War to the inhabitants. There was a relatively great interest shown in the courses of shorter duration, of 30–50 hours. These courses were held in 2 evenings every week, usually on Thursday and Sunday. The lecturers were mainly local teachers, officials or better educated farmers, who had much knowledge of the demands and interests of the participants, and made their message more understandable with illustrative examples (Juhász, 1991:48).

Public knowledge courses of longer duration, i.e. of 3 months (150–160 hours) were also organized in the reading circles. These courses were intended to refresh and bring up-to-date the knowledge acquired previously in elementary school, and to prepare the students for the possible continuation of their studies after the secondary school. In case of such trainings, however, some problems occurred (financial and organizational difficulties, lack of schoolbooks, problems in consultation with teachers), which made difficult to hold the courses. The students often raised objections to the topics drawn up centrally. In general, the time devoted to

economic issues (30 hours) were found insufficient, and also other practical knowledge (accounting, records management, commercial information) were missed.

The lectures delivered by teachers who came from urban institutions and were not sufficiently familiar with the daily life of farms and villages, were often found too general. The lessons requiring 3–4 days a week meant a considerable burden for the participants. Due to the frequent absence from the work and family, a large proportion of students dropped out. Barely half of the persons registered in the courses were able to obtain the certificate of completion. On the basis of the problems encountered and the signs of the local free-culture supervisors, the Ministry of Religion and Public Education gave permission to amend the programme of public educational courses, increase the share of economic knowledge and other issues related to business and management, and to make education more practical in nature (Leléné, 1996:262).

In the reading circles of some larger towns or suburban centres worked the (secondary) 'free schools', providing higher general education than primary schools. In several reading circles folk high schools or farmer's high schools were also organized. In case of these trainings of higher level, the associations usually provided the rooms and libraries, organized the students; while local educational authorities and public educational bodies took part in the arrangement of the courses. These courses were held on the basis of centrally issued topics, in co-operation with instructors approved by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education; in addition to the local primary-school and secondary-school teachers, there were also economists, educational experts, doctors and lawyers among the lecturers.

Economic education

According to the special needs of rural society, the reading circles and farmer's circles regularly organized professional programs and series of lectures of shorter or longer time, in order to widen economical knowledge, learn new methods and modernize technical and technological processes. Usually one specific subject matter, primarily the issues of growing of grapes, fruits and vegetables, the seed-treatment, plant protection, animal husbandry, as well as economic organizational and commercial information were discussed on these occasions. The economic lecture series with a special topic consisted usually of 4–5 occasions, and attracted generally a lot of interested people, because of their up-to-date and expedient message. The reading circles organized and financed these lectures; the central economic, social or cultural organisations generally collaborated only in the provision of suitable lecturers (Bárdos, 2001:109).

In general, the different economic courses were attended with great interest. These trainings were usually initiated by the circles and societies themselves, who accepted the professional conditions defined by the Free Culture Supervisory Board in order to issue the certificates. One of the main types of the economic trainings represented the winter economic courses of 30–50 hours. These presented usually one field of the cultivation or animal husbandry, always that one which played a more important role in the local farming. The audience has been acquainted with the new production procedures, the modern devices, the current rules, and business management information.

The courses of domestic industry organized by the reading circles played a special role in the life of the local community. In many places were

organized trainings dealing with hand-crafted activities (basketry, weaving) which could be performed also at home. Elsewhere housewife courses were initiated, where the tailoring, embroidery, fruit and vegetable processing, and preservation methods were the most frequent topics. The practical knowledge gained there contributed directly to the expansion of the earning potential of poorer families. These trainings were supported also by the local authorities, providing base materials and the necessary technical means (Szabó, 1971:90).

The so called 'Silver Wheatear' (Ezüstkalászos) courses had the highest rank among the winter economic courses. Completion of this course was acknowledged by the government as a primary economic qualification. These trainings of 150–160 hours were organized on the basis of centrally issued topics, in co-operation with the local educational bodies. The circles invited the lecturers from among the landowners of the neighbourhood running their farm the best, or the teachers of urban economic training colleges, but they always needed the approval of the official organs. In the course of the organization and arrangement of the economic courses, the reading circles had to face difficulties. Although, one part of the expenses was covered by central supports, but they themselves had to raise the bigger part of the money. The official licensing procedure dragged on many times, and because of this the courses began delayed. The Free Culture Inspectors tried to favour the courses, the Office of Public Supply, on the other hand, was often late with the allocation of the most elemental requirements, the heating and lighting materials (Baboss, 1948:333-335).

The courses were kept usually in the period between November and April, on most places between the middle of December and the middle of March, when the people had no agricultural work. The participation meant for the candidates an occupation of 3-5 days weekly, generally in the evenings from 6-7 o'clock until 9-10 o'clock. The necessary course books were supplied by the educational organs. The syllabus of the courses contained economic expertises in 2/3 parts of the lesson framework: beside cultivation and animal husbandry, separate lectures were given on horticultural, business management, economic legal partial topics. One third of the lessons contained topics of general knowledge: literary, social, scientific knowledge, fire-protection and hygienic activities. The majority of the participants belonged to the younger age groups; the listeners' average age was around 33 years according to a survey of 1947. However, on most places even the elder people of 40–50 years were not ashamed of taking part in these further trainings, first of all due to the familiar environment offered by the reading circles. On most places it was characteristic for the audience's combination that rather the members of old farming families enrolled for the courses, on the other hand, 'new land-owners' obtaining their property at the time of the land distribution after 1945, could be rarely seen there.

The final exams of the trainings were always held with all due solemnity, in the presence of official inspectors delegated and the leading personalities of the local public life. As a general rule, the event was scheduled on some kind of national or religious holidays (15th of March, Easter), in order to increase the rank of the exam, and to appreciate the performance of the listeners even better (Leléné, 1996:261-262).

The economic training of highest level organized by the reading circles was the farmers' course named 'Golden Wheatear' (Aranykalászos) of 1 year, the completion of which was acknowledged by the Ministry of Agriculture as a secondary agricultural qualification. In case of these trainings the professional affairs of the education were managed by the educational authorities, the circles primarily took part in the training by

providing the place, managing the lessons, mobilizing the audience. The economic qualifications of elementary and secondary levels had considerable rank in the eye of the local society. The title 'Farmer of Silver and Golden Wheatear' induced general appreciation and respect among the rural population. The diplomas certifying the qualifications were considered as an estimable value in all families.

Almost every member of the reading and farmer's circles took part in some kind of training forms, many times together with his family members. The adult education organized by the reading circles and societies conformed well to the demands of the local community; in addition to general knowledge they provided possibility for the discussion of special, current issues. Owing to the prestige of the participating local experts, clear manner of lecturing or the familiar atmosphere of the building of the reading circle, this form of education was attractive and assumable for the peasantry not accustomed to school desk (Madácsy, 1948:53–54).

Civic knowledge and civil competences

In the period after the World War II, at the time of the development of the new democratic system, it was highly significant that more and more people should acquire the modern civic education and civil skills, should be well informed on their rights and obligations, apply the new forms of expression of their opinion and enforcing their interests, the public activities should be increasing, and the sovereign civil consciousness get stronger. This was especially important in case of the agrarian society living under more traditional conditions than the citizens. The activity of the associations, contributed in a considerable measure to the fact, that the agrarian society could gradually step out of its particular closeness, and played a significant role in the development of the Hungarian peasantry into a more opened social class arising civil social claims, adapting democratic values (Nemes, 2003:8; Márkus, 1996:17).

The local civil organisations took a significant role in it, that the agrarian population should be supplied with the necessary information, the basic knowledge for an active and fruitful public activity. The associations organized lectures generally on 3–5 occasions annually, dealing with public, political, legal, administrative issues, or with the current social events. These lectures provided information primarily about the features of the democratic system to be developed, the new laws, provisions, and the current issues concerning the local population directly. The social societies organized often special preparatory courses for the public activity (in 10-30 hours). These courses included among others trainings concerning the completion of managerial assignment, the public performance, instructions for speakers, working in representation of interests, performing of electoral tasks. As a general rule, these courses were launched by the local authorities or national social organizations, - the circles and societies took part in the arrangement primarily by providing the location and organizing the audience (Lippainé, 1986:70).

Newspaper reading, listening to radio collectively and the discussion of the read and heard experiences were considered as typical associational activities. Seldom were the newspapers subscribed at home by the circle members, especially the inhabitants of villages and farms, only one local newspaper at most. However, the associations offered a wider press range, and also national journals, different economical periodicals could be read there. The regular newspaper reading and the continuous following of the

social, political events provided wide-ranging and up-to-date orientation for the membership of the associations. However, the real significance of newspaper reading and collective radio-listening in the first place was given by the collective and continuous discussion of the news. The opinion of the members better educated, informed, and being more experienced in public affairs exerted a considerable view-forming influence on the other people (Juhász, 1991:48).

The civil organizations laid special emphasis on the citizenship not to have only certain legal consequences for the people. Their aim was to mobilize to social activities and develop in the members the demand of being active in community life. All of the important decisions of the community life (creation of the fundamental rule, election of the board, making programs, use of money, admission of new members, etc.) were made on the general meetings of the associations, on the basis of the majority's opinion. The staff number of the management and the board was relatively high in the associations. Generally, 1/3 part of the members received some kind of assignments. In this way, an active social participation was realized for many people, and the control of the management was assured at the same time. In the leaders' selection played the main role the commitment to the association, the qualification, competence (organizing skills, conflict management, diplomatic tact, knowledge) and the personal prestige founded on the local community's appreciation. The discussions raised took place in parliamentary framework, requiring adequate self-restraint, convincing argumentation and due willingness to compromise. All this contributed to the acquisition of the fundamental elements and norms of the modern civil political culture, and to the wide-ranging public socialization (Szenti, 1990:43).

The circles and societies performed comprehensive interest-protecting activity. The inhabitants of the wide outskirts did not practically have any other organizations or forums at their disposal in order to word their interests or social ambitions and to enforce their interest. The management of associations being more informed in public matters and usually more experienced in official procedures rendered help to the members and occasionally even to outsiders in managing of their personal affairs or completing of different applications, petitions and appeals. In the course of these activities presented and taught the applicable forms of proper administration, official procedure and enforcement of personal interests. The events of community life, the comprehensive activity of the associations developed in many respects the problem-solving and conflict-managing abilities of the participants, the respect for others' opinion and the interpretation and treatment of controversial incidents. The internal order and habits of the associations required the toleration of the autonomy, cultural traditions, convictions and social ambitions of others in every case (Olasz, 2011:145).

Until the middle of the 20th century, the public activity of women was rather restricted into the peasant society and in small rural settlements. The local social organizations, local communities organized by the inhabitants and the reading circles represented the primary stage of entertainment, culture, adult education and public activity for women. In the rural agrarian society, in these associations women had the opportunity for the active public participation, representation of social interests, and expression of their opinion practically for the first time. This familiar atmosphere based on personal contacts provided space for women to step out from family circles, to live public life and assume social missions. Programs of the associations and the work performed there changed the quality of everyday life, and later

helped women to enforce their rights and live with their opportunities even in a wider range in the fields of working, culture and public activities.

Conclusion

In the years after the World War II, the reading circles and farmer's circles played a determining role among the rural population living far from the urban centres, in arousing the demand for books, reading, the extension of the general and professional education, the acquisition of new modern knowledge, in the dissemination of an opener view and the cultured behaviour. The population of scattered farms, hidden villages, small towns having lack of funds, could have got into a cultural vacuum situation permanently without these organisations, missing practically all cultural and training opportunities.

Reading and farmer's circles could involve such groups in the public and adult education, which without the associations could not access to these opportunities at all, or only on account of serious difficulties, great expenses and loss of time. The reading circles played a determining role not only in the increase of the public education and the extension and modernization of the economic expertises in the rural society, but they contributed to the results of the cultural socialisation by transmitting new community behaviours, forming the views to a large extent, in order to develop a more informed rural society having an opener view. The autonomous organizations of the agrarian society, the different circles and societies played a significant role in forming of the local public opinion, rising the demand for public performances, and introducing the different forms, rules and techniques of participation in public life. In the course of their activity, they rendered help in a large way to the outskirt population in the acquisition of norms, habits, behaviour patterns being characteristic of a more opened urban civil attitude and a self-conscious civic mentality.

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