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All-time sparkles of social innovation



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[Chapters from the History of Hungarian Youth Movements]

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Csaba Jancsák has been dealing with the history of youth movements for nearly two decades. In the early 2000s, as the head of the Student Union at the University of Szeged and a historian, he was naturally attracted to the history of the Szeged events of the 1956 Revolution.¹ Although in the academic community he is mostly known as a sociologist and youth researcher, in his scholarly work, he returns to the history of student movements from time to time, approaching it from the perspective of the sociology of education. He edited volumes in the topic back in 2002 and 2011²,

¹ DÖBÖR ANDRÁS – JANCSÁK CSABA (2000): “Ötvenhatnak az a megismételhetetlen hangulata”: Beszélgetés Kiss Tamás szegedi diákvezérrel. [“The Unrepeatable Atmosphere of 1956”: Conversations with Tamás Kiss, a Szeged Student Leader] *Oral History. Belvedere Meridionale* 12. évf. 5–6. sz. 52–65.

² KISS TAMÁS – JANCSÁK CSABA (2002) (eds.): *Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolások Szövetsége: 1956 – Szeged.* [Association of Hungarian University and College Students: 1956 – Szeged.] Szeged, Belvedere Meridionale.; JANCSÁK CSABA (2011) (ed.): *A szegedi szikra: MEFESZ, 1956.* [The Sparkle in Szeged: MEFESZ, 1956.] Szeged, Belvedere Meridionale.

and in 2016, he compiled a monograph³ on the role played by MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students) in the events of 1956. In the same year, his volume⁴ of life interviews with participants of the Szeged events in 1956 was also published.

As Jancsák puts it, “*When reading this volume, we take a time travel trip to the world of contemporary university students. This world of life can also be called the stage of campus-existence, the phase of university life, during which university students practically »live« on campus. We analyzed the issue of self-determination through the history of organizations and the role and effect of the scenario’s actors.*”

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, introducing the context on a theoretical level, discusses what conditions come together when student movements emerge, how their world of values forms and changes and what effect they exert on the social and political system. It covers the significance of forming youths’ active citizenship, as their participation in the life of society may be an indicator of how democracy works. The role university student movements play in innovation is also essential, as they are not only formed within the framework of institutional microclimate but also form it in a reflective way, expanding its frameworks in the meantime.

The second part of the volume explores the circumstances of the foundation of the first university student unit, the *Szegedi Egyetemi Ifjúság* (SZEI) [Szeged University Youth] under the rectorship of Albert Szent-Györgyi (1940–41). After the university had moved back home to Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca), and with the foundation of a university in Szeged on its own right, student organizations were established on new grounds; as the rector puts it: the university is to educate humans, individuals and intellectuals, and not masses that are easy to manipulate. As an advocate of Anglo-Saxon liberalism, Szent-Györgyi founded the first university clubs, as he believed that demanding intellectual work also needs to be accompanied by leisure activities in appropriate settings. Introducing the structure of an organization similar to today’s student unions, the author discusses the issues of higher education autonomy and students’ democratic activities.

The third part of Jancsák’s book is devoted to the student organizations of teacher training colleges. He mentions the first student organization, *Segélyegylet* [Aid Association] founded in 1875, then *Ifjúsági Kör* [Youth Circle] in 1901, which was the predecessor of *Polágriskolai Tanárjelöltek Köre* [Circle of Student Teachers]. The *Botond Bajtársi Egyesület* [Botond Camaraderie Association] took over the role of the *Ifjúsági Kör*, and they soon started to publish a student paper, with the title *Botond*. From 1928, after the college had become co-educational, female students could also join the association. Alongside the *Botond Egyesület*, another organization involving Catholic students, named *Foederatio Americana Integra Corporatio*, was also born, which later contributed to the foundation of KALOT [Catholic Agrarian Young Men’s National Council] and KALOSZ [National Association of Catholic Young Ladies]. From 1939, there was a scout troop at the college, and in 1941, the *Ifjúsági Hivatásszervezet* [Youth Professional Organization] of the teacher training college started its operations with its main function of safeguarding interests. The author emphasises that the listed student organizations “*worked as real communities,*

³ JANCÁK CSABA (2016): *Az 1956-os forradalom indítószikrája. A szegedi MEFESZ.* [The Sparkle of the 1956 Revolution. MEFESZ in Szeged] Szeged, Belvedere Meridionale.

⁴ JANCÁK CSABA (2016): *A Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolások Szövetsége (1956): Életítinterjúk tükrében.* [Association of Hungarian University and College Students (1956): In the Reflection of Life Interviews.] Szeged, Belvedere Meridionale.

and apart from uniting their members and offering valuable experiences for college students, they also functioned as scenes of informal education, preparing their members to become central figures in the local teaching community after their graduation and finding employment.”

Chapter four, after introducing the social environment of Hungarian higher education in the 1950s, depicts the first steps, objectives and later demands of MEFESZ, which later played a significant role in the 1956 events, through in-depth interviews with MEFESZ founding members and leaders, analysing contemporary documents, documents from the time of retaliations and printed and electronic press coverage of the events. The activities of MEFESZ gained significance as they dealt with social issues and problems, and the responses to these, in a given historical moment, and as a result, they functioned as a catalyst of the 1956 events, becoming the most impressive student attempt at democracy in the 20th century.

The last chapter in the book covers the period of student union movements from 1988 until today. As a consequence of nationwide student movements in the 1980s, student activism became a factor, and it formed into a structured unity by the early '90s. The 1993 Act on Higher Education meant that the institution of the student movement came of age, as its operations were now ensured within a legal framework. At the same time, it also meant that the roles of student activism became somewhat empty. In spite of this, student unions strengthened by the turn of the century and became decisive, indispensable actors on the stage of higher educational politics. It is a question now whether new types of student groups, being formed these days, will serve as an alternative for the present form of student unions or turn into its renewal in the end.

The student movements discussed in the volume can be interpreted as a trendsetting, valueforming phenomenon. The causes of the emergence of such movements – irrespective of historical eras – are socio-political problems or crises from the representatives of which young people dissociate themselves, and this opposition becomes a major component of the force that keeps the community together. As for the movements discussed in the volume, it was the dissociation of SZEI from the *Turul Szövetség* [Turul Association], MEFESZ from the *Dolgozó Ifjúság Szövetség* [Union of Working Youth], and the student union from the *Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség* [Association of Hungarian Young Communist League]. Student activism has become an official organisation, and although earlier movements dissolved in history, their effect is noticeably present in the world of values of later organizations.

At the back of the book, an index of names helps to navigate in the work.

Jancsák's book, richly illustrated with original documents and photographs, is a niche piece of work as the examination of youth movements does not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the given era but can also be interpreted as a reflection of social and political changes.