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Widows' and Orphans' Funds at the End of the 18th Century. An Attempt of the Békés Reformed Diocese to Establish a Widows' and Orphan' Fund²

Abstract.

The system of widows' pension, orphans' benefit, and old-age pension was established at the end of the 19th century; however, self-funding also had its antecedents in the early modern period. In Protestant churches, there is evidence that pastors tried to care for their widows and orphans from the 16th century onward. The first fund for the widows and orphans of ministers was established in the Reformed Diocese of Békés in the southeastern part of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1790. The institution, however, could not survive due to lack of capital.

Keywords: pension, widow, orphan, Reformed Church, Hungarian Kingdom, pauperism, pension fund, history of pension

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By abolishing priestly celibacy, the Protestant churches transformed the structure of society – namely, preachers with families became the basis of the moral norm system of local communities: people expected not only ministers but also their wives and children to lead a moral lifestyle. It meant a social rank to be a minister's wife, which came into existence at that time. In parallel with this, a discriminatory situation for the children of ministers developed: boys were expected to pursue a ministerial career, while girls were expected to marry pastors, or at least marry into a prestigious, respected Protestant family. In such a privileged social situation, the church could not allow widows and orphans to suffer in the event of the death of the head of the family because this would have violated the dignity of the ordained community. Hence, from the late 16th century onward, efforts were made to stabilize the situation of the pastor's family in trouble. One of these benefits was the grace year system, which allowed the widow to receive her deceased husband's income until the end of the service year. In Western Europe, it was also customary to provide a residence for widows: if the woman did not remarry, the village provided her with a house. In fact, the first traces of old-age pensions are to be found in German-speaking countries, where the widows' and orphans' funds did not only provide help to the widows and orphans of the pastors but also provided regular financial support to the elderly, helpless preachers.³

Protestant churches in the Kingdom of Hungary and the Principality of Transylvania also tried to care for elderly pastors and their orphans and widows. This took place within an institutional framework in the 18th century. Pietism gave great impetus to the conversion of the charitable activity into an independent institution. Since this spiritual trend was most widespread in the Lutheran Church in the Carpathian basin, not

³ RÜSZ-FOGARASI, Enikő (2021): Consequences of the Reformation. Priest Wives, a New Role for Early Modern Women. In: Wien, Ulrich A. (ed.): *Common Man, Society and Religion in the 16th Century* (Refo500 Academic Studies, Volume 67). Göttingen, Vandenhoeck–Ruprecht. 297–307. <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666571008>. PTASZYNSKI, Maciej (2006): Widow's Capital. Pastors' Widows in the Pomeranian Church at the Turn of the 16th Century. In: *Acta Poloniae Historica*. 96. 85–142. BORMANN-HEISCHKEIL, Sigrid (1991): Die Soziale Herkunft der Pfarrer und ihrer Ehefrauen. In: Greiffenhagen, Martin (ed.): *Das evangelische Pfarrhaus. Eine Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte*. Stuttgart, Kreuz Verlag. 149–174. ZIEMSEN, Ruprecht – PABST, Bernhard – THEUNE, Carlos (2007): *Die protestantischen Pastorenfamilien Theune und Reimann in Niedersachsen und Sachsen-Anhalt vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert (Vorfahren und Nachkommen von Friedrich Heinrich Theune 1691–1745)*. Berlin, [publisher missing].

surprisingly, István Károlyi, an evangelical pastor from Kispéc, organized the first known widow-orphan fund in 1732. Another Lutheran preacher was Márton Hamaljar, who founded the widows' and orphans' fund in Nagyhont in 1789. Hamaljar's work is important also because in 1791 the Lutheran Church held a synod in Pest, where the establishment of a national pension institution was initiated and modelled after the Nagyhont institute. The synod in Pest is also noteworthy because the Calvinists held their synod in Buda at the same time, and the two bodies worked closely together: they agreed on their positions and tried to coordinate the administration of the two churches. As a result of this, the Calvinists also passed a synodal resolution on the establishment of a national widows' and orphans' fund. Unfortunately, this endeavour was not successful for several reasons. The most important of these was that neither church had a national church governing body: Hungary and Transylvania were administratively independent of each other, and in Hungary several church districts of equal status operated in parallel, which independently decided on their operation. The fact that the organizers did not have enough capital further complicated the matter.⁴

In the first half of the 19th century, the idea of setting up a national widow-orphan fund came up again. József Lácza Szabó, professor in Sárospatak, initiated the establishment of a national pension fund.⁵ In 1838, Bertalan Szemere revived the idea of a widows' and orphans' fund and proposed the organization of a national church institution; however, his initiative was actually realized only at the end of the 19th century.⁶

In the Reformed Church, however, many widows' and orphans' funds were established at a lower level of church administration at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. These were organized by church dioceses. This is how these funds of the church dioceses in Dés in 1792, in Pápa in 1795, in Bars in 1799, in Debrecen and Tata in 1800, in Szabolcs in

⁴ PÁLYI, Zsófia Kata (2012): Protestáns lelkesítő öngélejtő társaságok és özvegy-árva kasszák. In: ifj. Bertényi, Iván – Géra, Eleonóra – Richly, Gábor (eds.): „Taníts minket úgy számlálni napjainkat...” Tanulmányok a 70 éves Kósa László tiszteletére. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó. 355–357.

⁵ GALUSKA, Imre (1992): *Egyház és közösség. Az egyházi közteherviselés a kesznyéteni eklézsia számadáskönyveiben* (Folklor és Etnográfia, 68). Debrecen, KLTE Néprajzi Tanszék. 26.

⁶ PÁLYI, Zsófia Kata (2013a): Az egyházi özvegy-árva tár megalapítása a Tiszáninneni Református Egyházkerületben. Szemere Bertalan intézeti terve 1838-ból. In: *Egyháztörténeti Szemle*. 14, 3. 36–66.

1809, and in Bereg in 1813 came into being.⁷ We have several data regarding the fact that in the 18th century church districts also tried to pay old-age pensions and orphans' benefits. In 1762, the Transibiscan church district decreed that the widows and orphans of pastors were to be provided for.⁸ The synod in Transylvania passed a resolution regulating the support of impoverished preachers in 1767.⁹ Márton Csáji wanted to set up a fund for the impoverished ministers in the Cistibiscan church district in the middle of the 18th century.¹⁰ According to our current knowledge, among the church districts, the Cistibiscan church district was the first to organize this sort of aid at the district level in 1842.¹¹

Research has dealt with the history of pastoral self-funding since the end of the 19th century and with the associations established for this purpose. In the 1890s, interest in the topic was revived because it was then that the national pastoral pension fund was established. Thus, Sándor Poszvék wrote about the self-fund of the Lutherans in Transdanubia,¹² while József Pokoly wrote the history of the funds of the Reformed church dioceses.¹³ After that, the topic was forgotten for many decades, when, due to the historical interest in the associations of the Reform Age, the case of the Reformed widows' and orphans' funds came to the fore again. Kata Zsófia Pályi, János Ugrai, and Orsolya Eszter Barticel-Kiss analysed the operation and effectiveness of these funds in their various studies.

All three authors point out that despite the synodal decrees, the church did not take care of the aged ministers adequately, and the fate of the orphans and widows was hard

⁷ PÁLYI 2012, 355–357. BARCSA, János: II. (1908): A Tiszántúli Ev. Ref. Egyházkerület története 1711–1821. Debrecen, Debrecen szabad kir. város Könyvnyomda Vállalata. 142–143.

⁸ KIS, Bálint (1992): A helvéciai vallástételt követő Békés-bánati egyházi vidék vallási, polgári, tudomány és földleírás történeteinek emléke. In: Gilicze, László – Kormos, László (comp.): A Békési-Bánati Református Egyházmegye története (Dél-Alföldi évszázadok, 5, ed. László Blazovich). Békéscsaba – Szeged, Csongrád Megyei Levéltár. 136.

⁹ BUZOGÁNY, Dezső – DÁNÉ, Veronka – KOLUMBÁN, Vilmos József – ÓSZ, Sándor Előd – SIPOS, Gábor (2016) (comp.): Erdélyi református zsinatok iratai, II. kötet: 1715–1770 (Erdélyi Református Egyháztörténeti Adatok, ½.). Cluj-Napoca, Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület. 418.

¹⁰ GALUSKA 1992, 20.

¹¹ UGRAI, János (2017): A Tiszáninneri Református Egyházkerület története: a türelmi páténstól a protestáns pátensig 1781–1860. Sárospatak, Hernád. 169.

¹² POSZVÉK, Sándor (1897): A dunántúli Ág. H. Evang. Egyházkerületi „Gyámolda” (Nyugdíj- s Gyámújjintézet) története. Sopron, Röttig Gusztáv Nyomda.

¹³ POKOLY, József (1896): A lelkeszi gyámintézetek történetéhez. In: Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap. 39. 753–756.

because the church did not provide them with the incomes that would be their due. In the Cistibiscan Reformed Church District, there was a *pauperum cassa* to support the ministers, but it did not provide regular pension.¹⁴ In the Reformed Diocese of Dés, Dean János Abats defined categories of membership fee when organizing the fund for orphans so that pastors with different incomes could implement saving flexibly.¹⁵ The history of the widow-orphan fund of the Reformed Diocese of Tata is known the most thoroughly. The institution, founded in 1800, was still operating in 1834, which was all the more significant because most funds went bankrupt within a few years. It is true that Tata also had problems with paying the annuities, and the records were imprecise too because they did not know the residence of the women who were supposed to receive a widow's pension.¹⁶

Next, based on the statute of the widow-orphan fund set up in the Reformed Diocese of Békés in 1790 and on some other sources, it will be presented how self-funding of the Reformed ministers was organized in the south-eastern region of the Hungarian Kingdom. The statute was preserved in the minutes of the board, but an earlier version could be found in the treasury files too. A report on the circumstances under which self-funding was organized and also a list of those who paid membership fee were at our disposal. On the other hand, on the operation of the fund, the minutes of only one meeting could be found. After that, the widows' and orphans' fund was reorganized in 1880.¹⁷ As regards the fate of the institution founded in 1790, the literature confirms that it ceased to exist within a few years, and its capital was merged into the treasury of the Reformed Diocese.¹⁸ The extant protocol reveals that this took place in 1815 because it was then that Ferenc Gyarmathi's widow handed the remaining capital over to the Reformed Diocese.¹⁹

¹⁴ UGRAI 2017, 164–169.

¹⁵ BARTICEL-KISS, Eszter Orsolya (2023): Abats János esperesi szolgálata: a papi özvegyek és árvák kasszájának létrejötte. In: VIII. Egyháztörténeti Konferencia. Cluj-Napoca, Kolozsvári Protestáns Teológiai Intézet.

¹⁶ PÁLYI, Zsófia Kata (2013b): Öreg prédikátorok, özvegy prédikátorné asszonyok és neveletlen árvák a református egyházmegye kebelében (1800–1834). In: Bárh, Dániel (ed.): Alsópapság, lokális társadalom és népi kultúra a 18–20. századi Magyarországon. Budapest, ELTE BTK Folklore Tanszék. 216–218.

¹⁷ TtREL I.29.k.1. Békés-Bánati Egyházmegyei iratai. Özvegy, árva és lelkeszi nyugdíjintézet iratai 1790–1943. Özvegy, árva és lelkeszi nyugdíjintézet jegyzőkönyve 1790–1908 TtREL I.29.k.3. Özvegy, Árva és Lelkeszi Nyugdíjintézet iratai 1790–1892.

¹⁸ KIS 1992, 99, 145.

¹⁹ TtREL I.29.k. 1. fol. 1v.

The Reformed Diocese of Békés was bounded by the rivers Körös in the north, the mountains of Transylvania in the east, the Lower-Danube in the south, and the River Tisza in the west. From the viewpoint of the Reformed Church, this Reformed diocese was located on the periphery. On its territory, which was almost of the same size as Belgium, just a few settlements had a homogeneous Reformed population, and most of the Reformed churches were situated in mixed denominational settings. Apart from a few important market towns, it consisted of village congregations of a few hundred people. Most of them were located along the rivers Körös; the neighbouring parishes in the Maros Valley and Bánság were up to 80 km apart from each other. There were no Reformed parishes in the major cities of the region (Szeged, Arad, Temesvár). One of the most important centres of the Reformed Church, Debrecen, was difficult to reach from Békés.²⁰ Its special, isolated situation raises the question: why and how was a widow-orphan fund established here?

In the 18th century, despite their disadvantageous situation, the pastors of the Reformed Diocese of Békés kept a keen eye on the spiritual movements of the era, the political events and the decisions affecting the life of the church. Reverend Benjamin Szőnyi, pastor in Hódmezővásárhely, corresponded with professors of the University of Basel.²¹ A significant number of the preachers of the deanery studied abroad, e.g. Pál Szalay in Basel and Lausanne, Bálint Kis in Jena.²² Hódmezővásárhely played a significant role in spreading physico-theology in the Carpathian Basin because István Segesvári learned about this intellectual movement in Vásárhely and translated Williem Derham's basic work on physico-theology there.²³ In 1791, a double election of superintendents took place

²⁰ BARCSA, II. 1908, 86. HEGYI, Ádám (2023): Privatmeinungen über die Reformierten aus den Städten Südosten Ungarns. In: Beer, Mathias – Heppner, Harald – Tschler-Hofer, Ulrike (eds.): Stadt im Wandel: Der Donau-Karpatenraum im langen 18. Jahrhundert (Neue Forschungen zur Ostmittel- und Südosteuropäischen Geschichte, Band 13). Berlin, Peter Lang, 371–384.

²¹ IMRE, Mihály (1981): Szőnyi Benjámín levele Jacob Christoph Beck bázeli professzorhoz 1776-ból. In: Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények. 85, 1. 67–72. STÄHELIN, Ernst (1968): Die Korrespondenz des Basler Professors Jakob Christoph Beck 1711–1785. Basel, Helbing und Lichtenhahn. 83.

²² HEGYI, Ádám – SZÖGI, László (2016): Magyarországi diákok svájci egyetemeken és főiskolákon 1526–1919 (Magyarországi diákok egyetemjárása az újkorban, 23.). Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Levéltára, nr. 274, 628, 1709. SZÖGI, László (2004): Magyarországi diákok németországi egyetemeken és főiskolákon 1789–1919 (Magyarországi diákok egyetemjárása az újkorban, 5.). Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Levéltára, nr. 6090.

²³ IMRE, Mihály (2012): Küzdelem a fiziko-teologizmus örökségével: Szőnyi Benjámín elfeledett öregkori műve (Istennek trombitája 1790–91). In: Imre, Mihály: Az isteni és emberi szó párbeszéde (Nemzet, egyház, művelődés, 7.). Sárospatak, Hernád. 406.

in the Transtibiscan church district, as a result of which the feud between the two superintendents escalated. This also divided the clergy; however, the ministers in the Reformed Diocese of Békés stood by Miklós Sinai.²⁴ In the same year, a synod was held in Buda, to which the Reformed Diocese of Békés sent two envoys. From the reports of Sámuel Szentmiklósi Sebők and Benjámín Szőnyi, we know that they took an active part in the debate on the creation of the canons, and Szentmiklósi also kept a diary on the double election of the superintendents.²⁵

In order to answer the question of why a widows' and orphans' fund was created in the Békés Reformed Diocese, it is not enough to say that the pastors led a lively public life. This was a prerequisite for the creation of a self-funding organization; however, it does not explain why the preachers established a fund. The answer lies in the motives: We need to find out why they came together in 1790 and founded a rudimentary pension institution in 1790.

The most important source regarding the motives is the minutes of the widows' and orphans' fund from 1790, with a total of 22 pages, which is structured as follows:

Table 1. Structure of the minutes

fol. 1r	front page
fol. 1v	1815 note on the fate of the fund
p. 1	inside title page
p. 2	Motto from the letter of the apostle James
p. 3–6	History of the organization of the widows' and orphans' fund
p. 7–15	The statute of the widows' and orphans' fund
p. 16	Samples of officers' oaths
p. 17–18	List of membership fee payers
p. 19–20	Minutes of the meeting of the Widows' and Orphans' Fund, 8 September 1790

²⁴ KIS 1992, 124, 141.

²⁵ TtREL I.29.c.12. nr. 20. Szentmiklósi Sebők Sámuel naplója Sinai Miklós püspökválasztási perével kapcsolatban, 1791 [The Diary of Sámuel Szentmiklósi Sebők in Connection with the Trial of Miklós Sinai, 1791]. TtREL I.29.c.14. Szőnyi Benjámín és Szentmiklósi Sebők Sámuel beszámolója a budai zsinatról, Buda, 1791. szeptember 23–26. [Report of Benjámín Szőnyi and Sámuel Szentmiklósi Sebők on the Buda Synod, Buda 23–26 September 1791].

Sámuel Sebők Szentmiklósi prepared all the documents for the widow-orphan fund, which reveal that it was he who initiated the establishment of a self-fund. Consequently, we have to look for the motive in his activity. Sámuel Sebők Szentmiklósi was born into a clergy family in Berettyóújfalu in 1735. He followed a typical pastoral career path: at first, he worked as a teacher, and then he went abroad to study. In 1766, he became a minister in Törökszentmiklós, and from 1777, he served in Szentes. In 1787, he was elected sub-dean, and in 1792 dean. He passed away in 1798.²⁶ The minutes of the widows' and orphans' fund reveals that he initiated the establishment of a self-fund, but this did not materialize at that time. On 11 February 1790, he came up with his idea again at the general assembly of the Békés Reformed Diocese in Nagyzerénd. This time, however, he found supporters and was asked to develop the statute for the institution. He did so, submitting his proposals on 1 June 1790, which were accepted on 8 September. On this day, the fund was established, the list of members was drawn up, the initial capital was collected, and, finally, the first general meeting of the fund was held, too.

The records of the widow-orphan fund reveal that the main motive for its establishment was that in the event of the pastors' death their widows and orphans were not secure financially. Nevertheless, the motive is not that much clear because in 1778, they were not in a better position either, and yet they rejected the initiative. What might have been the reason for this? The fact that in 1778 Szentmiklósi was a novice in the Reformed Diocese certainly contributed to this. In 1790, however, he already served as a sub-dean. In 1790, he already had such authority that the other pastors accepted his initiative. Szentmiklósi must have been preoccupied with the fate of widows and orphans for several decades. Where did this empathy come from?

Sámuel Sebők Szentmiklósi studied in Bern between 1763 and 1765.²⁷ At the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, pietism in Bern transformed the care for the poor.²⁸ We have mentioned earlier that pietism also played an important role in the establishment of widows' and orphans' funds in Hungary. In the canton of Bern, in the 18th century, homeless shelters in today's sense operated in every settlement.²⁹

²⁶ KIS 1992, 98–100.

²⁷ HEGYI-SZÖGI 2016, 558.

²⁸ DELLSPERGER, Rudlof (1984): *Die Anfänge des Pietismus in Bern: Quellenstudien (Arbeiten zur Geschichte Pietismus, 22.)*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 164–166.

²⁹ BAUMANN, Max (2008): *Armut im Dorf und im Landstädtchen*. In: Holenstein, André (ed.): *Berns goldene Zeit: das 18. Jahrhundert neu entdeckt*. Bern, Stämpfli. 191–194.

The property tax collected by local governments was used to care for the poor, and they tried to provide cash assistance to orphans to create conditions in which they can thrive. They also provided meals for the poor citizens of the city of Bern. Since 1676, it was the butchers' guilds' responsibility to provide food, which was mostly fulfilled from the leftovers of festive (urban) meals. The butchers' wives organized a separate body in the 18th century, one of whose tasks was to provide food for the poor.³⁰

There are no data available on whether Szentmiklósi brought the idea of caring for widows and orphans from Bern. However, during his two-year stay in Switzerland, he definitely got acquainted with how the system worked, which may have influenced his initiative in 1778. As mentioned earlier, some of these institutions had already been operating in the Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of Hungary; however, in the Reformed Church, they only came into being at the end of the 18th century. The establishment of the widows' and orphans' fund came about in the Reformed Diocese of Békés as late as in 1790 not only because it was by that time that Szentmiklósi had become a well-respected leader, but there were also other influential circumstances.

In 1787, the leader of the Reformed Diocese, Benjamin Szőnyi, was expelled from his congregation. Therefore, he became an unemployed pastor.³¹ One of the points of the statute drafted by Szentmiklós states that the fund is also responsible for the financial support of impoverished pastors. Szőnyi's case must have influenced the inclusion of this point in the statute. In addition, the adoption of the statute of 1790 was also supported by the fact that similar institutions were established elsewhere in the Reformed Church during this period. Since we proved above that the pastors of the Reformed Diocese of Békés were actively following the events, they must have heard about the initiatives of other church dioceses, so they thought that now they, too, should establish their own widows' and orphans' fund.

Consequently, the reasons for establishing the fund in 1790 are as follows: Sámuel Sebők Szentmiklósi was well aware of the Swiss care for the poor, which he wanted to implement in his country as an example to be followed. In 1787, the head of the Reformed

³⁰ SCHLÄPPI, Daniel (2008): Sozialer Frieden geht durch den Magen – Geselligkeit der Bürgerschaft. In: André Holenstein (ed.): Berns goldene Zeit: das 18. Jahrhundert neu entdeckt. Bern, Stämpfli. 198–201.

³¹ HEGYI, Ádám (2016): Problems Arising from Withholding Information in the Practice of the Reformed Church in the South-Eastern Part of the Hungarian Kingdom at the Turn of the 18-19th Century. In: *Istraživanka Journal of Historical Researches*. 27. 155. DOI: 10.19090/i.2016.27.153-167.

Diocese of Békés, Benjámín Szőnyi, lost his job, which shocked the clergy. By the 1790s, the issue of widows' and orphans' funds became the subject of public discourse and also the topic of table talks in Békés. By this time, Sámuel Sebők Szentmiklósi had acquired such authority as a sub-dean that his idea of establishing a fund was accepted.

Now, all we have to do is answer our second question: how did the fund work, what kind of relief was it able to provide?

In fact, it had narrow chances. The annual membership fee did not cover the operating costs, nor did all pastors of the Reformed Diocese join the fund. According to the statute, their basic purpose was to support widows and orphans. It was determined in detail up to which age the children would be supported. Different age limits were set for boys and girls. Widows could only receive support if they did not remarry. As mentioned earlier, they also wanted to provide old-age pension and unemployment benefits for pastors. Unfortunately, no records are available of any payments made from the fund. However, the 1815 record suggests that little capital had been raised and that no actual widows' pension or orphans' allowance could be provided. Therefore, it is no wonder that the fund has ceased to exist.

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