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Remembering András Pető

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Summary

After completing his studies and starting his career abroad, the originator of conductive pedagogy, Dr. András Pető commenced his activity in Hungary in the system of special education. Following the invitation of the Ministry of Welfare, he started to work with 14 children in an Alkotás út building which belonged to the College of Special Education. Over the years his practice separated from the training of special educators; he constructed the programme of conductive pedagogy which did not meet the expectations of the College of Special Education. In terms of methodology, Pető unified the elements of educating to an active life i.e. to movement, vision, hearing, speech, self care, integration into kindergarten and school life and occupation through work for the new type of pedagogue, the conductor. To those involved in the training of special educators, a union of tasks attached to the separate fields of study for one professional was unthinkable. In acknowledgement of his results Pető was later on appointed Head of the Department of Movement Therapy at the said College. Then he got the opportunity to run a separate institution when the National Institute of Movement Therapy opened on 1 February 1950. It took his incredible working capacity and adamant attitude to develop the conductive education system and method. It is impossible to talk about the shaping of the conductive system without mentioning the changes in attitudes towards people with disabilities. It is essential to touch some issues of integration and segregation as well for Pető's approach to social integration was then seen as revolutionary; by now his principles and ideas on the upbringing and treatment of people with disabilities have stood the test of time.

Key words:

conductive education, conduction, conductor, problem solving, spontaneity, dysfunction, orthofunction.

What makes the subject topical is the 115th anniversary of the birth of András Pető, the originator of conductive pedagogy. The Conference provides a worthy opportunity to remember

Professor Pető and to give account as to what extent we have adopted his efforts, his teaching principles and philanthropic ideas.



András Pető

As one of Professor Pető's students I feel honoured to have been asked to examine this question.

I am thrilled by the thought that Professor Pető's still flourishing oeuvre has matured and deserves evaluation. I wonder what Professor Pető would tell us if we could meet and what we would tell him? My pen is driven by such thoughts while from the history of our Institute, which goes back more than half a century, I am trying to introduce the audience to the more important stages in the development of the theory and practice of conductive pedagogy and the exciting results and struggles we had to fight for the survival of conductor training. While talking about these I will above all recall András Pető, the creative individual, the originator of conductive pedagogy, his mentality and his work, adding my personal experiences.

1. The main stages of Pető's life and work

András Pető was born in 1893 in Szombathely, the first child of a middle class family of retailers, followed by two brothers. His view of life was probably strongly shaped by his mother's strict upbringing and his father's fate who was suffering from Parkinson's disease. As a school child he was an unusually **keen reader**. He was working as a **private tutor** for he had to take care of his brothers' education as well.

Following his years in Szombathely where he finished secondary school with excellent result, he went to Budapest and started to work for 'Pester Lloyd', a liberal newspaper. He was sent to **Vienna** to study journalism and in 1911 registered at university, however, *surprisingly for himself* too, decided to enrol in the **medicine course**. He graduated as a medical doctor in 1921 and worked in a number of health institutions during and after his studies.

His professional **interest** turned more and more towards orthopaedics and **movement therapy**. Later on he made a name for himself also as the author of medical publications. It was in 1922 in a sanatorium in Semmering that he started to deal with the treatment of motor disabilities of central nervous origin. The principles of **conductive pedagogy** i.e. wholeness and the active way of life already emerged in his writings in **1931**.

2. The impact of contemporaries and his years in Vienna

In Vienna he found himself in an exciting world and became a member of the young spiritual elite. He spent much time with refugee intellectuals and notable writers such as Lajos Kassák and Andor Németh. Pető himself also composed short stories and dramas. Apart from his poems and plays written in German he left behind a number of studies in manuscript.

Examining the concepts of mankind of the reform pedagogues i.e. Pestalozzi, Montessori and Rogers and the one appearing in Pető's conductive education we will find similarities. Just to mention but a few of his thoughts suggesting this similarity:

- Man is primarily an active being who lives in activities and is thereby capable of development. Man can be characterised mainly by spontaneity and creativity.
- In human existence relationships are of utmost importance. We can only exist through our relationships.
- Important are man's holistic attitude, the special respect for freedom, the value and appreciation of being different, the immense confidence in the development of the individual and the group and the emphasis on the diverse individual paths of development.

3. The holistic approach

To find the way to recovery, Pető was searching the human personality as a whole. His holistic approach led Pető the physician to Pető the pedagogue, to remedial education and to conductive pedagogy. He emphasised that rather than local functioning, we must support the whole person as the human being needs more than a mouth to talk, more than legs to walk and the surgeon more than hands to operate. The person's nervous system has redundant tools to reach its aims. Pető opened a new era where rather than segregation, integration into society was seen as the primary task.

4. Pető's connection with Moreno

Pető and the American psychiatrist Jacob Levi Moreno, the originator of psychodrama were contemporaries and life long friends. For some years they were studying at the same faculty of Vienna University, the Faculty of Medicine. They were both persons of unique encyclopaedic learning and shared a keen interest in literature and philosophy. Perhaps these were the really tight bonds between them rather than the years spent together at university. Their versatile interests had several points in common; one of these was caring for underprivileged children. Moreno was working with the children outdoors. He usually leaned to the trunk of a tree and the children were sitting in two or three, later on even more, concentric circles. Moreno would recite stories and play with them. Later on he made them play episodes from their own lives. Pető was also part of those activities. In 1922 Moreno founded Stegreiftheater, the Theatre of Spontaneity in Vienna, putting spontaneity, creativity and action in the centre.

Those particular plays can be regarded as the forebear of psychodrama. They helped reduce aggression in the children and improved their ability to solve problems. Pető, too, integrated play into his daily programmes. He liked to see children play and would cheer and laugh with them. In the Theatre of Spontaneity the arrangement of the children in circles made every type of action, scene and group activity possible.

I did experience that in Pető's conductive pedagogical practice. I witnessed lots of demonstrations where Pető **insisted on the children being arranged in a circle.**

Another common activity of Pető and Moreno, the good friends, dates back to the early 1910s when with three fellow students they established the group called the 'Hose of Encounter' in order to support new emigrants and refugees. They helped them find jobs, complete documents and provided them with information.

The 'Hose of Encounter' functioned also as a community, a setting for daily talks, arguments, jokes and singing far into the night. This humane attitude was characteristic of Pető throughout his life. He continuously supported people in need, e.g. when he started to work with the experimental movement therapy group in Alkotás Street which had no budget, he maintained the experimental institute from the fees he had received from his private patients. Later on, in the Institute at Villányi Street he sponsored those colleagues who were in need.

In 1939 Pető left Austria and came to Budapest. He kept in touch with Moreno via correspondence. Following Pető's invitation, Moreno visited Budapest in 1963 and, having seen performances at the Institute which were close to miracle, expressed his recognition.

After Pető's death the new director of the Institute, Mária Hári, continued to liaise with Moreno and later on with his widow Zerka. Today Dr. Gábor Pintér, Senior Advisor to the Rector of the Pető Institute, keeps contact with Mrs. Moreno.

5. The situation of people with motor disabilities in Hungary at the time of Pető's return

In the 1940s when Pető returned to Hungary, apart from declarations no particular concept existed for the development of persons with motor disabilities, neither in the educational system nor in practice. There were no systemic pedagogical principles, theoretical implications or pedagogical schemes.

Lajos Hegedűs was a pedagogue and from 1913 to 1939 he was director of the National Home for Crippled Children. He was the first to regard his pupils as children with motor impairments and to class their care to the area of remedial pedagogy due to the following reasons:

- ▶ their special needs in terms of education and upbringing,
- ▶ the relative high incidence of poor intellectual capacities among them;
- ▶ their mental life being different from 'normal', having a specific character;
- ▶ and finally because their choice of career was impeded.

6. Movement therapy in special education

In his capacity as Head of the Movement Therapy Unit of the Special Education Institute which stood in collaboration with the College of Special Education, András Pető commenced

work in 1945 with **14 children** (The Unit was also referred to as the **Experimental Department**).

Gusztáv Bárczi, then Director of the College of Special Education, made the basement of the Alkotás Street building of the College available for the purpose. Due to the inordinate financial circumstances of the post-war era Pető had to find resources for the Movement Therapy Unit. For this purpose he established the **Pestalozzi Clinic** and maintained the Unit from the fees paid by its clientele.

The Clinic was named after Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a Swiss pedagogue who prepared children for life through profitable practical activities such as wool spinning and agricultural work. The principles of Pestalozzi's pedagogical method come across in Pető's teaching principles as well.

It has to be proved to the **dysfunctioning person** that everything they learn will yield practical use so that they can see **what is the point** e.g. in executing tasks. In 1964 and 1965, during those particular sessions held every week, every time a child performed a task well, Pető would bend to them, stroke their hair and explain how they could put that to use in the future.

As we shall see later on, the two successors of **conductive education**, the Institute of Movement Therapy and the present Pető Institute **sprang forth from those few rooms of the Experimental Department**.

At the beginning, however, Pető personally recruited the patients among the least fortunate and paid for their clothes and meals from his own pocket.

What makes Professor Pető's oeuvre unique is that he **was the first to regard disability as a pedagogical rather than a biological problem**. The results which were achieved through education were compared to miracle by most of the parents.

Pető was seen as a very special and charismatic person. In his diary the writer Sándor Márai reported on their encounter as follows: „He knows a lot, especially about medical history, Chinese medicine, curing with needles, etc. He is mad, but a colourful, strange and valuable fool, who has a system. Now he is working with 20 invalid kids with paresis and sclerosis in an institute and gives back their will and skill, provides them with rhythm. It's quite possible that his method is worth more than the anyway useless medicines.”¹

During the academic year 1948/1949 Pető run a course in movement pedagogy at the College of Special Education which had previously not been part of the training. In 1948 Gusztáv Bárczi made the following statement: “Movement pedagogy, the latest sprout in special education, now has a department at the College of Special Education. This new department is expected to produce a unified methodological and group-educating effect within special education and thereby bear a fruit.”²

It was then that movement pedagogy as a general study of primary importance started out in the training of special educators. It was recognised that the development of motor skills was inevitable in all areas of special education. When the training of special educators in Hungary

¹ Márai, Sándor: *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt*, 1948. Toronto (Ont.) Vörösváry, 1998. p. 76.

² Bárczi, Gusztáv: *A gyógypedagógus és az orvos*. In: *Magyar Orvosi Szemle*, 25 February 1948. február 25.

saw **one of its most critical moments**, András Pető came to the special education institution at Alkotás Street and the College functioning in the same block of buildings **like an angel from heaven.**”

7. The birth of an independent institution on national level. Difficulties of training on higher education level. Separation from special education

With regard to the positive results of the Experimental Department, which was operating until 1948, the **independent National Institute of Movement Therapy opened on 1 February 1950** at 67 Szent Imre (now Villányi) út in Budapest, still supervised by the Ministry of Health. András Pető was appointed its director.

The training of the staff took place parallel with internal service under András Pető's control. As an independent branch of pedagogy, movement therapy, **from 1955** under a new name as **'Conductive Movement Pedagogy'** was developing and extending continually. Until 1961 the College offered a one-semester training with the involvement of special education pedagogues.

In 1963 it came to separation also in the training of professionals. Due to the diverging views concerning the training in special education the initial concept for conductive movement pedagogy to be adopted in the organisational framework of special education failed. In special education child attendants were employed to take care of the pupils outside of instruction. To those involved in training, a union of tasks attached to the different professions was unthinkable for the global nature of living systems became acceptable in the 1980s only.

A **dichotomy** was characteristic of judgements concerning the work carried out at the Institute. On the one hand, the Institute was visited by high-ranking Hungarian and international experts who **evaluated our work positively** on the basis of the practical results. Visitors included Emmi Pikler, a well-known paediatrician and János Szentágothai, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Following his visit the latter said: “The Institute's work surpasses anything imaginable.”³ The method was acknowledged and adopted by physiotherapists from abroad like Helga Keil from Austria and Ester Cotton from the United Kingdom. On the other hand, on a matter of principle conductive education **did not find recognition** in the public health sector.

Pető kept fighting to get the Institute under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. The medical community did not appreciate his work and regarded him as a charlatan. According to the health nomenclature of the time, children with motor disabilities were seen as patients who needed treatment. In Pető's concept the way leading to proper movement was activity and learning rather than treatment.

At that time nobody was able to understand that difference in attitudes. Treatment via movement was no cure as they said. Pető kept asserting that he could not justify curing as expected thus he would go over to the Ministry of Culture and provide **education** and then he might be left to work in **peace**.

Following a governmental resolution a new institution of public education, the **Institute for Conductive Education of the Motor Disabled and Conductor Training** was established in **1963** under the directorship of Professor Pető. In addition to providing conductive education

³ Hári, Mária: A konduktív pedagógia története. Bp.: MPANNI, 1997. p.101.

the Institute launched an independent training programme on higher education level for the professionals of conductive education.

Thus a new chapter opened in the training of conductive pedagogy specialists: with conductor training conductive education became complete. As Pető and his colleagues commenced formal conductor training, international interest in the method grew. In accordance with Pető's intentions conductive education was transferred from health to public education and the setting up of the national network also started.

András Pető was working persistently and successfully until his death which he met in 1967. The first four-year training got under way in the same year.

From 1967 Dr. Mária Hári took over as director and later on as general director.



Mária Hári

8. What did we learn from Pető and what did we pass on to the next generation?

Pető thought that **an integrated programme was essential** for **any** appropriately implemented method to succeed in modifying wrong functions which had emerged due to damage to the nervous system. The educator cannot develop from one side, considering only one point of view at a time. The structure of the programme is crucial to achieving progress.

The tasks comprising care and activity must be carried out by one person in a structure of a higher level. It was vital that during any session the educator had to induce purposeful, feasible, active intercommunication, play or other intellectual activity which had to seem spontaneous. In the course of task execution the anticipation of goals, the importance of intention, the focus on motivation and the use of playfulness were also important principles.

Once something is taught in a given situation it has to be implemented throughout the day for even the best method makes no sense if the child or adult cannot see its practical use. Pető kept to the principle to never explain anything; he would name the sources where we could look things up. Mária Hári also adopted that principle.

Pető taught us comprehensive, thorough monitoring. We were not allowed to tell the bare diagnosis; we had to describe and expound the problem in detail. He considered **full day observation** essential for planning the following days. He always endeavoured to have an **overall picture of the group**.

For the lying programme we had to arrange the plinths in two rows while chairs were to be placed in a semi-circle or circle for the sitting and the standing and walking programmes. We had to prepare very carefully for the meetings where we had to give account of the group's results. On such occasions conductors from other groups were also invited.

We were given typed copies of the task series, then referred to as exercises, which we had to hold all the time as improvisation was not allowed and we had to keep strictly to the written text. Pető saw the task series as a unity.

Apart from generalities, goals and tasks, the programme also included the way of execution. The programme formed a methodological unity which was applied throughout the day while changing place and position, speech, vision and self care were practised.

Pető did not know the term 'incurable'; it was inadvisable to pronounce it in his presence for dismissal from work could be the possible consequence. He thought that constant prompting as a pedagogical method was out of date. Negative evaluation had to be avoided even in thought. "Children must be given interesting and challenging tasks" he kept saying. Success was to be achieved and **real success takes an effort**.

As regards Pető's relationship with his staff, he believed that everybody was suitable for something; he **detected the positive side in everybody**. His respect for children and adults with disabilities manifested itself in small details as well e.g. he would not let them use the tin plates which were typical at the time. The groups had china plates and real glasses. "You are a child and a human being as anybody else" he would say.

In a documentary film of the series 'Great Hungarians of the century' introducing András Pető, one of his former pupils, the poet Zoltán Vitó told about him: "Behind his strictness there was a warm heart, infinite as the sea". Dr. István Eke, lawyer, said: "He was very strict but humane, always having our interests in mind".

Leading the group was not meant to be directive. Pető considered impersonal conduction important where the conductor in charge of the session had to combine three things: spontaneity, intercommunication and orthofunctional solutions adjusted to the individuals.

9. His working capacity and morals

In his work Petó followed a strict regime. At 7 am he would already start visiting the groups, very often staying there all day to direct some programme.



Conductive programme 1



Conductive programme 2

In every case he expected conductors and trainees to approach the education of the dysfunctioning person from a pedagogical point of view and to adopt the principle of necessary and sufficient intervention, guidance and conduction. Direct intervention and too much assistance evoked his severe criticism.

On one occasion he was very rigorous with me when he found that the assistance I was giving was inappropriate. He advised me to act as a gardener, just clipping the branches of the trees, rather than a baker. A year later when I was working in a group of adults with hemiplegia, he called me and praised me: “Now you are doing it very well” he said.

It was crucial that once you started something you had to complete it. In his opinion order, cleanliness and the clarity of thoughts were interrelated. Every session had to be clean and neat. When he was watching the programmes in the groups or setting tasks, he would not leave the room to answer the telephone, even if it was a call from the Ministry.

10. How do I envisage the future of conductive pedagogy?

Conductive education is an open system. Some say it did not survive in its original form and we have to distinguish between the true followers of Pető and pretenders. I do not agree. I think it is important that conductive pedagogy is more central, broader acknowledged and better understood than at Pető’s time. Since his death the method has widely spread and its status improved. This tendency will continue if quality is safeguarded. Conductive pedagogy is a method that has proved itself but I agree that it is not appropriate for everybody.

To me the Pető method is the best working, the integral method. We compose the programme and we have it carried out. I believe Pető would be pleased to see that our work has been organised at international level as well. We have built bridges all over the world. Conductive education has spread and developed throughout the world. There are good functioning conductive schools in the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel, Japan and a number of other places on our Globe.

Pető created something original and permanent. It took him enormous strength to fight under the specific circumstances within the Hungarian state of the time. He had to struggle continually to survive and to establish the independent training. A special branch of pedagogy with a resource centre in Budapest, Conductive Pedagogy is today an accredited part of Hungarian higher education, formally acknowledged in a number of other countries as well. Professor András Pető's life-work has ripened.

The method carrying his name has earned the distinction 'Hungaricum'. Conductive pedagogy has a tradition and represents a high standard.

If we want to be true to Professor Pető's intellectual heritage, we should develop it further, responding to the challenges of our age and life and at the same time safeguard the principles and spirit of his teaching.

11. We cherish his memory

His memory is preserved by his place of birth in Szombathely, the house in Balassi utca in Budapest where he used to live, his statue in the Pető Institute and all of us who remember him today and keep up the work he once started.



Szombathely



Balassi utca, Budapest

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