

# TOWARD A BIOGRAPHY OF SÁNDOR FERENCZI

## Foodnotes from Miskolc.



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A special, constantly changing relationship exists between an exceptional personality and his native town, at the basis of which certainly lies his choice of a profession. In the long run, however, it is the judgement and approach of posterity that determine the character of the historical interpretation. When the person in question becomes famous and enters the academic canon, the subtlest details regarding both his background and intentions as well as the circumstances that may have influenced him merely in an indirect way become interesting. The evolution of the relationship between Sándor Ferenczi and the country town of Miskolc has reached this stage in our time.

Biography would seem to be a classic and clearly understood genre. Still, there is a problem when it comes to determining what content belongs in the main body of a biography, and what constitutes background information that can justifiably be relegated to footnotes. Although no comprehensive biography of Sándor Ferenczi has yet been written, his life has been frequently investigated. We know a great deal about his predecessors, his brothers and sisters, his family book-selling business, and his love life. Additional research into details would seem to qualify simply as local history. But the origin of its great native son is important to Miskolc. A cellar on the Tetemvár hill, a vineyard on the Avas hill -these are meaningless to those unfamiliar with the city. If we become fixated on locations, we risk getting too far from Ferenczi and the psychoanalysis that made him famous all around the world. It would be useful to know how much place-specific information might interest researchers coming to the city<sup>1</sup>. It may be that there is simply too much of it, but this problem is rooted in a history going back several decades. Two conferences have focused on this matter.

The first, which took place October 30–November 1, 1987 in Budapest, was organized by the Hungarian academy of sciences. This was the first psychoanalytic congress in Hungary since World War II, and it led to the founding of the Sándor Ferenczi society on september 12, 1988. The closing session included the “Ferenczi Tour,” a visit to Miskolc. The local working group of the academic Committee organized a meeting for these professional colleagues, who included Judith Dupont (Paris), Dan G. Hertz (Jerusalem), Harald Leupold-Löwenthal (Vienna), Pierre Sabourin (Paris), and H. G. Rechenberger (Dusseldorf). A special edition of the *Borsodi Orvosi Szemle* (Borsod Medical review) published the plenary papers (Aszódi 1988)<sup>2</sup>.

The guiding spirit of the conference was Professor Doctor Imre Aszódi (1924–2004). Psychotherapists and psychoanalysts admonished the city for having neglected its native son! A memorial tablet was engraved, a street was named after Ferenczi, and a bibliography was prepared for the occasion. So, the conference in 1987 was in fact a remarkable milestone. Subsequently, a technical school specializing in health was named after Ferenczi, mention of whom became a daily occurrence in the city. The local magazine, *Műút* (The Way of the arts), has contained essays and studies relating to Ferenczi’s biography and his psychoanalytic work

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1.- Esta cuestión fue el tema central de la conferencia de 2008 en Miskolc. Los trabajos presentados sobre la vida y obra de Ferenczi, surgidos de la conferencia se pueden encontrar en el volumen editado por László Jenei (2008).

2.- Los textos de este volumen se puede leer en húngaro y alemán.

beginning with its first issue in August 2007<sup>3</sup>. And then there is the current event, for which I undertook to supply Miskolc footnotes. Let us now consider some of these.

It was previously known that Sándor Ferenczi sat for his final examinations at the Miskolc Main Reform secondary school in the summer of 1890. What more can we add to the biography? As it turns out, the local archives contain the records of these examinations, which include written theses on the following topics, all included in the category of Hungarian language and literature:

1. common characteristics and differences in the genre of drama
2. the impact of the 1848 revolution on Hungarian poetry
3. the role of warmth and light in nature

Ferenczi also had to solve the following problems in mathematics:

1. Algebraic problem: a forest has 256,848 square meters of woodland, whose annual growth is estimated at 9%. If the wood is to be utilized in 24 years, how many trees should be cut down to be able to sell the same amount each year? How much profit would the forestry authority gain if a cubic meter of wood sold for 1 Forint and 25 Krajcár [a former currency]?

2. Geometric problem: if we want to create an 18-sided, regular multi-angle area in a segment of a circle, whose radius is 246.5 meters, how long is one side of an angle, and what are the area and the circumference of that area in relation to the circle's circumference and area? If we want to plant trees in that garden by planting one tree on each 16-square-meter plot, how many trees would we need to plant?<sup>4</sup>

But, after all, how much does this new information tell us about Ferenczi? Would it be appropriate to include this material in a biography? Perhaps as a Miskolc footnote.

Ferenczi's Jewish origin is common knowledge. His father was a reform Jew who attended the synagogue in Kazinczy street. We can still visit the temple where Ferenczi as a child prayed more or less regularly; it is nowadays the only synagogue in Miskolc. It is worth remarking that in the Jewish registry persons having left the Jewish congregation are marked with an asterisk. This sign can be found beside the name of Sándor Ferenczi (Ujvári 1929, 276). When Ferenczi moved away from Miskolc in 1890, he was still a member of the local Jewish congregation; all that we can say is that he left the Jewish congregation in Budapest sometime between 1890 and 1929. We know that Sándor's father, Bernát Ferenczi (named Fraenkel until 1879), was a book-trader, a technical writer, the treasurer of the trade and industrial board, a member of the board of directors of the Miskolc savings Treasury, Vice President of the Union of Hungarian Book Traders, and a professional wine producer.

Records in the archive certify that the family wine cellar was on the Tetenvár hill bordering the inner city of Miskolc.

To the northeast. Pál Harmat reports that "Sándor was close to his father, indeed was his favorite child, and Ferenczi senior took Sándor to the vineyards on the hills outside the city every day" (1994, 31). The exact location of the family vineyard can be ascertained by means of newspaper advertisements. The weekly paper *Borsod*, the title of which refers to the name of the county of which Miskolc is the capital city<sup>5</sup>, for example, contained the following advertisement on April 6, 1876: "Vineyard on the Szentgyörgy hill, near to the vineyard of Bernát Fraenkel, for sale in good condition." The contemporary map indicates that the

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3.- Para el sitio Web en idioma húngaro de esta revista, ver <http://www.muut.hu/>

4.- El documento está guardado en el archivo Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Levéltár Megyei (Miskolc), VIII.55. Los borradores de la Escuela Secundaria de Reforma Principal de Miskolc, Caja 7: registros de 1890 examen final.

5.- Bors es el nombre del líder de una de las antiguas tribus húngaras que se asentaron en esta región en el siglo décimo.

frequently mentioned hill is identical to the southern and eastern slopes of the Avas. We can conclude from this information that Sándor Ferenczi's father had a vineyard on the emblematic hill of Miskolc.

On the basis of the private disclosures in the psychoanalyst's posthumously published diary and letters, one may characterize his mother as a real dragon. Whatever we may say about the personality of Mrs. Bernát Ferenczi, born Róza Eibenschütz, we can accept the basic thesis that it is impossible to raise eleven children without some rigor and discipline. Elsewhere (2008) I have compiled contemporary recollections of the mother. I mention here another resource that I have not yet investigated. One of her contemporaries conjures up the nature of Róza Ferenczi as follows:

A mistress with classical education, [she] was the head of an israelite women's group. She was in fact the founder of this humanist women's group. Besides being the head of this group, divine providence also awarded her another duty, the majestic duty of motherhood, raising eleven children and directing their lives. The eleven children could not do without their mother, the director of the family's upbringing. This was quite a dilemma for her because she had to choose between her maternal duty and the women's group that required her to stay away from home for long periods. Naturally, she did her duty as a mother. She resigned as president but always supported the group with valuable pieces of advice. Later, she retreated to the family home. She mended the tights of one child, tailored a piece of clothing for another, helped yet another to memorize homework for school or calmed down a fourth and others too, if it came to a fight following an argument. She could maintain order and respect. (Sugár 1937, 72–74).

Although Sándor Ferenczi himself is buried not in his native town but in the "Farkasréti" cemetery in Budapest, both of his parents as well as his brother Henrik rest in peace in the Jewish cemetery on the Avas hill. The gravestones testify to harmony and love. The following inscription can be read on the gravestone of Sándor's father above the remains of both parents: "Bernát Ferenczi died on November 20, 1889, aged 59. These remains may be covered with the passing dust but the memory of your great and noble spirit will live forever. May you rest in peace?" The upper part of the gravestone with an inscription about Sándor Ferenczi's mother is also a touching example of the love of a married couple: "Mrs. Bernát Ferenczi Róza Eibenschütz, born on December 11, 1840, died on July 20, 1921. My children, do not cry. I found the calm and rest by your dear father's side that I looked for on earth in vain." An older inscription on the other gravestone pays tribute to Ferenczi's favorite older brother: "Here lies Dr. Henrik Ferenczi, Vice-President of the Orphanage of Borsod County. Born on March 27, 1860, died on February 9, 1912, he departed, loving and crying for his mother and brothers and sisters." The top part of the gravestone commemorates Ferenczi's younger brother and his wife, who died as martyrs in Auschwitz. "Károly Ferenczi (1877–1944). Mrs. Károly Ferenczi, born Vilma Klár (1878–1944). I will keep hold of your memories for ever. Your mourning sister."

Zsófia Ferenczi, the youngest child, had this text engraved on the stone and tried to revitalize the bookshop. Her attempt came to an end with the nationalization of private firms in April 1952, though in the summer of 1950 the following notice had been published in the local press: "We hereby notify our customers that we have moved our 115-year-old Ferenczi stationery, writing materials, and bookshop to 9 Széchenyi street." This is the last trace of the century that the Ferenczi family had spent in Miskolc. It was followed by a period of oblivion until 1987. The Ferenczi house disappeared, its ruins were removed from the main street in 1963, and their place was taken by a strong, modern brick building. Ferenc Erős proposes the following as keywords for a Ferenczi biography: "assimilation, mediation, creativity, rebellion, oblivion, and remembering" (2007, 49). The demolished house, which was also the place of Ferenczi's birth, is an irreplaceable loss stemming from this period of oblivion. The architectural heritage relating to the biography (synagogue, former secondary school, cemetery), the line of wine cellars on Tetemvár and the trees on the Avas, the air in the Bükk mountains, the melancholy of the winding streets in the autumn—all these tell much more than my musty footnotes. Finally, we listen to them, because the time has now come for Miskolc to remember.

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Translated from the Hungarian by Erzsébet Molnár

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