

THE DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HISTORY
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THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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The Beginnings of the Printed Mass Media in Szentés (1871-1883)

*The Role of Local Press in the Advancement of Civil Development after the Compromise of
1867 in a South Plain Town*

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1. The choice of the subject and its significance

The aim of this doctoral thesis is to give an overview of the early press history of the South Plain town of Szentes between 1871 and 1883. The starting date of the period is not debatable since the settlement's first locally printed newspaper was published in 1871, and according to my opinion, the determination of the end point can be justified from several points of view: firstly, János Cherrier printer and book trader, the founder of newspaper publishing in Szentes, moved away from the town in 1883. Secondly, in close connection to the above fact, *Szentesi Lap*, the leading media of local opinion shaping, was taken over by a new owner at this time, with which the pioneering and experiential period of the newspaper once and for all finished. Thirdly, at the end of the same year, Szentes became the seat of Csongrád County: the county hall on the town's main square was inaugurated in December 1883, and the county assembly held its first ceremonial meeting in the new building. With all this a new era started in the town's political, economic and social history, and what is more, with peculiar dimensions, which was the result of the strong opposition between the mostly independent-minded local population and the pro-government county leaders.

The fact that I grew up in Szentes, and my strong emotional bonding to the town made the choice of subject easy. This work aims to be a stopgap since except for local historian Lajos Labádi's brief summary, no greater volume studies using modern research methods have been conducted about the development process of the town's press in the era of Dualism. My thesis places the main emphasis on the local social, cultural and economic characteristics in one and a half decade's period after 1867, however, it is important to point out that it is not primarily a monograph of social or economic history but a study of the history of press. Following a sketchy introduction to the Hungarian, more specifically, the South Plain conditions of press as well as the town's contemporary political, economic and social environment, the thesis provides an overview on the circumstances of the establishment and termination of the first local newspapers, on the publishers and editors, and on the formal and content elements and features of some newspapers. The investigation embraces nine local papers: *Szentesi Füzetek* specialist periodical, *Szentesi Lapok* with the focus on public life, *Alföldi Figyelő*, *Szentesi Lap*, *Szentes és Vidéke*, *Csongrádmegyei Közlöny*, *Alföldi Nővilág* fashion magazine, and two humour magazines, *Északi Fény* and *Darázs*.

The exploration of new economic, social and cultural opportunities after the Compromise and the contradictions of Szentes town struggling with considerable backwardness were given a greater stress in the thesis, just like the introduction on how the fledgling local press tried to take the lead in urbanization and civic development not only in a physical but also in an intellectual sense. It was also a further objective of the thesis to provide a comprehensive picture about the everyday life of the characteristic community of Szentes in the 1870s and the first third of the following decade through the mirror of press, primarily by the help of publications and news in the papers. Furthermore, my research also aimed to describe how the product and consumer, *id est* the newspaper and reader influence each other, and what kind of interrelationship exists between them. In the final part of the thesis, the local press is looked at as a capitalist enterprise, placing the publisher, printer and book trader János Cherrier, the founder of modern press in Szentes, in the focus, with whose oeuvre I endeavoured to present a career history that was atypical for the period and rich in interesting and extraordinary turning points.

2. Research Method and Sources

Professional expectations in relation to press history studies have gone through considerable changes in the last few years. According to the rather traditional approach, press historiography is a primarily descriptive task: the historian outlines the preliminaries and conditions of the newspaper's publishing, the significant stages of its life curve, then the causes of its termination. In general, he just lists the names of editors, journalists working for the paper, then describes the formal characteristics and column structure of the paper. Finally, he elaborates on the content, focusing primarily on the most important or, for any other reasons, the most popular articles. Though it is the unavoidable method of any press historical monograph, especially in case of uninvestigated newspapers, the biggest insufficiency of this approach is that such study submits itself almost exclusively under historical and literature historical aspects.

Besides political and literature historical methodologies, however, the social historical approach, using primarily analytical methods, has also emerged, which does not only supplement the above mentioned, rather traditional view but also promotes press historiography from the status of auxiliary to a higher status science, standing on new foundations. It defines the printed mass communication tools in a broader context, and it interprets them with the view to the development of social communication systems, choosing the investigational methods (e.g. statistical analyses) accordingly. Furthermore, it is essential to analyse any media product in the context of capitalist economics from the aspect of production, distribution and consumption, consequently as a capitalist enterprise as well.

Since the chosen subject has not been investigated so far, it was unavoidable to apply the text analysing methodology comprehensively. At the same time, attempts were made to meet the requirements of both approaches by conducting a comprehensive content exploration of the said newspapers and drawing up statistics based on them, and also by presenting János Cherrier's career path and his entrepreneurial activities.

Due to the limitation of the volume, in the detailed presentation of the individual papers, three factors had to be considered while weighting: the length of publishing, the person of the publisher/owner as well as the impact of the paper in the press history of Szentes. Based on this, more attention was given to the short-lived *Szentesi Füzetek* with its only one issue since

it was the first local paper. A more detailed analysis was conducted on *Darázs* satire magazine, existing also for a short period of time, since with its rough tone and with its articles containing hate campaigns against certain nationalities, it has been unprecedented in the history of press in Szentes. Being published almost throughout the most thoroughly researched period (from 1872), the most detailed discussion was given to *Szentesi Lap*, in whose case a full-scale content analysis of the first thirteen volumes was performed by organizing data, and based on them, drawing up various statistics that could help draw some conclusions. Moreover, János Cherrier's two weekly papers – *Szentesi Lapok*, *Alföldi Figyelő* – were also given more attention. In studying these newspapers, I mainly focused on those columns that regarding their content served the above mentioned goals, i.e. primarily on the news, the editorial articles as well as the advertisers. I did not deal with columns on literature, for example feuilletons in details since their investigation could be the subject of a future research.

In the general introduction of the doctoral thesis, that is in the chapters discussing the contemporary national and South Plain press life as well as the history of Szentes after 1867, I primarily worked from books and studies having been published so far. Besides them, I also used secondary sources, mainly János Labádi's articles regularly published in *Szentesi Élet* weekly, and also in the chapters presenting the local press history and János Cherrier's career path.

The primary sources of the dissertation were mainly the contemporary newspapers of Szentes, to the copies of whose surviving issues I could have access, on the one hand, in the National Széchenyi Library (*Északi Fény*, *Csongrád megyei Közlöny*, *Szentes és Vidéke*), on the other hand, in the Szentes Branch of the Csongrád County Archives of the Hungarian Archives (*Szentesi Lapok*, *Alföldi Figyelő*, *Darázs*). My research work was made considerably easier by that the full stock of the most significant *Szentesi Lapok* was already accessible on the Internet in digitalized form. Additionally, I also used the following papers in my investigation:

- *Csongrádi Közlöny*, 12 April (Vol III No 15)
- *Csongrád megyei Közlöny*, 1876, Vol I (full surviving stock)
- *Darázs*, 1883, Vol I (full surviving stock)
- *Eger*, 10 December 1868 (Vol VI No 50)

- *Eger*, 5 January 1871 (Vol IX No 1)
- *Északi Fény*, 1874, Vol I (full surviving stock)
- *Kanizsai Ujság*, 18 January 1914 (Vol VII No 3)
- *Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap*, 11 April 1875 (Vol XVIII No 15)
- *Szentesi Füzetek*, February 1871 (Vol I No 1)
- *Szentesi Lap*, 1872–1883, Vol I–XIII (full surviving stock)
- *Szentesi Lap*, 12 September 1893 (Vol XXIII No 109)
- *Szentesi Lap*, 23 November 1913 (Vol XLIII No 94)
- *Szentesi Lapok*, 1871-1872, Vol I-II (full surviving stock)
- *Szentes és Vidéke*, 1880–1883, Vol I–IV (full surviving stock)
- *Vasárnapi Ujság*, 8 August 1880 (Vol XXVII No 32)
- *Vasárnapi Ujság*, 29 August 1880 (Vol XXVII No 35)

My investigations on János Cherrier required intensive research in the archives. I found numerous documents in Eger, in the Heves County Archives of the National Archives, with the help of which I managed to learn about those years the printer spent in Gyöngyös. I also found some valuable documents in the Szentes Archives; I also did additional research in Kecskemét (Bács-Kiskun County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives) on the period he spent in Kunszentmiklós, and in the Romanian National Archives, Timisoara, where after long search, I found entries in Cherrier's birth registry. In Kunszentmiklós, I researched the death certificates of the Roman Catholic parish also in relation to the printer's life. Marta Švoliková, a Slovakian historian, provided me with the findings of her personal research, namely the copies of the documents in connection to Cherrier's years in Nitra and Levice from the Nitra Archives. Furthermore, I looked at numerous small prints made in the Cherrier printing houses in the manuscript room of the National Széchenyi Library. I did further research in the Country Archives of the Hungarian National Archives, where in the registrar of the K 148 section of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, I found important documents related to János Cherrier; however, they could not be viewed unfortunately because they had disappeared in the storms of the 20th century's history.

3. Main Findings

Prior to writing my thesis, I set several goals in my research work. First, I wanted to offer a comprehensive picture on the early period of the press history of Szentes: in what circumstances and upon what motives these newspapers were established, to what extent they managed to meet the contemporary formal and content requirements, and with what methods and how successfully they were able to gain the readers' trust. My investigation gained a special dimension by the fact that the majority of the local population was Protestant and they were in favour of independence. In this aspect, Szentes was not an exception, however, the gradually growing political fights for earning the title of county seat gave a special colour to the town's public life. This can be better described by the ever increasing disagreements between the local people who mainly belonged to the Reformed Church and promoted the Kossuth cult unconditionally and the county leaders who favoured the government. Although analysing this public battle in depth was not the subject of this thesis since a fully comprehensive study had already been published on Szentes's political and public administration history, these public disputes are closely linked to the subject of the thesis, especially from the aspect of studying the factors of success and failure of the newspapers under investigation.

This special feature of public life, in case of some newspapers, resulted in processes that were significantly different from the national tendencies: those readers' reactions in Szentes who were mainly in favour of the 1848 ideas were contradictory to those the publisher had formerly supposed, or would have expected in the interest of his paper. The main reason of the relatively early failure of *Szentesi Lapok* might have been attributable to the fact that it promoted political neutrality in such a town where the local population traditionally opposed the establishment of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. Additionally, the lack of compensation after the Compromise increased disappointment even more against Deák's party, which was undoubtedly shown at the elections of 1869. Thus in such a public atmosphere, the people of Szentes did not demand objectivity and abstaining from the party interests but just the opposite, and since their expectations were not met by their first public weekly paper, they did not support it with their subscription despite the noble intentions, the high standard appearance as well as the varied content.

In case of *Alföldi Figyelő*, the situation was even made worse by the fact that the newspaper's aim was to serve not only Szentes but the whole region, therefore, the people of Szentes could not accept even the content as their own, thus Cherrier made a double mistake in this regard, which was proved by the short life of the paper. The third newspaper, *Szentesi Lap*, could have suffered from the same fate, however, the chief editor, József Buday, broke away from impartiality: the newspaper explicitly committed itself to defending the local interests and it openly advocated the principles of 1848, by which, no wonder, the newspaper's situation became consolidated. Though Cherrier yielded to the county's pressure and removed Buday from the management, after a while he could not help but accept that the business interest should come before his personal conviction and careful loyalty, thus later, under the editorship of Ferenc Sima, the *Szentesi Lap* gained an unprecedented popularity.

It can be concluded, therefore, that those newspaper publishing enterprises that did not undertake to oppose to the governing party were *ab ovo* deemed to failure, for example, the otherwise high standard *Csongrádmegyei Közlöny* or *Északi Fény* humour magazine failed within a short period of time for good reasons. János Vutsák did not have a well-developed sense of reality either, who as the publisher and editor of *Darázs* thought that there had been marketable demand for articles discrediting local public personalities and written in vulgar style. And he was even more mistaken when he thought that after the Tiszaeszlár trial, the people of Szentes would be receptive to a rude style inciting against Jews. Consequently, in the years after the Compromise, each publisher who wanted to set up a local newspaper primarily had to take, or should have taken, the special attitude of the Szentes community into consideration, instead of trying the nationally well-tested 'recipe'. This, however, did not only necessitate the identification with the world view and value system close to most of the people in Szentes but also the adjustment of the content and column structure to consumer needs. It can be seen that the almost entirely indigestible *Csongrádmegyei Közlöny*, containing mainly long publications and rather representing the period of ideologized journalism, was not met with a favourable reception in the town. The Ferenc Sima edited *Szentesi Lap*, however, focused more and more on short news, which must have been the other key to its success besides its open political standing. The aim of my thesis was also to present, mainly through the analysis of the longer existing *Szentesi Lap*, how the emerging Szentes press proceeded gradually from the period of ideology influenced journalism to the rather business-oriented operation.

Considering the size of the town, upon the investigation of the beginnings of printed mass media, it can be stated that the first publishing enterprises were mainly established in the early-1870s in accordance with the national and regional tendencies. Therefore, from this aspect, Szentes can be regarded as unexceptional, keeping the fact in mind that there were numerous settlements where the history of local press started far later, or indeed only in the twentieth century.

In my thesis, I endeavoured to give an overview on the everyday life of the contemporary society of Szentes as it was reflected in the press, and I also intended to demonstrate what kind of opportunities the economic and cultural development based on new foundations after 1867 offered to the town, and on the contrary, what kind of contradictions and problems the considerable shortcomings led to. Here, I am primarily referring to those irritations (e.g. slippery pavements, muddy roads), dangers caused by swampy inner areas (e.g. risk of epidemics, frequent drownings), or the modest framework of social life that though can be attributed to infrastructural underdevelopment, considerably undermined the quality of life and the sense of general comfort. One of my objectives was also to highlight how actively the local press contributed to the remedy of the above problems, the promotion of urbanization as well as to the economic, social and cultural development of the town, by continually emphasizing the local newspapers' responsibility for and to the town and its citizens with their articles of educational goals, as well as by their proposals and advocacies for improvement addressed to the authorities.

In the last chapter, I outlined János Cherrier's career history, the founder of Szentes press, which is interesting neither only because that in the course of his adventurous life, he lived at several places in the Carpathian Basin being far distant from each other, nor because finding his date and place of birth set a greater challenge for a historian than usual. On the one hand, his life path is primarily worth getting to know, because he was the first to establish long-working printing houses in four settlements – Levice, Gyöngyös, Szentes and Kunszentmiklós –, on the other hand, his name is also strongly associated with launching the modern press of public interest in the two latter towns, therefore, his economic and cultural historical significance is unquestionable. Owing to its learnt vocation, it can be stated that he lived in a period that offered the chance for fast rising to eminence since the Compromise created and broadened the legal framework of publishing and distribution of printed mass media, thus the readers' demand for various newspapers increased by an extent never seen before. Cherrier

realized and seized the promising business opportunity in good time since after 1867, printing became a free enterprise, and owing to the technical achievements imported from abroad soon after, the national printing houses started developing rapidly. In this regard, it is exceptional that after countless failures, he always managed to recover, and he also stuck to his craft to the end. He was venturesome taking risks quite many times, and started his publishing business without official permissions in Nitra, Levice and probably also in Kunszentmiklós. If it was necessary, he launched a new paper instead of the bankrupted one, and if all else failed, he moved to a new place with his ever growing family to try his fortune again rather than give up his goals. Cherrier's career and activities exemplify well the newer level of the professionalization process taking place in the nineteenth century as compared to the development of press in the era of Enlightenment and Reform: the newspapers published by the printer were not any longer sponsored by aristocratic patrons but from his own capital and proceeds from advertisements since he regarded them as for-profit business enterprises. Furthermore, he inevitably applied the division of labour in case of press media, which had not been in practice before, however, by the end of the century, it had become general. This was shown in case of his three newspapers where the functions were expressly separated, except for a short period of time when because of his subordinate's resignation, he was forced to do both the publishing and editorial tasks temporarily at *Alföldi Figyelő*.

Though Cherrier could not enjoy long-lasting success, and he was naive in some aspects – see his faith set in the business success of *Alföldi Figyelő* in the capital, and some of his deeds can strongly be criticized morally – one can think of the termination of *Szentesi Lapok* or removing József Buday from the management of *Szentesi Lap*, his oeuvre on the whole was undoubtedly unprecedented among the contemporary national publishers.

4. The Author's Publications in the Topic

- *The First Year of Town Status of Magyarkanizsa in the Mirror of the Local Press.* Délvidéki Szemle [*The Southern Region Review*], Vol I No 1 (2014) pp. 31–39
- *The Beginnings of Printed News in Magyarkanizsa.* Délvidéki Szemle [*The Southern Region Review*], Vol II No 2 (2015) pp. 56–69
- *The Beginnings of Printed News in a South Great Plain Small Town: Szentesi Füzetek and Szentesi Lapok.* [*The Southern Region Review*], Vol III No 1 (2016) pp. 17–34
- *The Opening of the First Kindergarten in Szentes in the Mirror of Local Press.* Délvidéki Szemle [*The Southern Region Review*], Vol IV No 1 (2017) pp. 5–17
- *Political Satire and Anti-Semitic Instigation in Darázs Humour Magazine in Szentes.* Délvidéki Szemle [*The Southern Region Review*], Vol IV No 2 (2017) pp. 53–67
- *Cherrier János, the Founder of Press in Szentes.* In: András Döbör – Lajos Forró – Péter Zakar (ed.): *Chapters in the History of Voivodina. Youth in the South Great Plain Media Foundation*, Szeged, 2018. pp. 125–164

5. The Author's Lectures in the Topic

- Title: *The History of Press in Magyarokizsza in the Era of Dualism* (Chapters in the History of Voivodina 1 – Hungarian-Serbian Relations – Common Past and Common Future. International History and Cultural History Conference, Szeged, 23 January 2014)
- Title: *Publicist, Teacher and Politician –Ferenc Sima's Role in the Life of Szentes in the Era of Dualism* (Chapters in the History of Voivodina 2 – Common Past and Common Future in Voivodina. International History and Cultural History Conference, Szeged, 23 January 2015)
- Title: *The History of Press in Szentes in the Era of Dualism* (Formation and Disintegration of Multi-Nation States in Central-Eastern Europe. Scientific Conference Series for Historians, Geographers, Regionalists and Economists, Szeged, 6 March 2015)
- Title: *The Beginnings of Modern Civil Press in Szentes* (Chapters in the History of Voivodina 3 – International History and Cultural History Conference, Szeged, 22 January 2016)
- Title: *The Beginnings of Modern Civil Press in Szentes* (Formation and Disintegration of Multi-Nation States in Central-Eastern Europe. Scientific Conference Series for Historians, Geographers, Regionalists and Economists, Szeged, 4 March 2016)
- Title: *The Beginnings of Press in Magyarokizsza (1909–1918)* (Chapters in the History of Voivodina 4 – International History and Cultural History Conference, Szeged, 23 March 2017)
- Title: *János Cherrier, the Founder of Press in Szentes* (Common Past and Reconciliation in Voivodina Conference, Magyarokizsza, 13-15 October 2017)
- Title: *The First World War in the Press of Magyarokizsza* (Chapters in the History of Voivodina 5 – International History and Cultural History Conference, Szeged, 17 May 2018)