

SÁMUEL BRASSAI, THE LAST TRANSYLVANIAN POLYMATH

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The aim of this paper is to introduce Sámuel Brassai, the teacher, the outstanding scholar of the 19th century to the reader. He played a great role in the Reform era which was the time of rapid development in the cultural life of Hungary. Brassai's views on language-pedagogy and methodology, and his principles of foreign language teaching are still acceptable. He deserves our respect for his struggle for the teaching of the Hungarian language and for his language supporter activity. His main effort to modernize education and spread knowledge were featured prominently in a newspaper devoted to public education, Sunday Jounay (Vasárnapi Ujság). The paper, founded with the help of the Kolozsvár Society (Casino), was edited by the professor of the Unitarian college, Sámuel Brassai.

Key words: language learning, mother tongue, education reform, language pedagogy

Introduction to his life and work

The present study relies mainly on facts in the monographs about Brassai; on the contemporary periodical reviews and publications published in Kolozsvár; on the writings of Sámuel Brassai; on the documentary data, on the history of foreign-language teaching – especially in the 19th century –; on his influence at home and abroad, as well as on the development of the Direct Method and its methodological background.

In the first place the essay wants to emphasize that Sámuel Brassai's teachings are so fundamental and deep that they are substantial even today. We can learn a great deal from him.

Perhaps nations had not been as conscious of their national characteristic feature as they were in the 19th century. This was proved by their struggles for independence and a national language. At the same time besides their characteristic national culture it was important –and it is today- to know the culture of other nations. The knowledge of that nation's language is the most essential condition and the means to it. Learning of a foreign language must not include the negligence of our mother tongue, because language is the biggest element in the formation of a nation besides the preservation and promotion of traditions. If a community has not got its own language it cannot form a nation.

Besides understanding the significance of language learning, another important question is what is the best, easiest, and most appropriate way of language acquisition, that is, which is the best language learning method. At the centre of Brassai's life-work, which influenced his whole life and his scientific work, was his research into the methodological principles of

teaching. In his long life he was engaged in the sciences; he fought for education in the Hungarian language eagerly and successfully, he took a stand for teaching in the Hungarian language against Latin. Besides jurisprudence he was very good in almost every science; excellent linguist, natural scientist, philosopher, critic, mathematician, musician, teacher and headmaster in a secondary school, essay writer, university professor, and a regular member of the Academy of Sciences. Although he received the title of doctor in the University of Kolozsvár in 1847, he never used it.

If we want to learn more about Sámuel Brassai's life we need to go back to his homeland, Torockó and Torockószentgyörgy, to the places of his youth and adulthood, mainly to Kolozsvár. We need to know his family background, the events of his life, the era when he lived, the Transylvanian aristocratic life, which preserved its typical Hungarianlike education and which lay stress on education and development of the mind. We need to know how Brassai developed the basics, which he had got from his family, by self-education. He lived in a wonderful period of time, in the Reform era, at the time of the discussion of language reform and war of independence of 1848-49. After the compromise of 1867, he was on friendly terms with Széchenyi, Petőfi, Arany, Ottó Herman, Ferenc Erkel, and Pál Gyulai.

Language as the representation of national consciousness and thinking was holy to Brassai. In this era in Hungary the struggle for the mother tongue bound up with the question of foreign language teaching. Sámuel Brassai was an outstanding character and a pioneer in this dual campaign.

Brassai's language knowledge – it is said that he spoke ten languages – his knowledge of the literature of the world, his talent for arts and aesthetics were amazing. Teaching, continuous learning, and persistent work were his lifelong passions. These were imbued with perpetual enthusiasm. He was an encyclopaedic scholar, the great teacher of the nation.

When on 20 March 1848 the news of the events from Budapest arrived in Kolozsvár, Brassai started his presentation with the following words: "*Remember that the flag of independence is held and carried around mainly by the youth.*" (Gál 122).

This thought always lived in his heart and it informed all his work. The problems of youth were much on his mind. He was searching for the solution to the reform of education. All his life was spent working. Acquiring knowledge kept him alive, and gave him strength to turn towards new sciences again and again.

There have been several valuable general works and studies written on Brassai's life and work. But the era he lived in and his long career still offer many discoveries.

His biographers revealed the important moments of his life and work, but we – posterity – can appreciate the importance of his language-pedagogy better with the hindsight of more than a hundred years.

Revealing and knowing Brassai's language-pedagogy is worthwhile because language learning is an important question even today. We are still searching for the best methods and most effective pedagogical solutions. We need to consider his principles because they are still relevant.

His life overlapped with the lives of the two Bolyais, Einstein, Darwin, Beethoven, Bartók, Goethe, Kazinczy, Jókai. He wrote about everything, taught everything and everybody, edited papers. "*He was a Polymath - in the opinion of the former president of the Academy he was the greatest. To everyone's knowledge he was the last.*" (Rászlai 31).

Géza Gárdonyi wrote the following lines about him in his poem: *A letter to Sir Sámuel Brassai (Levél Brassai Sámuel úrnak)*.

*"One century! What a big career!...
You saw the pale face of Kazinczy
and read his letters burning with holy flame.
You applauded the two Kisfaludys,
and turned the pages of the new book of Himfi's loves.
The author of the 'Szózat' called you his brother.
You saw the Hungarian nation when as a gentleman."*

Brassai, the teacher, the popularizer of sciences

Brassai, the teacher

His life, work and activity were inspired by thoughts that nowadays, a hundred years after his death, at the beginning of the 21st century are still valid. These thoughts are in the fields of education, economics, morality, research into the nation's prosperity. He contributed to all these fields not only with his methodological work but with his journalistic activity as well.

He is rightly called the last Transylvanian polymath and the great teacher of the nation. Mária Szonja Parászka also called him the first "reform educator" as Sámuel Brassai brought an end to backwardness and recognized the difficulties of education: the lack of an appropriate methodology and the mediocre standard of educational equipment. He not only recognized these things but also did something about them. He taught everybody, who required it, throughout his life. *"I made an arrangement that I dedicate myself to teaching. This aptitude and passion of mine started when I was twelve years old."* (Kallós 17) – he professed to his friends.

Brassai claimed several times that he had only one science, methodology, both in theory and in practice. Lajos Felméri, the professor of pedagogy of the University of Kolozsvár called Brassai the first methodologist of our country. He put Brassai - as a textbook writer - on a European level.

Brassai was a versatile scientist. He perpetually taught and studied orally and in writing. His fertile life was characterized by continuous learning, hard work, struggle and enduring enthusiasm. Beyond language pedagogy he dealt with other branches of science too and each was pervaded by research into the right method. *"The leading of his life was surmounted by two passions. The first was debate. Debate about not always essential questions but always in a passionate way. The other was methodology, teaching, by the most appropriate method."* (Rászlai 31).

In his childhood his narrower and wider environment inspired him to satisfy his thirst for knowledge and for serious thinking. He spent his childhood in Torockószentgyörgy between qualified grandparents and aunts. His father, who lived in the charm of books and who collected the latest ones, taught Brassai that he could recognize new features in every science and that he should increase his knowledge independently.

He professed that he who dealt with science did it not only for the pleasure and the usefulness of it, but also for its magnificence. Man takes pleasure in discovery and progress. Respectful honour and love flooded from him towards sciences throughout his life. In 1832 he surprised the world with a unique, valuable dissertation in the *National Conversation (Nemzeti Társalkodó)*. The title of his work was: *About the pleasure which is caused in ourselves by the complementing or hearing beautiful works (A gyönyörűségről, melyet a szép művek szemléltetése vagy hallása okoz bennünk)*. The world of scientists in Kolozsvár acknowledged the qualified young scholar who propagated the ideas of reform, progress and liberalism

in the furtherance of national cultural progress. Possibly the rather awkward relationship that he had with superiors and teacher colleagues could be explained by these things. But the relationship between him and youth was warmer and more insistent. He could speak to the heart and also to the mind of the students because he not only knew the desires and wishes of the young soul but also acknowledged them. He broke the old pedagogical idea according to which there was a reign of terror in the school where every fault was met by punishment. He stressed that the getting of power did not depend on external things. He respected nothing which was external and valueless convention or habit. According to him man can reach and has to reach a high standing by knowledge, the teaching of sciences and humane behaviour.

He gave his inaugural speech at the Unitarian College in 1837. The title of it was: *The influence of periods and national characters on the writing of history* (*Az időszakok és nemzetkarakterek befolyása a história írásaira*); in which he examined the development of the personality. In its development, besides the era, he stressed the effects of geographical factors and of a common language and cultural identity. With this theory he preceded *Hippolyte Taine* (1865) by one generation. According to *Taine's* philosophy the actions and the works of art of people are affected by the cooperation of three factors which are the following: the species, the environment, and the time.

The speech of Brassai beyond its contents and message is specifically significant because this was the first Hungarian inaugural.

Brassai wanted principally to teach his students to think so he gave priority to transpose language and mathematics in his curriculum. We have to emphasize especially that he enlarged his knowledge in countless places in a self-taught way in order to teach others and that others could benefit from his knowledge. He trained and taught not only as a teacher but also through his extremely significant academic educational work. He left for us such a heritage that deserves respect and that we have to conserve and appreciate. He was a pedagogue who wanted to reform public education not only with his theoretical activity but also with his practical methods.

The popularizer of sciences

1. *The Sunday Journal* (*Vasárnapi Újság*). Brassai took a share in educating people and publicising science for everyone as an editor and writer of articles too. He also considered it as his duty beyond his school and private tuition. That was the reason why he accepted editorship of the Sunday Journal in 1834 – the invitation of the Kolozsvár Society (called Casino). Kolozsvár was a real literary centre at that time. Ferenc Szilágyi, Sándor Farkas Bölöni, the Telekys, Zsigmond Kemény, Sándor Kriza, Miklós Jósika were at the head of cultural literary life. At that time the gentlemen's society was founded under the influence of Széchenyi, in which the most prominent men, born and intellectual aristocrats of Transylvania used every effort to promote patriotic public education.

Two kinds of ambition were noticeable in the articles of the Sunday Journal. One of them gave financial information to the reader, and the other had the purpose of public education.

Brassai declared that people should improve their mind, because education was the basis of economic development. He subordinated his journal to this conception. In his articles Brassai mediated for the readers what Széchenyi proclaimed in the trilogy: *Credit, World, Stage* (*Hitel, Világ, Stádium*).

Brassai edited the Sunday Journal between 1834 and 1848, and its aim was in tune with his personality and views. It informed the readers about the political situation, proclaimed the progressive ideas of the Reform Age, popularized the most recent achievements of the contemporary science and techniques, gave modern economic knowledge and a foretaste of contemporary literature; and furthermore, it published my pedagogical, scientific, musical, economic, philological articles on 16 pages every week. Besides the financial writings the paper often contained poems, short stories, and travelogues.

The Sunday Journal became widely read. Most of the articles, written in excellent, tasteful Hungarian language of popular terms with individual power and colouring, were written by the editor himself, mostly anonymously. Brassai was the author, the editor and the proofreader in one person. Once he noticed angrily: "*the Sunday Journal is written by Sam Brassai, edited by Sam Brassai, corrected by Sam Brassai, correspondent is Sam Réz*". (Fitz 106).

Nevertheless, we can appreciate the ambition of Brassai that he tried to use well-sounding Hungarian words for technical and scientific expressions.

2. *The Almanacs of the Transylvanian Museum (Az Erdélyi Múzeum Évkönyvei)*. In the autumn of 1859 the Museum of the *Transylvanian Museum Association (Az Erdélyi Múzeum Egylet)* was founded for the press of Imre Mikó in Kolozsvár, which was opened with brilliant festivals. Sámuel Brassai became the director and the custodian of the collection of natural science; the custodian of the cabinet of the antiquities was Henrik Finály, and the management of the library was entrusted to Károly Szabó.

The museum is an important means of spreading scientific knowledge in every period. Brassai often emphasized the importance of attainment based on empirical and experimental facts; and the Association of the Transylvanian Museum fulfilled this function. In Brassai's opinion the public museum is the intellectual pantry of people.

He soon started the Almanacs of the Transylvanian Museum, which ran to five issues. These were especially important, because on the one hand the Transylvanian scientific works did not have the chance to reach the public, and on the other hand these effectively transmitted the scientific and technical literature of Brassai's age to succeeding generations.

3. *Friend of Youth (Fiatalság Barátja)*. Brassai liked to be the first in everything. He was the first editor of a popular newspaper and he was the first to be editor of a juvenile magazine too.

His main purpose was to educate and drive youth towards science besides the cultivation of the national culture and native language, because youth is the ideal time for learning and getting experience. Brassai wrote in the Sunday Journal in 1835 in an article entitled *Benefits of a well-educated mind (A jól kimívelt elmének hasznai)*, that the solid basis of a glad old age was a youth devoted to goodness, because the ones who tasted beauty derived from the occupation with wisdom and science knew that they wouldn't be alone. They weren't deprived of fellows and conversation even in the deepest loneliness; their fellows were their own ideas and they could talk to their own mind at any time.

In 1851 Brassai started the journal entitled the Friend of Youth for the better service of youth education. This was one of our first juvenile literature-educational magazines to edit which he studied German, French and English children's journals too. He published plays for the young, historical and geographical articles, educational readings. Among other

things he wrote about the International Exhibition in London; also he published uncle Mór (Jókai)'s tales in the column entitled *Chatroom (Téricsélő szoba)*. The rich material of the magazine served the national-public education. To attract readers' attention and to popularise History he published rhyming riddles of letters and numbers with quizzes.

Although, the magazine only had six issues, it served as a model for succeeding journals for children. In this magazine János Arany and Pál Gyulai introduced themselves as children's poets.

Brassai worked and fought to spread and improve knowledge and destroy all misleading and false ideas and doctrines in each of his magazines.

Conclusion

Brassai never wrote those things which did not derive from his own soul. That is why he never repeated himself during his 65-year long career as a writer; but he gradually went forward and developed himself; he always kept abreast of the time. (Boros 63).

Sámuel Brassai was one of the first to speak up in connection with educational questions. He stated his educational principles in his different writings and works. The principle of his pedagogical work is that he considered the schools to be educational institutes and the final goal of teaching is to form the educational mind. He gave preference to thoroughness over encyclopedic knowledge.

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