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## **The Creation and Results of the National Free-Cultural Council**

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By its decree issued on 9 October, 1945, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (MERA) established the National Free-Cultural Council (NFCC) to co-ordinate the cultural activity at social level. The NFCC was a social organisation, the advisory board of MPEEA. It organised extracurricular training and public education, it played a connecting role between the state owned system of institutions and the social associations, and provided theoretical, methodological and financial support to the implementation of cultural tasks. The 110 members of the NFCC were delegated by various cultural institutions, political parties, and social associations. The members of the Council were assigned by the MERA for 3 years. The president was assigned by the head of the state from among the 5 people proposed by the members, while the vice-president was assigned by the Minister of Public Education and Ecclesiastical Affairs. On the inaugural meeting held on 10 December, 1945, Sándor Karácsony, the teacher-philosopher professor of Debrecen University, was elected as the president of the Council with a large majority. Sándor Sík also got votes for getting the post of the president. Nobody got the large majority of votes for the post of the vice-president. Erzsébet Andics and others were among the nominees. Dezső Keresztury, the Minister of Public Education and Ecclesiastical Affairs, finally decided to appoint Sándor Sík as vice-president (Dancs, 1988:9-12, 31-32).

It took a long time to implement the measures in connection with the establishment of the National Free-Cultural Council and setting up the necessary infrastructure, consequently, the NFCC commenced its operation in practice only in spring 1946. On 11 March, Karácsony sent a circular to the members of the Council. He reminded them that in the previous decades a lot of people could not access school education and public education. As a result of democratic transformation, now they require bigger sweep in economic and public life for themselves. However, in order to get that, they will need to wind up their cultural deficiencies. On 4 April, 1946 session of the NFCC, upon Karácsony's proposal, Árpád Szabó was elected to be the secretary general and János Victor was assigned to manage the central secretariat. Szabó withdrew on 30 September because of his other tasks; at that time, Endre Barczán took

over the authority of the secretary general (Dancs, 1988:70-71, 148-149).

Within the frames of the NFCC, 3 working committees were established, including several subcommittees. Each member of the Council participated in the activity of one of the committees. The president of the Political Committee was József Darvas and then Józsefné Antal took over his post after his withdrawal due to his party functions. The tasks of the secretary were performed by Ferenc Kovács. Gyula Ortutay was the president of the Pedagogical Committee until he was nominated to be a minister in 1947. First Endre Barczán, then from October 1946, Dénes Kövendi held the post of secretary. Erzsébet Andics was elected to be the president of the Professional Committee, while the secretary of the committee was József Újfalussy. The NFCC Bureau (the secretary general, the central secretariat, and the secretary of the 3 working committees) operated next to the president and vice-president of the Council. During the intervals between the full sessions, the necessary decisions were made by the NFCC Presidium that consisted of the president, the vice-president, the presidents of the 3 working committees, and 2 members from each committee. Between March 1946 and March 1947, the NFCC held 3 full sessions and 12 presidium sessions (Beszámoló, 1947:225; Dancs, 1988:148-149).

The state owned and the social institution systems were developed parallel to each other in the organisation and management of public education. The country was split up into 40 free education districts. Counties and towns/cities with municipal rights comprised a district. Free-Cultural Bureaus were set up in them, headed by a supervisor. Managing directors were nominated to each settlement based on the recommendations of supervisors. They were mostly teachers who performed this function for a moderate remuneration and that they had less class. The social institution system of free education consisted of Free-Cultural Councils set up in the districts, and Free-Cultural Committees established in each settlement. They consisted of the representatives of cultural institutions and the delegates of parties and civil organisations and they operated on the one hand as the advisory boards of supervisors and managing directors, while on the other hand, they organised local cultural life highly independently (Kövendi - Szathmáry, 1948:3; Dancs, 1988:9-12).

However, building out the structure of the bureau progressed haltingly. It took a long time to nominate Free-Cultural supervisors. Because of that, the free education managing directors also worked for a period of time based only on temporary assignment, without nomination and regular remuneration. The Free-Cultural Councils were already established in summer 1946. However, in order to officially assign the members, they had to wait for the inauguration of the district supervisor, because the minister assigned the members based on his/her recommendation. This was the situation with the local committees, too, because their minister level confirmation was done based on the recommendation of managing directors (Gombos, 1947a:221-222).

The NFEC regarded it essential to popularise the free education related principles and methods as widely as possible. The heads of the Council kept on travelling around in the country. They made 80 visits during one year at 32 settlements in the country side. They negotiated with the local social organs, made presentations, collected information about the local conditions and circumstances, and even personally participated in mobilising the inhabitants. From 5 February, 1946, upon the NFCC's recommendation, a bi-weekly series of presentations was launched in the radio about the questions related to free education, which soon became a regular weekly information providing broadcast. The NFCC worked out a 3-year action plan based on the experiences of the first year on the session held on 13 March, 1947. Its key issues contained: fight against illiteracy; culture house building program; folks library development; publication of student books, accessory materials for the free schools; the introduction of the subject of „Free Culture“ in the teacher training institutions; harmonisation of the cultural activities of social associations; and management training courses for the purpose of free education (Beszámoló, 1947:223-228, 224-225; Gombos, 1947a:221-222).

Close co-operation was formed between the NFCC and the MERA's Free-Cultural Department. They held regular negotiations and supported each other's initiatives at various forums of the bureau. The Council paid special attention to joint work with various social associations, youth and women organisations. In summer 1946, they organised a professional conference and poll with the participation of the representatives of the bigger national associations. In February 1947, there was an agreement entered into about holding regular negotiations with the most important youth and women organisations. They held meetings about topical questions monthly or bi-monthly with the involvement of 19 organisations (feminists, youth and women divisions of the parties in the parliament). On 29 May, 1947, they organised a specific national level free education conference for the women organisations (Dancs, 1988:90-91; Beszámoló, 1947:224-226).

The NFCC kept on negotiating with the appropriate ministries in connection with the cultural tasks within their scope of authority. Upon the initiative of the Council and the MERA, on 13 June, 1947, a professional meeting was held with the participation of the representatives of 6 ministries. On 19 June, they organised a joint professional conference the relevant persons in charge of the national organisations of free education (Hungarian Folks' Cultural Institute, Public Education Council). As a result of the NFCC's proposal, on 15 April, 1948, a Permanent Intra-ministerial Professional Committee was set up with the involvement of 6 ministries and 8 big national social organisations. The professional committee led by Karácsony made efforts to better co-ordinate the activity of free education, to harmonise the action plans, to ensure the required funds and to enforce the professional aspects of regulation (Gombos, 1948:263-266; Ortutay, 1948:327-328).

The NFCC regarded the organisation and development of extracurricular adult education as one of its most important tasks. Several members of the Council were involved in the elaboration of the MERA decree issued

concerning the regulation of the operation of the primary, secondary, and tertiary free schools. The National Free-Cultural Council's proposals were also incorporated in the curricular guidelines compiled for the free schools. They gave only the framework i.e. included only the key range of subjects and example curriculum outlines. Besides this, however, they offered a high level of independence for the enforcement of local demands. The NFCC also paid special attention to various information popularising and professional courses. At local level, these represented the main focus of the activity of the free education organs. The Council supported the adult education programs of villages and civil organisation with theoretical, methodological guidance, sending central presenters, publishing accessory materials to trainings, technical devices, and funds (Timaffy, 1947:357-359).

In winter 1945-1946, there were 1532 courses held in the country, 55% of which in small villages with less than 1000 inhabitants. In 1946, a new form of training was introduced, which merged the primary level general education and economic training. The 150-160 lesson courses compiled in this way expanded the students' general knowledge and provided modern information required to private farming. In winter 1946-1947, there were adult training or organised information popularising activity already on 2700 settlements, 200 free schools operating (minimum 3 months' education, with at least 30 students), and 2000 different courses held. One year later, 240 free schools operated, 1306 free education courses were held, with the participation of 59 185 students in the country (Hangai, 1947:106-107).

On the session of the NFCC held on 18 December, 1947, it was mentioned that there were a lot of challenges because of the fragmentation of the supervision of the schools and the adult education and because professional training belonged to the scope of authority of 6 different ministries. They would have found it a better solution, if all training forms had been co-ordinated by the MERA. In order to discuss this question, the Council initiated an intra-ministerial meeting. At the conference convened by the MERA by 15 April, 1948, where Sándor Karácsony was the chairman, they achieved a compromise. Although the order of training was not changed, within the frames of the newly set up Permanent Intra-ministerial Professional Committee, there was a possibility to keep on negotiating all the time (Dancs, 1988:164; Ortutay, 1948:327-328).

The NFCC put special emphasis on the complete winding up of illiteracy. According to the statistics, 8% of the Hungarian population could not read and write, however, according to its estimation this ratio reached even 15%. The NFCC urged to take effective steps to wind up illiteracy, because it was not possible to talk about high standard mass culture until this problem was not solved. People who were not informed well who could not represent their own interests because of their illiteracy could not even enforce their basic civil rights. The Council, on its session held on 13 March, 1947, announced a program to wind up illiteracy, mobilise the society, find the persons involved and appropriately train the teachers to

be involved in the training. They emphasised that the adults' training could not feature a childish character; other methods needed to be applied during the training (Beszámoló, 1947:227; Barczán, 1948:22-24).

The Council endeavoured to raise the attention of the entire society through the press and the radio. It held negotiations with the social organisations and the parties that they support mobilisation, the propaganda for learning, and the identification of illiterate people. Upon the NFCC's urging, the MERA ordered that between 27 May and 2 June, 1947, the Free Education Bureaus should organise the listing of illiterate people with the involvement of social organs. Between 17 and 19 November, 1947, with the participation of 1 leading teacher per county a further training was held, while from December, at county level, courses were organised to prepare the teachers that would take part in the training. According to the plans, from the beginning of 1948, 6000 local primary courses would have been started, with a 50 lesson curriculum. The practical realisation, however, faced several difficulties. The required teaching materials were missing and there were few applicants. The NFCC convened a national conference to discuss the professional problems in November 1948 (Karácsony, 1948:21-22; Barczán, 1948:22-24).

The development of the library network was considered as a fundamental issue from the points of view of both the free education of the society, the expansion of the economic and social knowledge, and the enhancement of the cultural standard. There were huge losses because of the war. Out of the 3500 public libraries operating in 1944, the books of 2300 institutions were destroyed. In June 1946, the NFCC submitted a proposal to the MERA to set up a public library at each settlement with more than 200 inhabitants for the sake of supplying rural population with books. The MERA, however, partly due to professional, partly due to financial considerations, wanted to concentrate the available book stock rather in the bigger regional libraries. In 1946, a decree regulating the re-organisation of the public library network was issued accordingly. The aspects represented by the NFCC were only enforced to the extent that the issue of local public libraries was allocated to the Free-Cultural Councils (Varjú, 1948:273-275; Dancs, 1988:358-362).

In order to further develop library matters, in November 1946, the government ordered to set up the National Library Council and the National Library Centre that served as its administrative organ. It took, however, several months to implement it due to various administrative reasons. Utilising the opportunity, the NFCC requested the modification of this decree, because it did not put enough emphasis on public education libraries. The Council proposed that within the frames of the central organs to be set up, a professional library department and a respective public education department operated. Although the proposal was also supported by the MERA, the government issued the decree again in its original form on 23 March, 1947. The NFCC got involved in the organisation of plant libraries and local public libraries and the compilation of lists of recommended books. In March 1947, within the frames of the Council, a library subcommittee was created. Jointly with the MERA's

Library Department, they distributed 1100 public library sets between 1946 and 1948. In co-operation with the Hungarian Folks' Cultural Institute, they compiled 600 travelling libraries that were allocated to various social associations for a year. The NFCC initiated that the works of classical Hungarian authors (Jókai, Ady, Móricz, Mikszáth, and Móra) got released from intellectual property fee payment obligation so that these writings could become available cheaply and could get to as many libraries as possible (Dancs, 1988:350-355; Beszámoló, 1947:227).

The management of the Council regarded it outstandingly important to select the appropriate persons into the staff of the free education bureau that was why it notified the ministry that it wanted to take part in the selection of the supervisors and managing directors. It regarded democratic attitude and behaviour, comprehensive awareness, good sense of pedagogy and organising skills as the most important criteria. From March 1947, they started to organise the management training courses for the social organs of free education. The NFEC turned to the ministry with the request that only the NFCC could start such trainings. However, this was rejected by the MERA as a result of the governing parties' pressure. The parties insisted on having the option of management training courses, because they wanted to put their own reliable people into public and cultural positions. In return, the NFCC requested to work out general principles that must be enforced at each management training course and that upon issuing the start permit, the MERA should listen to the Council's opinion, too. The ministry approved it during the negotiations held on 29 July, 1947 (Dancs, 1988:248-249, 656-658; Gombos, 1947b:321-323).

The first national conference of local Free-Cultural Councils took place between 13 and 15 March, 1947. The district council members and 2 representatives of each town or city that belonged to the district were invited to the event. During the conference, the following problems were discussed: the lack of financial resource and tools, the program overlapping due to omitted co-ordination, and that the local cultural organs were still not pro-active enough; they still waited for central instructions. They pointed out as the most important tasks to survey the cultural demands of the transforming society, to continue the fight against illiteracy, to expand the training opportunities, to extend acquiring information on public life, and to preserve folk traditions. Between 9 and 16 June, 1947, the national conference of the District Free-Cultural Supervisors took place in the same spirit, during which a professional further training was also held. The presenters included Sándor Karácsony, Péter Veres, and István Bibó (Kövendi, 1947:228-230; K. Nagy, 1947:43-44).

The extensive discussion of the theoretical, methodological, and organisational issues of free education made it necessary to set up a professional forum, to publish a cultural journal. In 1946, the NFCC took over the editing works of the *Free Education News* launched by the MERA then it launched a new journal from 1947 titled *New Plough*. The chief editor of the journal was Sándor Karácsony. The journal published on 60

pages in average discussed doctrinal questions, published professional analyses, reflected to topical questions, and distributed several practical examples and experiences so that it supported the cultural life of local communities with these, too. In the journal's volume of year 1947, 191 articles were published on 772 pages. 18% of the writings dealt with theoretical, 42% with concrete professional problems, 30% with practical, organisational, methodological aspects, and 10% with social and political questions. In its cultural news column, 314 national and local events were reported. In addition to this, the NFCC also had a significant book publishing activity. It published several publications that dealt with social, public life, culture political topics, but it also published methodological writings, accessory materials to teaching, literature, and program guides (Dancs, 1988:636-638).

The political environment, the sharpening fights among parties, however, had their influence on the NFCC's work. In summer 1947, the critics related to the democratic principles and the pro-active practice of free education and its feature of building on folk culture got stronger. The communist party expected a clear-cut commitment towards left-wing ideology and socialist targets from the cultural organs. As a protestation against unfair critics and political pressure, in the middle of June, Sándor Karácsony withdrew from the chief editor post of *New Plough* and had not published any articles in the journal for several months. He only gave up his opposition by the personal request of the minister of culture, Gyula Ortutay and from October he agreed again to edit the journal. On 7 November, 1947, Sándor Sík withdrew from his vice-president position. The official reasoning said that he became the Hungarian provincial of the Piarist Order. His withdrawal was, however, in reality a political resistance because of the strengthening of left-wing attacks against free education (Lendvai, 1981:70; Lányi, 1984:60).

In June 1948, at the conference of free education supervisors in Révfülöp, then in the columns of the *Social Review*, Kálmán E. Kovács worded a harsh critic in relation to the principles of free education and the NFCC's activity. He stated that free education only served the aim of maintaining peasant romanticism, religious approach, and obsolete civil views. He explained that education was not the self-activity of a free society, but a specific battlefield where it was necessary to fight against the reactionary forces and way of thinking. At the end of 1948, a governmental decree was issued about the reorganisation of the free education institution system. The independence of the autonomous social organisations, the Free Education Councils and Committees got substantially limited. There were widespread personal changes introduced both at national and local levels. The cultural activity got under increasingly higher state management and served more and more daily political objectives. From November 1948, the publication of *New Plough* was terminated (Koczkás, 1948:483-485; Lendvai, 1993:124-125).

In January 1949, the president of the Republic nominated Sándor Karácsony for a further 3 year period to be the president of the NFCC. However, the Council already did not operate in reality at that time. The

free education name was not used anymore; in the official documents they returned to the application of the former expression of general education. As the totalitarian dictatorship got more developed, the democratic cultural circumstances based on the self-activity of the society were replaced by strongly centralised and overpolitised socialist culture policy, where there was no place for the National Free-Cultural Council that was building on autonomous thinking and civil self-organisation, broad publicity and social control.

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