

## József Benkő, historian of Transylvania

GYÖRGY PÉTERFFY

### I. A brief biographical overview

Benkő József (of Középaĵta [Aita de Mijloc] and Árkos[ Arcuș]) was born on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1740 in the village Bardóc (Brăduț, Covasna) of Transylvania, where his father had served as a Calvinist pastor for 24 years. He graduated in Nagybacon (Băţanii Mari), Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc) and Nagyenyed (Aiud). In 1765 he took over the pastoral work of the church of Középaĵta (Aita de Mijloc) region from his aged father. In 1775 he was elected notary, in 1785 the dean of Transylvanian district of the Reformed Church. By this time, he was known as an honoured scientist throughout Transylvania: a historian, as well as a botanist. Moreover, his historical work *Transsilvania* made his name recognized in Europe, too. He was admitted to be a Member of The Haarlem Scientific Society in the Netherlands for his study concerning the unknown caves of Transylvania.

The year 1787 had a big impact on his life and scientific career: he has been assigned as a professor to the Calvinist College of Székelyudvarhely by the Major Syndicate of the Transylvanian Reformed Church. His studies have won him trust among his seniors, and respect among his students. However, their feelings towards him soon changed, since there were numerous professors who envied him. Sámuel Bodola was the principal among his intriguers. He, who was an academic as well as a graduate of a foreign university, looked down enviously and malignantly to the "domidoctus" (lit. autodidact) village pastor and he gave utterance to his ideas along with his fellow professors.<sup>1</sup> Benkő was shattered psychically by the pressure and started to neglect his lessons. He lost his cheer and began drinking. Because of this he was fired after two years of teaching at the College.

In 1793 he was elected to be the pastor of the congregation of Köpec (Căpeni, Covasna). His poor financial condition, his weakness as a human, as well as his wife's death made life almost impossible for him. Though he was given a memorial medallion weighing 29 gold coins for his work "The Scumpia of Közép-Aĵta" by King Ferenc I, his financial problems did not cease to be. In 1799, when he retired, he had to give most of his collectibles and books to

---

<sup>1</sup> Benkő József, *Specialis Transsilvania Terra Siculorum*, Szabó András, *Benkő József*, Minerva, Kolozsvár, 1944., p. 7.

the College of Nagyenyed (Aiud) and accept 700 Ft in turn to survive.<sup>2</sup> Eventually he died on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1814, after being sick for a long time. Pál Pruzsinszky, who wrote a brilliant biography on him puts: „*The tragedy of József Benkő lies in that he found pleasure energy and profession in writing, though his fate, his inclinations and his talent made him to do a work of the polar opposite kind.*”<sup>3</sup> -wrote Pál Pruzsinszky.

## II. How József Benkő became a historian

His interest in history itself was a family heritage. His relative and student, Ferenc Benkő (1783-1845), wrote the first biography on him and says the following about József Benkő as a child: „*He even fancied learning in his young age when he was attending primary school. When his father was preaching or setting up the Lord's Supper he hid behind the Church door and listened to his father's speech. He wrote down and learnt the mentioned quotations from the Bible, even if he did it in a childish way.*”<sup>4</sup> His father, who was well versed in literature and science, had a remarkable impact on the formation of his son's interest in history. Benkő himself notes somewhere that his father the Dean directed once to all pastors in the Transylvanian District to write the major events into their own record-books, for he had thought the knowledge of the past was indispensable.<sup>5</sup>

Besides his father, his uncle on his mother's side József Dienes Hermányi (1699-1763), a memoir-writer and a collector of anecdotes, played a serious role in his commitment to history. The close relation between them helped the young Benkő a lot to develop a wider span of knowledge in the intellectual field. It is said that when Dienes Hermányi died in 1763 the books and manuscripts he left were sold at an auction by his heirs. "A lot of tatty, smoky books were sold there" at the auction, and he was the one who bade on most of them. Fellow students laughed at him because he had spent a lot of money buying those shabby old books. Even the well-known history and language professor Mihály Ajtai (1704-1776) has made fun of his action. But people were surprised when the Confession of the Synode of Erdőd (Synodus Confessio, 1545) was found among the shabby books of the collection of István Dési, the pastor of Szászváros. Immediately, Benkő made 3 copies of

---

<sup>2</sup> Szinyeyi József, *Magyar írók élete és munkái*, vol. I., Budapest, 1891, p. 863-864.

<sup>3</sup> Pruzsinszky Pál, *Benkő József*, Lelkészegyesület, Debrecen, 1915, p. 703.

<sup>4</sup> Benkő Ferenc, *Nemes Benkő József biographiája*, 1822, Kolozsvár, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Éder Zoltán, *Benkő József nyelvészeti munkássága és az Erdélyi Magyar Nyelvűvelő Társaság*, Budapest, 1978, p.11.

the text of the Confession: one for Mihály Ajtai, one for Péter Bod (1712-1769), and one for himself.

The third of the factors that led him to the direction of history was the intellectuality of the College of Nagyenyed. Let's not forget the fact that he spent half a decade in the famous college (1761-1766), where the memory of the great predecessors (János Apáczai Csere, András Huszti, Péter Bod, Miklós Misztótfalusi Kis, Ferenc Pápai Páriz, József Hermányi Dienes) lived on vividly. Benkő knew well the works of the scholars of Nagyenyed (Aiud). He adopted some ideas of the work of the predecessors and built them into his own works.

Thus, Benkő was somehow predestined by his family and environment to work as a historian.

### **III. A brief introduction of *Transsilvania***

He began his major work of state-education about Transylvania in the winter of 1773-1774. The reason for starting the arrangement of the enormous data was that Ádám Kapronczai (1744-1786) who had been his fellow student in the College of Nagyenyed (Aiud) worked at the press of József Kurzböck in Vienna and he promised him to publish *Transsilvania*. The first volume of the work is called *Transsilvania Generalis* which was published in 1778. This volume contains a description of Transylvania from a state-education point of view. From his youngest years Benkő had a determined intention to perform a thorough education about his beloved Transylvania to its inhabitants as well as to foreigners. In the preface of the two-volume work we can read a report that he had sent more than 500 letters to lords, nobles, churchmen, and other prominent people of Transylvania asking data from them. Apart from this, he collected rare documents, manuscripts, letters, and he himself copied about 400 pages. He presents the large data arranged in the following way: first he summarizes briefly the published works of native writers on the topic, then he reviews the data that can be found in detail and commenting them. Here is a quotation from the preface of *Transsilvania*: „*The serene reader will see that the history of Transylvania has never been told yet in this way of systematic scope, and that previous historians were rather engaged in details, or they could touch only the surface of the events and not their internal part. No one has arranged a general (both old and new) interpretation of this region, not in other shall there be but in this one Corpus only.*”<sup>6</sup> The novelty of Benkő's *Transsilvania* lies in the fact that he, as the last prominent

---

<sup>6</sup> Benkő József, *Transsilvania Specialis. Erdély földje és népe*. Vol. I., Bukarest-Kolozsvár: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1999, p. 98.

representative of the state-education school, made a general description covering the whole region, that no one have done before him. The *Transsilvania* can be treated as the first monograph of the Transylvanian country.

The next series after *Transsilvania Generalis* is the three-volume *Transsilvania Specialis* which remained in a manuscript for a long time. The Hungarian translation of this work was published only recently in 1999, thanks to the work of the classical-philologist György Szabó.<sup>7</sup> *Specialis* reviews the Hungarian counties of the Szekler and Saxon szeks in historical, geographical, economical and religious points of view with numerous statistical data.

Benkő started to collect data for the *Transsilvania* when he was a college student at Nagyenyed (Aiud). Besides the collection of historical data, he did a remarkable correspondence with intellectuals of his age. He collected valuable information on political, parochial, administrative, military and scientific aspects of the contemporary Transylvania. Count Imre Mikó (1805-1876), who published a monograph in 1868 called *Life and works of József Benkő* (which is still the only monograph today), commended about Transylvania with a great appreciation: „[I] would say we are lucky if most of the people of our homeland learn what may be learnt of it or at least would learn it in this half of the century.”<sup>8</sup> Benkő did not tell only stories of old towns and people living in them, nor only parochial records, but he also reports on data of economical history as well as of production. In *Transsilvania* we can read about the corn cultivation of Transylvania, the fish-pond of Cege ( Țaga - where he even tells how much a net cost), the dikes of river Maros (Mureș) and the unforgettable good taste of the bread in Kolozsvár (Cluj). The targets of the writer were the scientific processing of the knowledge about Transylvania as well as making them public what he wanted to do because of his patriotic feelings.

Envious people attacked him that he had only published József Hermányi Dienes's heritage under his own name.<sup>9</sup> These nonsense accusations were inconsistency with all the circumstances: his multi-volume correspondence with scholar men of his homeland, the changes from the time of Hermányi's death, his research in archives, and his numerous notes. *Transsilvania*, as it was a work of a man who had been blessed with a multi-directional interest as well as scientific awareness, rightly brought him a successful reputation abroad. According to an anecdote in 1799 when János Bodola (1754-1836) the professor from Nagyenyed (Aiud) was invited by the

---

<sup>7</sup> Letters of József Benkő was also collected and annotated by György Szabó and Andor Tarnai. This work was published under the title of Benkő József mailing with Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Irodalomtudományi Intézete in 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Gróf Mikó Imre, *Benkő József élete és munkái*. Pest, 1868, p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> Vass József, "Benkő József" *Vasárnapi Ujság*, 29<sup>th</sup> December. No. 52, 1861, p. 614.

Bishop of Oxford in England the bishop asked him: „*What is your Benkő is doing?*” The professor, who have not met Benkő by that time said, grounding his comment on the homeland rumour: „*He always drinks.*” For this, the Bishop brought out the Vienna edition of *Transsilvania* and said: „*Well, you who do not drink why don't you write books like this?*”<sup>10</sup>

József Koncz (1829-1906), the professor and librarian of the Calvinist College at Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş) commended the author of *Transsilvania* in the following way, when he was translated the Hunyad (Hunedoara) county part of *Specialis* and published it as a separate book in Déva (Deva), 1901: „*We have to appreciate Benkő, who gave data to our age and whose great work would have been forgotten, or at least never escaped the devastating destruction of time or flames.*”<sup>11</sup> As to count Imre Mikó, he commented on Benkő in concern with his great work the following way: „*This is a work of his enwreathed part of his life and points out the meridian of his success as a writer as well as his potentiality as a man.*”<sup>12</sup>

#### **IV. The role of the statistic school**

„*The statistic school was established in the beginning of the 18th century in Germany, from the interaction of systematizing ambitions of data-collecting national historiography and rational Protestantism and as a product of the ideology of the early Enlightenment.*”<sup>13</sup> In our country, Mátyás Bél (1684-1749) founded this school, but it developed fully within Benkő's historiography. *Notitia Hungariae novae historico-geographica*, Mátyás Bél's statistical work, which had its first 5 volumes published between 1735 and 1742, made a remarkable impact on Benkő's historiography. Besides this, he also leered a lot from the works of Saxon science writers in Transylvania (Georg Soterius, Marcus Tartler).<sup>14</sup> He preferred to read the books of Schmeizel school writers and of the Jesuit source-collector's. Besides Dániel Cornides (1732-1787) historian, János Földi (1755-1801) doctor and scientist of Szatmár, János Gyöngyösi (1741-1818) a reformed church reverend and poet in Újtorda (Turda Nouă), Károly Koppi (1744-1801) historian and Ádám Kapronczai typographer, he corresponded with several others and acquired information about the contemporary subjects.

---

<sup>10</sup> Benkő Samu, *Sorsformáló értelem*, Bukarest: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1971, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Benkő József, *Hunyadmegyeről. Déva*: Hirsch Adolf Könyvkiadása, József Koncz's Preface, 1901, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Gróf Mikó Imre, *Benkő József*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Éder Zoltán, *Benkő József nyelvészeti munkássága és az erdélyi magyar nyelvújító társaság*, Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 1978, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Egyed Emese, *Régi könyv a régi Erdélyről*, Erdővidéki Lapok, nr. 2000/1, p. 15.

Samu Benkő (1928-) civilization historian of the state-education school describes the role of Benkő the following way: „*The statistical school has opened new fields for history. Criticism and evaluation has been added to the collection of sources and their chronological arrangement. Instead of a dry analytic description of the events he got into the analysis of causality. He tried to put aside the formal arrangement of time and let logic of the things speak for themselves. He has widened the narrow thematic of political military and parochial events with the study of various phenomena of social, material, and spiritual life and broadened the field of historiography with the past of the everyday's life. Committed to utilitarianism, he put great stress on the study of the homeland, the goods that were produced by its inhabitants as well as revealing chances for a better subsistence based upon natural resources. Thus, Benkő, as a historian has stepped on a road where statistical trends raised historiography to the eminence of a synthetic science.*”<sup>15</sup>

Benkő's oeuvre belongs to the notion system of the Enlightenment. Most of his works are written in terms of the rationalism and was the last scholar in Transylvania to write in Latin. Even nowadays, he is considered as one of the effective source collectors.

## V. His importance as a historian

The importance of Benkő's statements have raised by the fact that he saw and studied the numerous source value prints and books that were destroyed in January, 1949 when the College of Nagyenyed (Aiud) was ravaged. We have to emphasize the objectivity of his historiography for he treated the past of Transylvania with regard to the condition of symbiosis of the peoples that were living here for centuries. As an example of his unbiased view, he found houses of the Romanians more beautiful than mansions of the nobles. Moreover, after summing up many data details he stated that Romanians outnumber the aggregate of all the other people in Transylvania.. „*His historiography has a characteristic feature that he often corrects the mistakes of others. As for governor Zsigmond Kornis, he states that he did not die in Szentbenedek, but in Kolozvár, and he insists that Bethlen could not poison Ferenc Mikó who died in 1635, since he died many years before, in 1629.*”<sup>16</sup> Let us quote again count Imre Mikó the author of the Benkő monograph.: „*There are many signs of that count József Kemény and István Kovács of Nagy-Ajta used Benkő's collection as a famous source when editing the Historical Archive of Transylvania. What about our investigation of history? Aren't we stepping in his trace? Whether the authors of the National Library, Toldy or Gábor Kazinczy did not*

---

<sup>15</sup> Benkő Samu, *Sorsformáló értelem*, p. 71-72.

<sup>16</sup> Benkő József, *Transsilvania Specialis*, p. 69.

*follow the torchlight he lit?*<sup>17</sup> Mikó eventually states that Benkő is the founder of „historical investigation of Transylvania”.

Benkő wanted to educate his people to the knowledge of the homeland. He could only realize part of the work that he wanted to, but a large part of his valuable collection was published by others. In spite of this and his human weakness, Benkő is scored as one of the most prominent people of both Hungarian and Transylvanian historiography.

## VI. Listing up the major sources concerning József Benkő

Count Imre Mikó in his monograph of József Benkő (15<sup>th</sup> part), that was already quoted several times above, listed the authors arranged in topics that studied the life and scientific works of the Transylvanian historian. Since Mikó published his work in 1868 implicitly, all of his brief and long writings concerning Benkő could cover only the range of time ending with this year mentioned. But which were the most important memorial, educational and commending works about Benkő that Mikó quotes among others? Below we made a list of them, arranged in topics.

1. Horányi (1792). *Nova Memoria Hungarorum ac Provinciae Iuliet Scriptis editis notorum*. Pest. – As can be seen, the first writing is from the end of the 18th century. It is in Latin and we can read about the life and scientific works of József Benkő there.

2. Benkő, F. (1857). *Nemes Benkő József biographiája*. Kolozsvár. – Mikó made the following comment on this: „...some of his later biographers copied the data found in this with a different outlook only, without any enrichment of the contents.”<sup>18</sup>

3. Benkő, K. (1857). *Benkő József életrajza*. (Transylvanian Museum)

4. *Közhasznú Esmeretek Tára*. (1841). Vol. II. Pest. - In this book, one of the authors who did not want to be mentioned commended Benkő for his love for science and scientific works.

5. *Oesterreichische National-Encyclopedie*. (1835). Wien.

6. Salamon, J. (1839). *Középjaitai és Árkosi Benkő József rövid életrajza*. Kolozsvár. – Let us quote Mikó: „This biography is almost the copy of Ferenc Benkő's but more simple and clear than the original one and outshines its reflections.”<sup>19</sup>

7. Kőváry, L. (1841). *Székegyhonnól*. – Kőváry writes that people should have inaugurated a statue of Benkő in Középjaita (Aita de Mijloc) since everything resembles him in the village. Later states what Benkő knew he wanted to use

---

<sup>17</sup> Gróf Mikó Imre, *Benkő József*, p. 229-230.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204-205.

for the benefit of his homeland. Mikó rephrases Kőváry's words: „*Benkő was a patriot, in the most noble meaning of the word and saying this, we state the greatest things we can about him.*”<sup>20</sup>

8. Toldy, F. (1853). *Benkő József emlékezete. Új Magyar Múzeum*. Year 3. Vol. I. Pest. – Toldy emphasizes how enthusiastically and jovially Benkő argued for the people of his country that they should know extensively the history of Transylvania.

9. Vass, J. *Benkő József (1740-1814)*. Vasárnapi Ujság. 29 December 1861. No52.

10. The letter of József Benedek Dean of Reformed Church of Transylvania to the editor of Kolozsvári Közlöny, written on 30th March 1863, in which he calls for the conscious preservation and cultivation of József Benkő's memory.

11. Márton Pap's review in the Kolozsvári *Nagy Naptár*. (1865).

12. The letter of count József Kemény to Sándor Mike, 20th Nov. (1853). *Új Múzeum*. Year 6. Vol. I, 1856, pp. 338-339. – In this letter count Kemény acknowledges Benkő's excellence in the inland historiography, but he accuses *Transsylvania* with plagiarism. It states that Benkő only rearranged Martin Schmeitzel's *Sciographia* which remained in manuscript and published it under his own name. Mikó points out that plagiarism is nonsense, since the direction of the discussion and the size of Benkő's and Schmeitzel's works are completely different. Moreover, while the Schmeitzel's publication is unclear and difficult, Benkő's is clear and simple.<sup>21</sup>

The number of references about Benkő has increased since 1868. Studies and articles were published which analysed Benkő's botanical, linguistic and theological work. The authors of these books can be found in the recent Hungarian biographical encyclopaedias. However, it is interesting that despite the increased references concerning his multi-faceted scientific activity there were only few publications engaged in his activity as a historian. Samu Benkő in his book of studies (*Sorsformáló értelem*, published in Bucharest, 1971) publishes an essay called *From Középjajta to Europe* which is a precious synthetic work as well as it draws attention to new aspects. The essay has a subtitle of József Benkő, the Historian and the Linné-Follower and the author states that Benkő did exactly the same thing as he did in botany: he collected and arranged matter.<sup>22</sup>

He has come to know botanical ideas as well as ideas concerning the scientific investigation of caves for he had previously encountered such a field while collecting data for his statistical historiography. He integrated themes

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> Benkő Samu, *Sorsformáló értelem*, p. 76.

concerning the introduction of the everyday life and culture to the political, military and parochial view of historiography. Having committed to the idea of utilitarianism, he emphasized the research and education of conditions of the homeland.

Eventually, Samu Benkő draws the conclusion that Benkő, as a historian raised historiography with the assistance of statistics to the eminence of a synthetic science.

The most recently published study is the preface György Szabó wrote for the *Transsilvania Specialis* in 1999 in which he analyzes Benkő's activity as a historian. We have already mentioned this above.

Benkő's activity as a historian is subject to further investigation. For example, it would be interesting to compare his works about the Szeklers with Péter Bod's manuscript (*Siculia Hunno-Dacica*) of the same kind. Or show the similarities and differences between *Transsilvania Generalis* and *Transsilvania Specialis*. These further investigations would enlighten many things. However it is a fact that the work of József Benkő as a historian is an inevitably precious source for references of Transylvanian history.

### **Bibliography**

1. Benkő, Ferenc (1822): *Nemes Benkő József biographiája*. Kolozsvár.
2. Benkő, József (1901): *Hunyadmegyéről*. Déva: Hirsch Adolf Könyomdája.
3. Benkő, József (1999): *Transsilvania Specialis. Erdély földje és népe*. Vol. I-II. Bukarest-Kolozsvár: Kriterion Könyvkiadó.
4. Benkő, József (1944): *Specialis Transilvania Terra Sicularum*. Kolozsvár: Minerva.
5. Benkő, Samu (1971): *Sorsformáló értelem*. Bukarest: Kriterion Könyvkiadó.
6. Egyed, Emese (2000/1. 1.): *Régi könyv a régi Erdélyről*. Erdővidéki Lapok. pp. 14-17.
7. Éder, Zoltán (1978): *Benkő József nyelvészeti munkássága és az Erdélyi Magyar Nyelvművelő Társaság*, Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó.
8. Gróf Mikó, Imre (1868): *Benkő József élete és munkái*. Pest.
9. Pruzsinszky, Pál (1915): *Benkő József. Lelkészegegyesület*. Debrecen.
10. Szinnyi, József (1891): *Magyar írók élete és munkái*. Vol. I. Budapest.
11. Vass, József (1861): *Benkő József (1740-1814)*. Vasárnapi Ujság. 29<sup>th</sup> December. No.52.