

# EVENTS, MEETINGS

## 2003 -2004

### Sztehlo-Days 2003 in the Gabor Stehlo School and Home at Gic May 29, 2003

Esteemed guests, dear colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen!

About a good month ago, when I was called by Mr. János Finta to undertake a presentation about GÁBOR SZTEHLO as they organize a Stehlo-Day at Gic again, I immediately replied „yes”. Afterwards, I started to meditate: why was it so natural, why did not emerge any doubt in doing so? Studying this feeling and thought that made me do it, it was entirely clear to me that this is the sense of appreciation and duty. Even now I am convinced, it could not have been possible to say no.

I can say, which is true, that Gic has left deep impression in me. In May, 1992, Headmaster József Vock invited *the /former children cared by GÁBOR SZTEHLO („the Stehlo-children”)* to the *name-giving ceremony of the Home* where I was also present. I can hardly list my memorable experiences: the unforgettable presentation by Éva Ancsel, laying wreathes on the memorial plaque *dedicated to GÁBOR SZTEHLO*, planting trees, the present by Peter Rodosi, the hours I spent in the Home as well as my later pleasant memories with my hostess, Györgyi Nagy. I might say, they caused the impossibility of saying „no”. I hope you will not be offended at this, not even this was the primary reason; I was prompted by a kind of mission. If an opportunity is given somewhere to speak about GÁBOR SZTEHLO, to make anybody, who still has not known him, acquainted with him, I am inherently forced to go there.

In my present address, I try to elucidate why was an important event in my life to meet with the activity and life-work of GÁBOR SZTEHLO and, since then, why I have regarded it as a mission to get any others acquainted with this extraordinary man.

The answer has three focal points, I must admit they are very subjective.

The first one: I cherish the picture of GÁBOR SZTEHLO as a creator who has shaped my adult personality by his life and deeds. He was an excellent organizer giving responsible answers to any problem emerged in his surroundings. He was brave following his own way who was thinking and acting originally but not in schemes. He was able to attend to the real needs, to love and help unconditionally. He was living with a deep straight inherent faith. (With present-day expressions, we may call him a modern person with excellent manager qualities capable of utilizing his capital of connections.)

Secondly, I cherish his picture as the Child's saver who dared to be and act humanely even when not the others. This is a logical consequence of the above.

And thirdly, I cherish, moreover, I have searched as possible and understood GÁBOR SZTEHLO, standing in my and others' view as an ever example of a pedagogue, an educator of children who does not fit into schoolbooks.

This arbitrary classification may not be quite correct since GÁBOR SZTEHLO was all the three at the same time, in fact even more. However, these are the three little hand-bells I would like to share with all of you.

Let's begin with a short biography, we can say, with dry factual data that are still highly eloquent: GÁBOR SZTEHLO was born in Budapest, on 25 September, 1909. His father was notable lawyer, his mother was generated from the very wealthy family Hagenmacher of Swiss origin. They brought up 6 children in middle-class prosperity; Gabor was the third one. The name Stehlo was well-known in the history of the Lutheran church since many ascendants had served as priest.

It is honorable of the family that, in spite of its wealth, Gabor became a socially sensitive helpful boy. He studied in several schools of Budapest including the *famous Lutheran high-school in „Fasor” (Alley)* receiving, among a great deal of worth, the life-long experience of Scouting. He was preparing for the maturity at the Lutheran lyceum of Sopron. After the jurist father and grandfather, it was a surprise that he decided to learn theology.

Let me quote his autobiography he submitted to the application for admission to theology, drawn on the *book of Emil Koren about GÁBOR SZTEHLO*: „I was on the sixth level of the high-school when I decided to go in for minister. In the next summer I contacted with a theological student on the fourth level who made a great impression on me... The contact with him created my sense of vocation and inspired to fighting for higher objects... Magister Lajos Hetvényi taught me to love my Country more passionately. If God helps me, my most principal purpose to lead the Hungarian people, the common people to wellness... the knowledge of the present population is quite poor in every respect, even in the economy... I know I have to overcome great many obstacles if I want to get over this situation but I have confidence in God and I believe He will give me power to it...”

In this early autobiography, a life-long program arises, really inspired with a deep belief in God, a sense of vocation, and a committed willingness to help.

Each segment of his biography, as tiny links, clinging one after the other, but in uniform spirituality, appears as a continuous chain.

During his undergraduate years, decisive experiences affected GÁBOR SZTEHLO's course of life, first of all a one-year study trip to Finland. His impressions in the Finnish Awakening Movement and about the people's academies made him try to organize such an adult education system in Hungary as well.

In 1937, as the pastor of the congregation of Nagytarcsa, he commenced the organization and as early as in 1938 his activity was crowned with success: the first Lutheran People's Academy named after Sámuel Tessedik was opened. The essential concept of the Academy was that the peasant youths need not take out of their milieu, instead, they should be made conscious open-eyed farmers. According to his notable pedagogic method, in these institutions the peasant boys and girls grew up following their talents and professional abilities.

From 1942 on, as pastor of a church district, the most important duty of GÁBOR SZTEHLO was to maintain the movement of people's academies and to arrange and manage youth conferences. As the war progressed, especially after the German occupation, his country-wide organizing work became impossible. He received then another job as a hospital minister. Very sad but edifying experiences enriched him. Day by day he had to console the patients of Jewish origin, converted to Christian, who had attempted suicide in a fit of despair. The frame of this action was obtained from the Good Pastor Association initiated by the Calvinist Church for assisting Christian children of Jewish origin, especially families of inmates of forced labor camps.

His charge prompted *Reverend Sztehlo* to face to the daily political realities, as he characterized himself later, he had been that time „immature naive soul” in political respect.

As *the Hungarian Nazis*, the Arrow Cross Party had come into power, even this legal organization had to be ceased. Before GÁBOR SZTEHLO two ways were available: either to withdraw and live through the hard times or to undertake *the risk of life* by saving people from execution. *It was no doubt about GÁBOR SZTEHLO's choice!*

The leadership of Good Pastor also came to the decision: houses, residences should be acquired for children to be saved. The first failures are well-known from the book of *GÁBOR SZTEHLO, In The Hands of God*, such as throwing out from the head quarter of Arrow Cross Party, forcing Good Pastor into illegality.

The project, seemed to miscarry, was still continued *with the help of God, through series of chances.*

On the assistance of the International Red Cross, personally of Friedrich von Born, GÁBOR SZTEHLO created saving homes for children in private flats and family houses. Between September 1944 and February 1945, about 2000 persons, predominantly children turned up and found shelter in 32 homes for longer or shorter periods. The extreme poles of the society met in these homes: aristocrats and workers, wholesalers and petty bourgeois, communists in illegality and right-wingers.

Like at any time of his path of life, GÁBOR SZTEHLO helped everybody who was in want, in name of charity of Jesus, without any political or denominational commitment. He and his coworkers exerted preterhuman efforts in maintaining and supplying the homes. A great deal of personal courage

and intuition was necessary for the procurement and distribution of the everyday food supply in the besieged Budapest. Besides the physical supply, they took care of the cure of souls by regular occupations, games, lessons for the children.

After the siege, GÁBOR SZTEHLO's work did not cease. *The majority* of saved children could return to their homes and families but 20 to 30 of them had to remain with family Sztehlo. However, this number was getting higher and higher with orphaned or outcast, even tramping, children. This situation is well-known from the *classical Hungarian* film, *Somewhere in Europe*.

GÁBOR SZTEHLO was seeking place *in the green belt of Buda*, first in Pasarét, later in Hűvösvölgy, and finally in the 30-acre settlement of 7 villas, the former property of the *notable plutocratic* families Weiss and Mauthner in Budakeszi Street.

Until its nationalization on January 7, 1950, the latter was the centre of the children's home network registered as „Pax” Hungarian Social Foundation. Besides this settlement, the system embraced the „Girls' Castle” in Somlói Street and another girl's home in the Pilis Mountain (*not far from Buda*), named after Mrs. Zoltán Tildy (*wife of the president of the Republic of Hungary*). They were homes, in the real meaning of the word, for 100 boys and 11 girls altogether. As GÁBOR SZTEHLO stated in his Memoire, „...we did our utmost to avoid the character of an orphanage but to approach to family homes as much as possible. We wanted our children not to live in constraint of a foster-home but to perceive the nurses as mother-substitutes who are surrounded by them like a mother by her family.”

GÁBOR SZTEHLO was not a pedagogue, even though, if this life-period ought to be characterized in one word, after the Child-Saver, it would be the Child-Educator. His education system, adjusted completely to the practice, to the problems and questions arising in the life of children, rested upon three main principles:

1. family-like education;
2. work school
3. self-rule (for higher-class children).

Above all, GÁBOR SZTEHLO wanted to make the children forget the most upsetting tragedy of their life, loosing parents, by making up for the lack. The homes were based on familiar communities, both in externals and in organization. Family houses, villas were suitable to home-like education due to their situation, furnishing, and natural surrounding. Each house was conducted by a single mother (a nurse) and every child had the own duty. This family-like education controlled the discipline of the home. (Nowadays, this principle is in accord with that of the S.O.S. villages.)

The family-like education was supplemented by the work school. GÁBOR SZTEHLO organized a self-contained primary school for the smaller children to learn inside the settlement under the direction of teachers who were aware of and understood the internal conditions. The work school character appeared on one hand by the tuition method of keeping the pupils work and, besides the intellectual development, the improvement of manual skill was also regarded important. The objective of this concept was to attain a craftsmanship by each pupil. According to the available data, sloid, shoemaker, and locksmith workshops were operating while girls made puppets and sewed balls.

Another field of the versatile activity was the community arrangement, named Gaudiopolis (City of Glad), as the third pillar of the education principle. The idea of a children's republic was created as early as the time of the siege of Budapest in one of the shelters when mainly teenager boys were day-dreaming about the future. They were inspired by the American movie *Boy's Town* (in fact, the Scout Movement) which did not let them alone. GÁBOR SZTEHLO had the good sense to put his finger on the play of the bigger boys which gave room to their initiatives to independent social innovation.

The objective of the children's state is known from its Constitution accepted by the public meeting in February, 1946. „The purpose of the Youth State, Gaudiopolis is to bring up self-keeping, conscious, aspiring to self-expression and self-criticism, practically skilled, theoretically trained Hungarian humans in the evangelical spirit of Christ.”

The slogan of the self-government, „there is no life without work”, linked the technical school with the children's republic which organized and registered the work in and outside the workshops. The citizens of „GAPO” might experience with childish dignity and proud conscience that they had become responsible proprietor and leader of the republic and their own life.

As few as five years were available to GÁBOR SZTEHLO for realizing his pedagogical concepts in practice. His fellow workers were Balázs Szőke, teacher of Sárospatak, Jolán Galgóczy, Zoltán

Rákosi, Margit Hrabovszky-Révész psychologist, István Péterfy, Balázs Vargha and many others, likewise generous innovative pedagogues or simply adults bearing injuries of the war.

In spite of its genuine values, even this institution could not avoid nationalization. GÁBOR SZTEHLO took leave with heavy heart and then found calm in the Church as assistant minister.

We are aware that he assisted *families expelled from Budapest to villages by the communist regime*.

In the early fifties, the regime signed a pact with every Churches which definitely set the scope of their activity. In addition to the work within the church walls, only a single field remained: social actions.

After the activity as assistant minister for a year and a half, GÁBOR SZTEHLO recognized the possibility of a work fitted to him: to espouse the affairs of the needy, the defenseless, the ignored. He contracted with the authorities in Bonyhád for attending and providing 10 severely handicapped children in the Lutheran orphan's home. Now an almost ten-year social care work had commenced. Quite soon, he founded a home for damaged children in Budapest on the Street of Red Army, then further homes for handicapped children and old-aged people in Budapest and Piliscsaba, respectively.

He was again in the position of organizing, mobilizing; he created deaconry service or charity service. Creating the bare existence of these institutions needed a lot of inventions and careful arrangements. He collected donations, delivered lectures about this work, mobilized his Finnish connections by mediation of minister companions. Finally, he was able to develop the operating conditions (later even a state contribution was also deserved).

In the institutions, he attempted to accomplish familiar atmosphere. He grouped the fosters into rooms mixing different ages and various levels of deficiencies in order to support each other. In this way, even the helpless might experience that he or she could help the others. He organized work therapy for the capable patients by employing a special remedial teacher.

Of course, he separated the severely handicapped persons, confined to bed, supplying them with permanent nursing. He had to be inventive in arrangement of the nursing network because high professional was necessary besides goodwill. He was convinced that even damaged children were able to be happy.

It was still easy to acquire employees around the work of GÁBOR SZTEHLO though salaries were less than those at the state institutions. The atmosphere was attractive to the helpful fellows. The vocational training was hindered by the fact that applicants from the Church were not accepted by the faculties of remedial teaching. GÁBOR SZTEHLO called on Gusztáv Bárczy, the director of the College of Remedial Teaching, who was ready to receive the fellows as real guest students, without registration book. They obtained professional knowledge without certificate. They proved to be excellent specialists *in the practice*. Mr. Gusztáv Bárczy appeared several times in Sztehlo's homes and helped the work there with his personal advice.

During this active period of GÁBOR SZTEHLO, the Lutheran Church had 16 such institutions, more than any other, *much bigger*, historical Churches in Hungary.

In 1956, *after the Revolution*, GÁBOR SZTEHLO's family emigrated to Switzerland but he remained. He was devoted to his indigents. In 1961 he *was allowed to* visit his family. *Released from* the full stretch of work, followed by traveling and the excitement of meeting his next of kin again might cause the heart attack that confined him to bed for a longer time. By the time he got about again, his passport had expired and, on medical advice, he remained with the family. He undertook pastorate, organized rest and summer holidays for widows of pastors and ignored ministers.

In 1973 GÁBOR SZTEHLO received the Prize of Righteous from the Yad Vashem Institute. Unfortunately, he was not able to undertake the participation in planting the Tree. On the tenth anniversary of his death, in 1984, his son planted a long-living Japanese pine in the Garden of Righteous of Jerusalem.

The Prize of Righteous is donated to those *non-Jewish* people who saved *at least one* to be persecuted at the time of holocaust, disregarding to the risk, who dared to set his face against the ignominy, who were courageous to save people to be persecuted. *He saved 1700*.

I cannot imagine of any deed of higher human worth than this activity of saving.

In the latest years, several heart-stirring films were made about this period, about this inhuman affliction. I am deeply moved when I recall the Schindler's list by Spielberg, lately The Pianist by Polanski, I pay boundless homage to the Polish pedagogue, Janusz Korczak who went to death

following his school-children and pupils. I tell you with mild pride, with unlimited gratefulness and glad that GÁBOR SZTEHLO saved 1700 persons.

„Whoever saves a life, saves a world.” GÁBOR SZTEHLO saved the world and returned our self-esteem. This is why I take it very essential that we do not forget his example. This mission has been undertaken by our Foundation.

Emil Koren (*GÁBOR SZTEHLO's pastor mate, close co-worker in many periods of his life*, summarized it *in his book about GÁBOR SZTEHLO's life* as follows: GÁBOR SZTEHLO has all the time remained, in his life and in our memory, the same as he was: one of the greatest out of his contemporaries, human in inhumanity, impartial in partiality, living in love.

„Lux in tenebris” (light in the darkness) said Professor Tibor Fabiny (*the organizer and first director of the National Lutheran Museum*), „Let be light by his example and self-denying love from generations to generations...”

Merényi Zsuzsanna

May 29, 2003

president of the Gábor Sztelhlo Foundation

Gic,

### **Sztehlo Days in the Gabor Sztelhlo School and Home of Gic May 29 2003.**

We visited the Sztelhlo Gábor General School in Gic, as a kind obligation at May 29 2003). We accepted the invitation with great pleasure because since the retirement of director Jozsef Vonck we have not been in the School and Children's Home and we hoped to revitalise the tradition. Director Janos Finta commenced the continuation of Sztelhlo Days and wreathing the memorial plaque.

Mrs. Sara Keszthelyi (Sztehlo Sara) Judit Fidy, Fuzeki Balint, Andor Andrasi and Zsuzsa Merenyi were present in the name of Foundation.

We experienced many changes: the former castle building has been closed, the children, following the new legal rules, live in village houses. We saw beautiful, well designed houses, equipped in a family style. The moderately handicapped children were nicely dressed and happy to show their pleasant homes.

Two talks were given in the morning time on children protection, on special education of backward children and also by the president of the Foundation on the activity of Sztelhlo Gábor.

The Foundation, though with its modest means, supported the Home and presented the children with tools to help their physical development, like special balls, badminton rackets and others.

The memorial plaque of Sztelhlo Gábor has been transferred from the wall of the castle to the building of the School. It was wreathed by Balint Fuzeki with moving words.

The afternoon performance of the children shed tears into our eyes and we could sincerely respect the activity of the teachers and caretakers of these backward children. We remember the kindness of the hosts and the excellent program of this day for long time.

## **Meeting of Sztehlo children with Gabriel S. Sztehlo in Budavar September 25, 2003**

The meeting of the Sztehlo children with Gabriel S. Sztehlo took place in the Lutheran church at Becsi Kapu square (September 25 2003). As in occasions of the previous Meetings the curatorium and the invited Sztehlo children to greet the again healthy Gabsi and his wife Janine with an Agape. Their program, as they asked, was modest, though they could visit with bishop Imre Szebik and the pastors of the community at Budavar. We note that Gabsi served as bookkeeper of the 3 Lutheran communities in Kreuzlingen (Switzerland).

## **Obituary of Pál Komár January 25, 2004**

Pastor Viktor Fodor and our president Zsuzsa Merényi remembered Pál Komár, language teacher of PAX -who died in January- and also the children's saving activity of Gábor Sztehlo during the service in the Lutheran church at Pesthidegkút in the Sarepta Home. The inhabitants of the Sarepta Home also participated the service. The Sarepta Homes for elderly people and handicapped children have been established by Gábor Sztehlo.