

# Education on the peripheries – then and now

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## Per aspera ad astra

Through hardships to the stars – a reasonable way to describe the history of the education of poor children in the past or in the present. In former times, it was hard to achieve higher educational qualifications, a proper profession, and a happier life from poverty and social isolation – and it still is. The past and the present of the educational history of a now homogeneous Gypsy community in Alsószentmárton – a town located a few kilometers from the Croatian border in the lowland alongside the Drava River – serves as a notable lesson and example, and it raises quite a few questions in an outsider.

Education in a town is determined by numerous factors, including the composition and size of the community, the location in the country or in the region, the interest of schools, municipalities, and churches, the current educational policy, the economic situation of the country, and the presence and effect of an incidental outstanding figure (a teacher or a priest).

In my work – which comprises of studying archives as well as observations through lengthy participation – I study the educational situation of disadvantaged residents in this disadvantaged area in the past, and the evolution thereof in the present.



In 1945, Béla Simon painter – another extraordinary teacher – and his wife arrived to Alsószentmárton. They worked as teacher and managed the school until 1959. In an interview in 1958 he declared: *„We are fighting centuries-old superstitions and trying to overcome the feeling of inferiority with patience and moderate education. Surely, sometimes I have to start with the elementary rules of personal hygiene and how to use a knife and fork. What matters is that after eight years of hard work we managed to achieve that 60% of those enrolled come to school regularly, and some of them finished even 6th grade.”* In 1963 the number of non Gypsy residents declined significantly, and there was a serious lack of teachers, therefore children went to the same school, particularly because children in upper grades went to the neighbouring Regional Primary School of Egyházasharaszti. Not many Gypsy children were affected by that, altogether five of them were involved in upper grades, out of which only one finished 8th grade in 1966. During the twenty-five years, only one student of the gypsy school completed primary education! In 1971, upper grade education was terminated permanently in Alsószentmárton, while lower grade education – with mainly Gypsy children – became more like a special education school. In 1975, the school had two full-time and thirteen unqualified teachers. In an interview it was told that *„More and more children are assigned to special education, however they are not mentally disabled but heavily disadvantaged.”* The reason for being classified as disabled – the consequences of which they bear throughout their lives – was clearly the social situation! In 1981, the Regional Studio of the Hungarian Television shot a documentary entitled as *„The first Gypsy village”*. The principal of the Regional Primary School of Egyházasharaszti lamented the facts desperately: out of the 30-35 children in first grade maximum four or five makes it to 8th grade, while nine of ten are excused, the number of those assigned for special education increases year by year, early „marriage” is common among children(!), girls become „wives” at the age of 12-13 and have children by the age of 13.



## „The Priest took us – we belong to him”

Two events in the life of Alsószentmárton brought significant changes, especially for the future. One of them was the arrival of Priest József Lankó in 1980, thus the first time a young Gypsy called Ágnes Jovánovics pursued higher education in 1981. After the Priest of the village arrived and the constant presence of the church brought hope and the possibility for progress as opposed to poverty. As a result the saint Martin Kindergarten opened on 1st September, 1999 with 74 children. It is managed by Ágnes Jovánovics ever since, who was the first Gypsy person in the village, who went to high school. Thanks to this commitment, Saint Martin Caritas Foundation was established in the spring of 2000 with the objectives to maintain „The Kitchen of Providence”, to distribute donations, clothes and shoes, and to organize summer camps. As a result, a Tanoda was also established.

## Education in Alsószentmárton at the beginning of 21st century

There are 84 children divided into four groups at the Kindergarten. Those who speak only Boyash learn Hungarian here. Kindergarten teachers are either of Gypsy or non-gypsy origin including two young gypsy men. The leadership of the Kindergarten takes it seriously to provide good example for children and their parents.

In 2007, the primary school was closed and now children go to the Regional Primary School of Egyházasharaszti 3 km away. The mass influx of gypsy children resulted that non-gypsy children were taken away, therefore the school became a Gypsy institution bearing all the severe consequences of segregated education.

Even though both father József and the staff members of the Kindergarten try to encourage residents to have their children enrolled in quality education, the vacuum nature of the village predominates. The unresolved issue of transportation and local family patterns draw children and youngsters back to the village. Only a few of them go to school in Siklós or Nagyharsány, successful.



## The brief history of education in Alsószentmárton

The first school of Alsószentmárton was established for Sokci and German children in 1859. Local Sokci and a few Hungarian and German children were taught amidst difficult circumstances, while Gypsy children were never taken into consideration. In 1937, the idea of establishing a public school was discussed by the general assembly of Pécs – for which the village should have provided the plot of land and some help – but it was rejected by the leadership of Alsószentmárton. The education of Gypsy children remained unsolved, villagers were ardently against any of them entering school. Thus, the public school for Gypsy children and the teacher's apartment was built without local support in 1940 in the centre of the village. A young and enthusiastic entrant schoolmaster applied for the teaching role, and education started in the autumn of 1941 with 50 Gypsy children. The schoolmistress regularly took the children to masses in the local Catholic church creating great tension within the village. The first Sokci, Hungarian and German speaking families moved out of the village at that time.

Classes become homogeneous, and the teaching method applied is not inclusive, although that could make Gypsy children more. The Tanoda which was founded in 2000 by Saint Martin Caritas is of key importance ensuring educational progress for local children, but it also serves as a place where they can get together, play sports, and create a feeling of community.

The „Tan Kapuja” Buddhist Collage founded in 2004 plays a controversial role in the life of the village. It is intended to be a second-chance school, providing the possibility of finishing primary or high school for students who dropped out. The institution is mostly criticized for preventing youngsters from leaving the village, thus creating a ghetto environment where they do not have the possibility to stand tall among non-Gypsy students or to learn how to succeed beyond the borders of the village.

Alsószentmárton has come a long way to say that 17 young adults received a degree as a kindergarten teacher in the last twenty years, and a few members of the Tanoda are currently studying to become bakers, electricians, locksmiths, IT specialists, or cooks in Pécs and Siklós. Scholarships and grants are provided by the Caritas Foundation, but locals must overcome hardships themselves. The majority of young people are still unable to break out of this situation. Dominating patterns and forces are strong while drug use is part of the everyday life.

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