

A Hungarian Priest from the 19th Century who Translated Homer

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ABSTRACT

István Szabó was considered the most outstanding Hellenist of Hungary in the 19th century. He was the first who translated the two great Homer's epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey into Hungarian, as well as the fables of Aesop. István Szabó began his service as a priest in the villages of Nógrád. Ferenc Kazinczy also noticed the young priest during his traveling in Northern Hungary, in Palócföld. In 1863, the Historian Frigyes Pesty presented his intention to collect Hungarian toponyms to the Hungarian Royal Council of Governor-General. He collected the toponyms of all the settlements in the Carpathian Basin. The handwriting and correction of the priest-translator István Szabó can be found in the text of the toponym-collection. In my study, on one hand, I will write about the significance of the Pesty's collection, as well as about the literary activity of István Szabó, and his contribution to the collection of toponyms in Nógrád.

Keywords: Nógrád county, Frigyes Pesty, collection of toponyms, Homer, hellenist, 19th century

1. István Szabó, the Priest

István Szabó, originally from the Bakony region of Transdanubia in Hungary, spent a long time living in Palócföld a region of the Northeastern Hungary and witnessed almost the entire 19th century — born in 1801 and passing away in 1892. Though he began his schooling at the significant Reformed College in Pápa, Transdanubia, in 1812, Count László Esterházy, then the bishop of Rozsnyó,¹ admitted him into his Catholic seminary. This led him to continue his

1 Today: Rožňava, SK.

studies at the Premonstratensian grammar school in Rozsnyó.² From 1819, he prepared for priesthood at the seminary in this town, and in 1826, he was ordained. Moving from Transdanubia to the northern Karancs Valley, he began his clerical career. He served as chaplain in Karancskeszzi for seven years, from 1827 to 1834. His service extended beyond just one community, as the parish of Karancskeszzi included four branch churches: Karancsalja, Karancsberény, Bocsárlapujtő, and Karancsapátfalva.³ In 1834, he left Nógrád for a time, serving in Gömör-region settlements for nine years. He was an assistant priest in Osgyán⁴ for three years, then continued his priestly service in the neighboring Guszóna⁵ until 1842. He served as the parish priest of Pilis in Pest County until 1847, after which he returned to Nógrád, this time to the village of Kazár. Kazár also had branch churches, and he ministered not only in Kazár but also in Mátraszele and Vizslás until his death. Even today, the residents of Kazár remember him as a defining figure in their village's history — a scholar, writer, and translator-priest. His memorial room in the village preserves his legacy. As a young priest, he began translating and publishing works of Greek classical literature, earning him the reputation of being the most distinguished Hellenist of his time. István Szabó was regarded as the most outstanding Hellenist of his time in Hungarian literature. As a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Kisfaludy Society, István Szabó published his works under the name *Kazári pap* ('the priest of Kazár') between 1857 and 1892 (Kenyeres 1982, 679; Szinnyi 1909, 205–207).

2. István Szabó, the Translator

He translated numerous works of ancient Greek literature. Even as a young priest, he stood out for his erudition. Ferenc Kazinczy, a key literary organizer of the era, took notice of him during his travels in Upper Hungary. In his travelogue *Hungarian Journeys*, Kazinczy mentions the translator-priest:

“And who would have thought that here, someone reads the Anthology in Greek and transplants Meleager's flowers onto Hungarian soil? – »Oh, where have you strayed, beautiful works of the Greek soul!« – I could exclaim, echoing Molière's famous words. – István Szent-Királyi Szabó, Chaplain in Karancskeszzi, between Ludány and Bocsárd, translates them. His acquaintance, as well as that of his esteemed Dean, was most delightful for both of us.” (Kazinczy 1831/2015, 175)

2 Today: Rožňava, SK.

3 The latter two merged later to form Karancslapujtő, now part of Nógrád County's administrative area

4 Today: Ožďany, Slovakia, located in the Banská Bystrica region, Rimavská Sobota district.

5 Today: Husiná, Slovakia.

In 1834, he published a collection of translations titled *Greek Flowers from the Anthology* in Kassa⁶. The editor of the *Hungarian Bibliography 1712–1920* (Petrik ed. 1892) mistakenly attributed this work to a certain József Szabó, misinterpreting the monogram Sz. J., although this was actually István Szabó's first Greek translation.

He was the first to translate several ancient classical authors into Hungarian. His translation of *Aesop's Fables* (*Aesop meséi*, Pest, 1846) and Homer's epics were the first to be rendered into Hungarian by someone with an excellent command of ancient Greek. His translation of *The Iliad* was published in 1853 by Gusztáv Emich's printing house in Pest (*Homeros Iliasa*), with an introduction and notes written by the esteemed linguist and ethnographer Pál Hunfalvy. That same year, he also translated four speeches by Socrates (Petrik ed. 1892, 301).

His Hungarian translation of *The Odyssey* was printed in 1857 by the bookseller György Kilián Jr's publisher in Pest (*Homer Odysseaia*). The inner title page stated: "From Grecian by István Szabó, officiating priest of Rozsnyó County, parish priest of Pilis, member of Hun. Acad. and the Kisfaludy Soc."

After translating Homer's great epics, he worked on *The Argonautica* which survived from Apollonius Rhodius, a 3rd-century BC poet. This epic recounts the story of Jason and his fellow heroes on their quest for the Golden Fleece. Szabó dedicated his translation to Antal Lonkay, the publisher of *The Hungarian Knights of the Golden Fleece*, as a "token of eternal friendship and gratitude." He honored his esteemed patron with a laudatory poem written in elegiac couplets and a ten-page tribute, both published in the book's opening pages. The work was completed in celebration of Szabó's fiftieth anniversary as an officiating priest and writer, thanks to a donation from Antal Lonkay. In the introductory pages of the volume, he salutes him on this occasion. And on the occasion of the half-century jubilee, the translator is greeted by several distinguished persons and institutions. First, the publisher himself, followed by the distinguished poet János Arany, who, on behalf of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, praised Szabó as "a true admirer." In his tribute, Arany wrote: "Your reverence's contributions, especially to Hellenic literature and the complete translation of Homer, have ensured your lasting name." (Arany 1877, 17.) On behalf of the Kisfaludy Society, its president, the literary historian Ferenc Toldy, and its secretary, Ágost Greguss, conveyed their congratulations. In their tribute, we read: "You have earned your most beautiful laurels, and even your literary career, as an interpreter of poets, especially Greek poets." (Greguss–Tolnai 1877, 18.) The literary historian Pál Gyulai sent greetings from the section of linguistics and literary studies of the Academy, requesting Szabó to submit another Greek translation to be printed and published as a gift for his fiftieth anniversary. Emil Ponori Thewrewk, president of the Budapest Philological Society, wrote a congratulatory letter, expressing

6 Today: Košice, Slovakia.

his deep respect for the literary world and emphasizing the importance of literature for national education. Alajos Nagy, a teacher whose students learned Greek literature through Szabó's translations, also sent a letter addressed "To Our Deeply Respected Scholar". A similar congratulatory letter came from another institution, the Piarist Secondary School of Budapest, celebrating his literary jubilee.

During his translation work, István Szabó engaged with the works of Hesiod, translated Greek dramas into Hungarian, worked on Demosthenes speeches, translated Greek letters, and introduced epigrams to Hungarian readers. Beyond interpreting Greek classics, he also wrote studies and treatises, making him not only a translator of ancient works but also a literary historian who analyzed and contextualized them. In his major literary history work, Zsolt Beöthy offered a critical assessment of Szabó's translations. However, this critique simultaneously highlights Szabó's merit as a classical philologist: "All these translations [...] are faithful in content, yet, regrettably, devoid of poetic sensitivity; they bear the mark of a philologist rather than that of a poet." (Beöthy 1896, 782–783).

3. His Study on the Palóc Dialect

István Szabó, as an intellectual attentive to the values of his surroundings, observed that in the Nógrád settlements where he served, people spoke differently from those in his homeland, the Bakony region of Transdanubia. Initially, as an educated man, he found the rural speech unsettling to his ears and even condemned the Palóc pronunciation. He perceived the dialect as "distorted speech" and noticed its significant deviation from the emerging standard language or from his own dialect (Szabó 1837, 43). However, over time, he came to understand that Hungarian dialects held value, as they preserved ancient forms of the Hungarian language. He recognized the importance of documenting and preserving dialectal features for future generations. After years of service, when he began recording the distinctive language use of the Palóc people, he already referred to the villagers as his "beloved people of the Karancs region" (Szabó 1837, 43). It was upon the request of *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*,⁷ a 19th-century scientific journal, that he consciously started collecting the dialectal characteristics of the speakers in his place of service, the Karancs Valley. He dedicated his study to "Mr. István Horvát, the wise friend of the Palóc language and people," who was the editor of *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*. István Horvát was the one who formulated the historical linguistic theory of the Palóc people, elaborating on their supposed ancient origins in multiple studies and advocating for the collection of Palóc linguistic features. Under the pseudonym "a patriot", Horvát published a call for submissions in

7 Scientific Collection, a periodical of wide scope.

Tudományos Gyűjtemény (1817, vol. 1. 114–116), encouraging research on the Palóc dialect.

During his priestly service, through conversations with the local people, István Szabó observed that the intonation, grammatical features, and regional vocabulary of the Palóc dialect differed from the language varieties spoken in other parts of the Carpathian Basin. In his study — one that not only highlights linguistic characteristics but also expresses the joys he experienced during his time there — he offers his work as a token of gratitude, a gift, a “forget-me-not garland”. He compiled this study on the Karancs-region Palóc dialect in response to a call for papers by the journal of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Szabó 1837).

He begins his dialectological study with a geographical description, delineating the area whose dialect he observed: “Karancs Mountain is located in Nógrád, between the towns of Fülek, Losonc, and Szécsény” (Szabó 1837, 43). From his writing, we learn that he served in this region for seven years and nine months, which gave him ample opportunity to familiarize himself with the Palóc dialect and local customs. His description presents the features of the local dialect, which belongs to the Central Palóc dialect group. In his study, he also incorporates examples from his native Transdanubian dialect, comparing them with the speech of the Palóc people to illustrate the differences.

He made highly precise observations regarding vowel and consonant phenomena. First, he highlighted the characteristic diphthong pronunciation in the region, e.g., *sűrőü* [ʃy:ry:], *sőürőü* [ʃø:yrø:y] for *sűrű* [ʃy:ry:] (‘dense’). He noted that the vowel *a* [ɒ] had three different pronunciations, while *e* [ɛ] and *é* [e:] each had two variations in this dialect. He observed that speakers replaced the long *ú* [u:] at the end of words with *ó* [o:] and *ű* [y:] with *ő* [ø:], as in *hosszó* [ˈhos:o:] instead of *hosszú* [ˈhos:u:] (‘long’) and *keserő* [ˈkɛʃerø:] instead of *keserű* [ˈkɛʃery:] (‘bitter’). He also noted the palatalized pronunciation of *l* [l̥], as in *gól’a* [ˈgo:l̥ɒ] (‘stork’). This feature, which had once been widespread across the Hungarian language area, had by then been largely confined to the Palóc region, making it a distinctive trait.⁸ He further illustrated the palatalization typical of the Palóc dialect. For example, instead of the standard Hungarian infinitive suffix *-ni* [ni], speakers used *-nyi* [ɲi], as in *látnyi* [ˈla:tɲi] for *látni* [ˈla:t.ni] (‘to see’). He provided data on the palatalization of *d* [d] and *t* [t], with examples like *gyió* [ʒi:o] (*dió* – ‘walnut’), *másogyik* [ˈma:ʃoʒik] (*második* – ‘second’), *tyíz* [ci:z] (*tíz* – ‘ten’), and *nevetyi* [ˈnevɛci] (*neveti* – ‘he/she laughs at it’). His study also documented the *cs* ~ *ty* [tʃ ~ c] variation, offering examples such as *tyizma* [ˈci:zmɒ] for *csizma* [ˈtʃizmɒ] (‘boot’) and *tyipke* [ˈcipkɛ] for *csipke* [ˈtʃipkɛ] (‘lace’). He noted the characteristic disappearance of final consonants in the Palóc dialect, using the pronunciation of the verbal prefix *meg-* [mɛg-] as *me-* [mɛ-] as an example. Additionally,

⁸ The historical orthographic representation of this sound is the *ly* [ɬ] grapheme in modern Hungarian spelling.

he described cases of compensatory lengthening, where the loss of /l/ resulted in the preceding vowel lengthening, such as *títom* ['ti:tom] ('tiltom' – 'I forbid') and *szíva* ['si:vɒ] (*szilva* – 'plum'). He observed that this phenomenon also affected *r* [r], leading to similar vowel lengthening, as in *mőre* ['mø:rɛ] for *merre* ['mɛr:ɛ] ('where to'). The sound combination of *rl* [rl] often is *ll* (*pallag* ['pɒllɒg] for *parlag* ['pɒrlɒg] – 'fallow land', *salló* ['ʃɒl:o:] for *sarló* ['ʃɒrló] – 'sickle') and *rs* [rʃ] in pronunciation of other dialects is mostly *ss* [ʃ:] (*gyoss* ['jɒʃ:] for *gyors* ['jɒrʃ] – 'fast', *bossó* ['boʃ:o:] for *borsó* ['borʃo:] – 'pea').

Among morphophonetic features, István Szabó also observed a phenomenon characteristic of the Central Palóc dialect: the *g* in the verbal prefix *meg-* assimilates to the first consonant of the attached verb. He provided examples such as *meffogom* (*megfogom* – 'I catch') and *mellátom* (*meqlátom* – 'I see'). At that time, the superlative prefix *leg-* was still heard as *let-* in this region, a form that later receded. Examples include *letjobb* (*legjobb* – 'best') and *letszebb* (*legszebb* – 'most beautiful').

Regarding morphological traits, he documented the distinct Palóc inflection and conjugation patterns that remain characteristic today. He noted that the first consonant of *-val*, *-vel* ('with') suffix did not assimilate to the final consonant of the noun stem, resulting in forms like *karddal* (*karddal* – 'with a sword') and *kézvel* (*kézzel* – 'with a hand'). He also observed the imperative mood, noting that where emerging standard Hungarian or other dialects use the *-ts* suffix, Palóc speakers pronounce *j* or *jj*, as in *ordíj* (*ordíts* – 'shout') and *taníjj* (*taníts* – 'teach'). Verbs ending in *-t* in the imperative form have *dd*: *tanídd* (*tanítsd* – 'teach it'). In the early 19th century, István Szabó was still able to document the use of the so-called family locative suffixes among the Palóc people of the Karancs region: variants such as *-nyi* and *-nál* (lativus, 'where to?'), while *-nul* and *-nó* (ablativus, 'where from?'). The characteristically Palóc "short past tense" was already an established feature of the Central Palóc dialect in the early 19th century. He recorded examples such as *süttem* (*sütöttem* – 'I baked') and *üttem* (*ütöttem* – 'you hit').

Among regional vocabulary, he highlighted *pegy* ['pɛj] for *pedig* ['pɛdɪg] ('however'). He also noted frequent consonant swapping in words, such as *terenyem* (*tenyerem* – 'palm'), *hedegű* (*hegedű* – 'violin'), and *feteke* (*fekete* – 'black').⁹

4. István Szabó's Entries in Frigyes Pesty's 1864–65 Toponym Collection¹⁰

On February 2, 1863, historian Frigyes Pesty submitted a letter to the Hungarian Royal Council of Governor-General, outlining his intention to collect Hungary's geographical names. The governing body sought an expert opinion from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The

⁹ See also Gréczi-Zsoldos 2022, 119–123.

¹⁰ See Hajdú 2001–2002, 24–26.

Academy's recommendation in support of the initiative was signed on July 20, 1863 by Baron József Eötvös, the Vice President of the Academy. Based on this endorsement, the Council of Governor-General took the project under its patronage and, on February 21, 1864, issued a circular instructing county authorities to carry out the collection. Frigyes Pesty compiled and printed standardized questionnaires to facilitate uniform data collection. These forms were distributed to local officials with the assistance of district magistrates. To ensure the most comprehensive collection of geographical names from every settlement, a guide for completing the forms was also included. The guide explicitly stated the purpose of the project: "The aim is to explain and determine the meaning of all place names in our homeland." (Csáki 2015, 242) Both the questionnaire and the guide indicate that the organizer considered it essential to record the name of "every inch of land, every hill, and every valley." (Csáki 2015, 242). The full collection of place names was never published.¹¹

In this toponym collection, István Szabó's name appears in connection with three villages, identified as the "parish priest of Kazár" (Országos Széchényi Könyvtár [National Széchényi Library] Fol. Hung. 1114/38). However, he did not record the field names or fill out the questionnaire himself; he merely added remarks to the recorded entries.

The documentation of place names was typically carried out by the local notary, priest, or schoolteacher. The transcription of the field names for the village of Kazár in Nógrád County does not bear a signature. However, after the collected material, there is a supplementary note signed by István Szabó and dated June 30, 1864. From this note, we learn that it was through his intervention that the responses to the questionnaire were transcribed by cantor-teacher Antal Kluka. In his note, Szabó added historical information about the settlement, claiming that Kazár might have been a significant "stronghold" of the Palóc people in ancient times, as the chronicle he studied indicated that the Palóc were originally Khazars. He also included a linguistic observation, tracing the etymology of the word *kazár*. Among the 505 pages of the Nógrád County collection, it is unique that certain parts of the manuscript — often reflecting the personal spelling variations of less formally educated individuals — were corrected by someone. The evidence suggests that this was István Szabó. His postscript at the end of the text was written in ink significantly darker than that used by the cantor-teacher, and the same darker ink was used for the corrections

11 However, in the 1960s, staff at the National Széchényi Library created microfilm copies of the handwritten material from the 1863–65 collection. Currently, a research group within the Hungarian National Toponymic Program (MNHP) is working to publish the Pesty collection in a unified format, providing a philologically accurate transcription of the entire dataset. This extraordinary onomastic database will be made available both in printed publications and electronically on the MNHP website (https://mnhp.unideb.hu/kiadvanyok_pesty.php) My colleague László Angyal and I are preparing the Nógrád County material for publication.

throughout the text. This strongly indicates that Szabó was the one who revised what he considered incorrect word forms. This case reflects the educational disparities of the time: the linguistic proficiency and spelling accuracy of a simple village teacher and a village priest who authored scholarly works, was a member of the Academy, and translated from Ancient Greek were on different levels. István Szabó corrected the following linguistic inaccuracies in the cantor-teacher's transcription (with the corrections italicized).

In several instances, he refined the use of locative suffixes, correcting the *-ba*, *-be* forms to *-ban*, *-ben* in inessive cases, and even added commas where necessary at clause boundaries: "Kazár Község fekszik Nógrád Vármegyében, a füleki járásban, Délről Nemti [...] szomszédságában, [...]"; "[...] a szelei határral öszve függésben áll"; "a belső kertek végiben."¹² He corrected the contemporary name variant *Terenne* for the settlement of Kisterenye to *Terenye* in several places throughout the text. He inserted a missing *z* into the name *Vislás* for Vizslás village (although not consistently, as he left *Vislás* unchanged elsewhere, likely due to oversight). The field name *Verepes* was adjusted to *Verebes*. The title *A Község határában elő forduló Helyek*¹³ was refined to *Helynevek*.¹⁴ Among his corrections was a phonological assimilation mistake: the cantor-teacher did not indicate the assimilated consonant in the *-vá*, *-vé* case suffix in the word *földé* (*földdé* – 'it will become earth') and Szabó István corrected this grammatical mistake by inserting a *d* after the word root.

He attached two numbered notes to the text in the description of place names. In one case, the original recorder had simply written: "Földes Úr Ki Pesten lakott"¹⁵. Szabó supplemented this by providing the landlord's name in Note 1: Miklós Vadasi Jankovics.

A section of the text had been heavily crossed out, likely by the reviewing priest himself. This passage was presumably removed because it referenced superstition, attributing an event to divine punishment — something a Catholic priest would have found theologically unacceptable. The crossed-out passage reads as follows:

"a juh akoly 300. db juhval menykö ütés által porra égett épen Kis asszony napján esti hat órakor, elérte az Isten büntető keze, mert még az nap d.e. is nyíratott az akkori Árendás zsidó Blabontál Simon."¹⁶

12 'The village of Kazár lies in Nógrád County, in the Fülek district, bordering Nemti to the south, [...]; [...] is connected with the boundary of Szele'; 'at the end of the gardens'.

13 "Places occurring within the village's boundary."

14 "Place names."

15 "The landlord who lived in Pest."

16 "The sheepfold, with 300 sheep, burned to ashes due to a lightning strike precisely on the evening of the Feast of the Assumption at six o'clock, struck by the punishing hand of God, because earlier that morning, the tenant Jew, Simon Blabontál, had sheared the sheep."

In another section, the cantor-teacher wrote about the beneficial effects of a well's water. Szabó corrected the verb conjugation and added a personal remark to that of the cantor-teacher:

"[...] vize a köszvényben szenvedőknek hasznos orvosszerül szolgál, a vidékiek is látogatják, és vizét más vidékekre is hordják."¹⁷

Based on his personal experience or the testimony of locals, Szabó also believed in the healing properties of the spring. He appended Note 2 at the bottom of the page with his wish: "Even to Pest. If only the relevant authorities would support it."

Similarly, Szabó's handwriting appears in the description of the village of Mátraszele, following the documentation of its field names. His addition reveals that he had overseen the Frigyes Pesty toponym collection in this village as well, as Mátraszele was a subsidiary church of the Kazár parish. He was responsible for the spiritual care of 430 Catholics.¹⁸ His attached note identifies the local recorder of Mátraszele's toponyms: under his supervision, the records were transcribed by the village's cantor-teacher and notary, György Borbás. He dated his note at the end of the text: June 24, 1864.

On the same day, he also countersigned the place-name records of Vizslás. His note confirms that in this village as well, he had assigned the transcription of the Frigyes Pesty questionnaire responses to the village cantor-teacher and notary, József Mikus. The note also reveals that the Catholic residents of this village were likewise affiliated with the Kazár parish's subsidiary church. The total population of the village was 587, the majority being Roman Catholic, and only seven identified as Jewish.

5. Commemoration

In 1995, a statue was erected in Kazár, Nógrád County, in honor of István Szabó, the scholarly priest and prominent figure of the 19th century. Recognizing his contributions as a writer, translator, scholar, classical philologist, and clergyman, the bust was placed in the parish garden. The sculpture is the work of Péter Molnár. Two years later, a memorial room was opened at the same site, showcasing the legacy of the renowned scholar-priest through an exhibition.¹⁹

In the former Hungarian town of Rozsnyó²⁰, a bust sculpted by Barnabás Holló was unveiled in 1897, five and a half years after Szabó's death, paying tribute to the great Hellenist and former student of the

17 "[...] its water serves as a useful remedy for those suffering from gout; locals visit it, and its water is taken to other regions as well."

18 The religious demographics are notable: the village also had five Evangelical and fourteen Jewish residents.

19 <https://www.bnpi.hu/hu/reszletek/szabo-istvan-tudos-pap-emlekszojaja>

20 Today: Rožňava, Slovakia.

local Catholic high school.²¹ On October 24 of that year, philologist, translator, writer, university professor, and Academy member Ede Margalits delivered a commemorative speech during the inauguration of Szabó's memorial room and the unveiling of his statue in Rozsnyó. The speech was published as a separate print in the 26th volume of the publication series containing the proceedings of the Scientific and Literary Department of the Saint Stephen Society under the title *Commemorative Speech on Hungarian Hellenist István Szabó*. In his tribute, Margalits praised Szabó with these words:

"We celebrate in him the fiery-spirited Hungarian patriot, who not only rejoiced with those who rejoiced but also grieved with those who mourned. (...) We celebrate in him the perfect and wise man, whose life, especially in our time, can serve as a guiding example." (Margalits 1897, 13.)

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21 <https://emlekhelyek.csemaadok.sk/emlekhelyek/szabo-istvan-katolikus-pap-mufordito-mellszobra/>

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