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The Hungarian Reformed Museum and Archives of Ligonier Are Back!

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Bethlen Home of Ligonier, founded in 1921 and situated in the center of Pennsylvania's mining regions, has been familiar to me since my first visit in 2003. My passion of photo-documenting Hungarian markers (www.magyarnegyed.com) led me there, and I also interviewed some of the residents, last members of the immigration wave of the early 1900s. The late Rev. Imre A. Bertalan was always very helpful, and I had been aware of their archives as well, which, however, were in need of some serious clean-up and organization work, and thus not accessible.



The rooms upon my arrival (Photos 1-2)

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Csaba Krasznai, indicating that there were plans to consolidate, contacted me last year (in 2023) with the request of making a stop in Ligonier on my annual photo trip. I took several pictures for him of various rooms housing the scattered material, and of the neglected collection in disarray.

In my earlier discussions with Rev. Dr. Joseph Posta (the last curator of the Archives and Museum, now serving Duquesne and Vintondale), he often mentioned that I would be the best person to re-create the space, as it is probably the two of us who have the most current knowledge about the holdings. I was thus only little surprised when in March this year, Bishop Krasznai officially asked me to tidy up the place this summer, requested so by the current owner (Concordia Lutheran Ministries). Under this condition, our collection would be able to stay at its original location in the long run.



FOTÓ: DR. TÓTH GERGELY 2023

After driving up from Florida, I received the keys and started my work on May 23rd, and I handed over the re-born exhibition and storage space to Bishop Krasznai on August 15th.

My tasks involved a thorough review of all office boxes, artifacts, and about two-three tons of mixed books, crammed in two large and three smaller rooms, of which only a fraction had been partially organized. I had to reduce the total volume (and free up one of the large rooms), organize and group the printed matter, adjust the furniture to the available space, set up and label a shelf system, cover the walls with framed and other objects, and overall, bring an attractive exhibition space into being.

On the whole, we have amassed a unique content over the decades which includes the following components:

- Record books of both closed and active Hungarian reformed churches and congregations from the US, Canada, as well as some other countries, dating back to the late 1800s. Some of these come from long forgotten churches such as Rossiter, PA, Pocahontas, VA, or Chicago South Side. Other related documents consist of bulletins, ads, jubilee editions, correspondence, articles, and photographs;

- Copies of 50-100 Hungarian American newspapers and journals, among them the issues of the *Calvin Synod Herald*, *Testvériség/Fraternity*, *Reformátusok Lapja*, or the bound 1903-1905 numbers of the satirical monthly *Dongó*, quite a rarity;

- Songbooks, hymnals, prayer books, Bibles, displaying hand-written notes of their „őregamerikás” (old timers) owners, and/or stamps of their respective churches. There are some older Bibles as well, placed in the glass cabinets;



The exhibition space created in the summer of 2024 (Photos 3-6)

- About 15 hand-made, large-size flags and banners of churches and associations, as well as ribbons and pins;

- Church table clothes and other textiles, some of them supplied with the maker's or donor's name and date;

- Church service chalices and sacred vessels, and memorial wall plates featuring the images of individual churches;
- Historical photographs of church interiors, exteriors, congregations, festive events, and officials, both in boxes as well as framed;
- Four intact pastor's robes, and a dozen pastoral hats;
- Three special, historical headpieces: a hat belonging to a former Hungarian-American association, a conductor's cap from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's railway system, and a 19th century high military officer's hat;
- I utilized much of the wall surface to accommodate charters and founding documents of churches and associations, benefactors' lists, honors and servicemen rolls, proclamations, appropriate paintings and other documents;
- North-American Hungarian pastors' bequest or legacy of objects and writings, correspondence, memorabilia, and awards, incl. the bishops Zoltán Béky, Lajos Nagy, and János Bütösi;
- North-American Hungarian pastors' own publications, many of them signed copies;
- Files and documents pertaining to the operation and residents of the Bethlen Home;
- Editorial material of the Bethlen Naptár/Almanac;
- Several boxes of old printing plates of photographs and articles, used for *Fraternity/Testvériség*, *Bethlen Almanac*, and hymnal books;
- Bronze donors' plaques from the old wings of the Home;
- Publications relevant to the life, work, and achievements of the Hungarian-American community in general;
- Historical audio and video recordings of sermons, church events, and Hungarian radio hours;
- Old dry and wet stamps of congregations and associations;
- Files and documents of the Hungarian Reformed Federation of America, including members' records and insurance cards, spanning the entire 20th century;
- Files and documents of the Hungarian Reformed Church in America and the Calvin Synod;
- Files and documents of the American Hungarian Federation and other nationwide Hungarian organizations;
- Items related to the Verhovay Fraternal Organization (now William Penn Association);
- Documentation and newspaper material on 1956, the 1978 return of the Holy Crown to Hungary, and the exiled Cardinal Mindszenty;
- Larger size paintings, exhibition banners and tableaux;
- Some miscellaneous items such as a bust of Bishop Béky, a hand-crafted replica of the Bethlen Home, an old Hungarian shepherd's garment from the

Hortobágy, a concert cimbalom, the typewriter of the First Hungarian Reformed Church of Los Angeles, the ground breaking shovel of the newest wing of the



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Home from 2005, a bingo cylinder from one of our churches, a decorative grape press donated by the Dayton, OH church, the catalogue cards of the Archives' original library section, large paintings and murals and an indoor Szekler Gate (székely kapu) in the hallways, a hand-painted village furniture set from 1930s Hungary, and a small „church corner” consisting of carved wooden furniture from some of our closed churches: one pulpit, one Chair of Moses, a baptismal font, a lectern, complete with hymn boards, and a raised pulpit.

Many items in the collection are fairly fragile (framed photographs, old record books...); I marked these with bilingual warning labels. By the entrance, I posted a bilingual greeting sign, and another with brief information about the 2024 reorganization project. On two of the four large windows, I installed temporary sun protection shields. In addition, due to my own interest, I photographed several items in my free time.

As far as the future is concerned, I consider it crucial to remind our churches and other organizations that the Museum and Archives of the 'Bethlen Home – Concordia at Bethlen' has been reestablished and ready to welcome contributions again. In case these institutions have to close, we ask their leaders

to make sure to deposit their archival material as well as objects and decorations at Ligonier.



