

Interview with Szabó Gergely  
An ex-activist of Keret Association



"It all started in a kitchen", says Geri, when he recalls the beginnings of Keret Association. "We met, made friends, we had great plans to change the world. Then we realized it's not enough to discuss, we also have to do something." Keret Association – meaning "frame" or "framework", reflecting the original motto to encompass all non-profit endeavours – was started in Győr by a handful of friends in 2003. There were over 40 active members in the beginning, all of whom have just finished university, started to work, so they had free capacity. They regularly met their extended friends' circles, and the idea of an organization grew out of this large group of intellectuals. "Everyone was interested in city development and European culture. Although real progress was done in baby steps, there was some greater idea in the background – how to gather youth and create some alternative culture in town."

Geri says it's hard to tell what his function was in the organization. He'd been brainstorming, designing web and posters, organizing events. "I tried to do whatever I felt like doing." He's been an original organiser of Bringapolisz, the most successful cycling project of the association.

Geri was active in the organization from 2003 until 2007. He says that last year, his job and private life took most of his free time, so he had to choose between active participation and his career. Although he doesn't participate in everything, he visits the events and follows the activities. "I've experienced that there is a level that you can reach through personal enthusiasm, but this runs out after a while." He adds that the organization didn't manage to collect new, young members, who could take over and carry on.

For Geri, among the most memorable projects were the turf project of Széchenyi square – when the largest square in town was covered with blocks of turf, supported by individuals. "That was sensational, and then we tried to "über" it the following year, when I got the task of managing the 2006 turf project." The third event he remembers most was the first Bringapolisz: everyone was involved, even a music mobile was built, the procession was great and ended as a huge cyclist street party.

When he has to talk about his motivation, he says that though the city is relatively small, with 140-160 thousand inhabitants, what the association did was well known among young people. "It motivated me that many were interested in our projects. And another factor was the unbelievable amount of bribe money from companies (laugh)."

Talking about hardships, he mentions private problems – he was scolded that voluntary work is his

hobby horse only, and takes all free time from his family. The association had a problem with the town hall, which didn't support its activities. "The problem was that the town leadership didn't want to treat us as serious partners, but rather saw us as a little non-profit organization who does this and that, but didn't want to listen to what we had to say." The association wanted to become a non-profit, non-governmental, civil voice in town, so that the mayor listens to its voice – an aim that has yet to be achieved.

When he talks about experiences, he mentions a lot of things: getting friends and new acquaintances, learning how municipality works, how a non-profit organization works – and that it fundamentally differs from businesses. "In a non-profit project you also plan, make finances and so on, but while in business you motivate people with money, and you ask for results, in an NGO this doesn't exist, so the volunteers tend to be late with deadlines and work."

When asked if he'd do it differently, he laughs and says he wouldn't be so enthusiastic. "People need to set tiny goals, real goals, those can motivate and keep an organisation." He reflects that if he could start again, he wouldn't want to be all-encompassing, but more specific – an NGO for cyclists, mothers, hikers. "I think we didn't have the experience to be an umbrella organisation, only the enthusiasm that blasted because of unsuccess. You have to be small, with few people, and focused."

As regards getting new members, he says that people were invited to come, see, think, and those who were interested got some tasks. There were no conscious efforts to fit the new members in, and neither did they try to motivate people. "Only their tasks motivated them. It never happened that people were told 'no' when they wanted to apply for something, or realize some ideas. I think this could be motivating. Oh yes, and some people got T-shirts, could use the camera and the griller," he laughs. Geri says there were some educational workshops and round-table talks that could be called 'training', although those were far from formal. He adds that Keret had a great atmosphere at the beginning, "when everyone communicated, everyone knew about everything, participated, discussed, we went everywhere in a team – this was the pioneer period." However, the association hasn't lost its friendship-base, and that he finds important.

When I asked him about leadership, he said that a successful leader must put his heart and soul into work. Besides that, there should be task-sharing – some people should watch finances, some deadlines, operational stuff, and others brain-storm. He thinks an organisation needs two-three leaders – not only one – and he adds that women should be in the "management" too. Geri thinks that in an NGO people should divide the jobs into parts and set deadlines. It is essential that members and volunteers freely take on a job, and finish it on time.

"Youth work means that young people should get tools with which they can create something on their own, and if this has a result, then it's success." He says he would teach young people about decision-making, because it is not enough to discuss and discuss. "I'd teach what to weigh when they have to decide. Planning is not a problem nowadays, but when it comes to realising something, then decisions have to be made."

Interview by Marta Czibik, 2008