

Famous Yet Forgotten Natives of Baja: Bódog Beck, the Father of Apitherapy

János Mayer¹ 

¹ Bajai III. Béla Gimnázium, Baja, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This article revisits the life and legacy of Dr. Bódog Félix Beck, a native of Baja, Hungary, whose pioneering work in apitherapy earned him international recognition, yet remains underappreciated in his hometown. Born in 1868, Beck trained as a physician in Budapest before emigrating to the United States in 1901, where he gained prominence for his innovative use of bee venom therapy to treat rheumatic conditions and arthritis. He authored *Bee Venom Therapy* (1935), a foundational text in the field, and *Honey and Health* (1938), which explored the cultural and medical significance of honey. Despite initial controversy, Beck's methods influenced modern medical and pharmaceutical approaches to apitherapy, cementing his status as a trailblazer. Beyond medicine, he actively engaged with the public through lectures and publications. Beck's contributions, including a vast library integrated into Cornell University's Phillips Collection, remain influential today. Efforts are now underway in Baja to honor his memory through a memorial and the establishment of the Dr. Bódog Beck Memorial Medal by the Hungarian Apitherapy Association. This article seeks to reclaim Beck's rightful place among Baja's distinguished figures and highlight his enduring scientific impact.

Keywords: Dr. Bodog F. Beck, life, memorial, apitherapist, author

There is no end to the number of our fellow townspeople who have left our city and gone on to achieve great renown elsewhere. Many of them rightfully occupy a place in the pantheon of honoured and distinguished individuals from Baja, while the names of others have been undeservedly forgotten. The following recalls the memory of a distinguished researcher and physician born in Baja, who is celebrated for being the first to employ a pioneering healing method of his time, though, regrettably, his name remains relatively unknown in his hometown.

Félix Bódog Beck was born on 6 August 1868 in Baja, the third and youngest child of a local Jewish family. His childhood home was located at 353 Laubengasse (now Lomb Street), identifiable as the building still standing at the corner of Attila Street and Alkotmány Street. His father, Sámuel Beck, was a grain merchant, and his mother, Róza Kohn. (According to available documents, no connection is confirmed between this family and Károly Beck, the poet, who also hailed from a Jewish family in Baja.)

Between 1875 and 1879, Beck attended the primary school of the Jewish community in Baja, continuing from 1879 to 1889 at the Cistercian Order's Catholic Secondary School (today's III. Béla Grammar School). (He had to repeat the 3rd and 6th grades.) In his final years of secondary school, he had become a good student, and in 1889 received a gold medal from the local Jewish community for his achievement in history. During his school years, he became proficient in both Hungarian and German, and also studied Latin, Greek, and Hebrew in the context of religious practice. (He later went on to learn French and English as well.)

From 1889 to 1894, Beck attended the Faculty of Medicine at the Royal Hungarian University in Budapest, where he studied under some of the leading medical professors of the time (such as Endre Hegyes, Géza Mihálovics, and József Kovács). During his studies, he was also a member of the Budapest Volunteer Ambulance Association, and in 1890, he received recognition for his work. He was awarded his medical doctorate in September 1894, initially specialising in surgery. He began his medical career at St. Stephen's Hospital in Budapest, and also served for a time in the military. Alongside practical medicine, he took an early interest in theoretical questions; his publication on cervical cysts in the *Orvosi Hetilap (Medical Weekly)* in 1896 sparked considerable professional debate.

In 1901, probably following his older brother, Beck emigrated to the United

Citation: Mayer J (2024): Famous Yet Forgotten Natives of Baja: Bódog Beck, the Father of Apitherapy, *APIS*, Volumen 1 (2024) Issue 1, DOI: [10.62949/01317437.3191106](https://doi.org/10.62949/01317437.3191106)

Original published in Hungarian language: in *Bajai Honpolgár*, 2024. Mai, XXXV. 5(402) (*Patriotic citizen of Baja*), 2024. mai



Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. © The Author(s) 2024

States, where he began practising in Manhattan, New York. (He received citizenship in 1919.) In 1906, he married Anna Kreuder (or Krender), of German descent; however, the marriage soon ended, and they had no children. His first scientific work focused on cancer research and surgery, including the use of X-rays to assist in diagnosing cancerous tumours. Beck became most professionally renowned for establishing bee venom therapy (also known as apitherapy, a term he coined), a technique he reportedly first encountered in Germany. For some time, he had collected data on the harmful and beneficial effects of bee stings, and based on this research, he began performing treatments in the United States using live bee stings. This method proved particularly successful in treating movement restrictions and arthritis resulting from rheumatic conditions. His accumulated experience led to his book *Bee Venom Therapy* (1935), which remains a seminal work in the field: it examines the effects of bee venom during treatment, the method of healing, and the stages of the recovery process. Beck's book, initially controversial, helped lead to the development of bee venom-based medicines and injections by some pharmaceutical companies, though his method (using live bees) faced criticism. Eventually, however, numerous researchers supported his approach, and the effectiveness of his method was then measurable with instruments. His second book, *Honey and Health* (1938), explored the cultural history and health benefits of honey and beekeeping. (After the author's death, this book saw ten more editions, slightly revised and expanded.) He had planned a third book analysing his experience with more than 2,000 treated patients, but this was never completed, and the manuscript's whereabouts are unknown.

According to contemporaries and successors, Beck primarily treated patients with swollen joints and severe pain, initially administering a few stings and gradually increasing the number (sometimes up to 30–40 per session). Although this treatment was painful, patients found it tolerable compared to their months-long suffering, and many reported either a complete relief from their agonising pain or significant improvement, although some saw no change or showed allergic symptoms. Beck's research and findings remain influential among the growing number of apitherapists.

In addition to his medical work, he led an active social life, regularly giving educational lectures, writing popular articles, responding to readers' letters, and frequently giving interviews. After a prolonged illness, Bódog Beck passed away on 1 January 1942 in a sanatorium in Kingston, New York. His death was noted by the *New York Times*, which included an appreciation of his life's work. As he had no direct descendants¹, his estate was auctioned; his valuable library, containing beekeeping books dating back centuries, became part of Cornell University's Phillips Collection. (Professor Everett Franklin Phillips was one of the first scientists to recognise Beck's work, and he wrote the foreword to Beck's second book.) Beck's legacy is still held in high regard by experts in the field, and his works are frequently cited. His book on bee therapy, now often called the "*Bible of bee venom therapy*" in the foreword of its unchanged 1997 reprint, remains widely used. Although his books were never published in Hungarian, some of his studies are available in Hungarian in a book about Beck by Dr. János Körmeny-Rác, President of the Hungarian Apitherapy Association [1]. At the joint initiative of the author and Mihály Simics, the city of Baja is creating a memorial to Beck outside his childhood home [2]. Mihály Simics also established the Dr. Bódog Beck Memorial Medal, which the Hungarian Apitherapy Association awards.

REFERENCES

- [1] Körmeny-Rác, J. (2019): Dr. Beck Félix Bódog élete /The life of Dr. Bodog Felix Beck/ (in Hungarian, with English documents and summary in seven languages: Lilli Publishing House, Nagykovácsi, ISBN: 978 963 9837 430
- [2] Hajdú, M.(2024): One of Baja City's New Squares Named After Dr. Bódog Félix Beck, *APIS*, Volumen 1 Issue 1, DOI: [10.62949/01317437.3192217](https://doi.org/10.62949/01317437.3192217)

¹ Remark of the Editor: He had no direct descendants, and his heir was his sister.