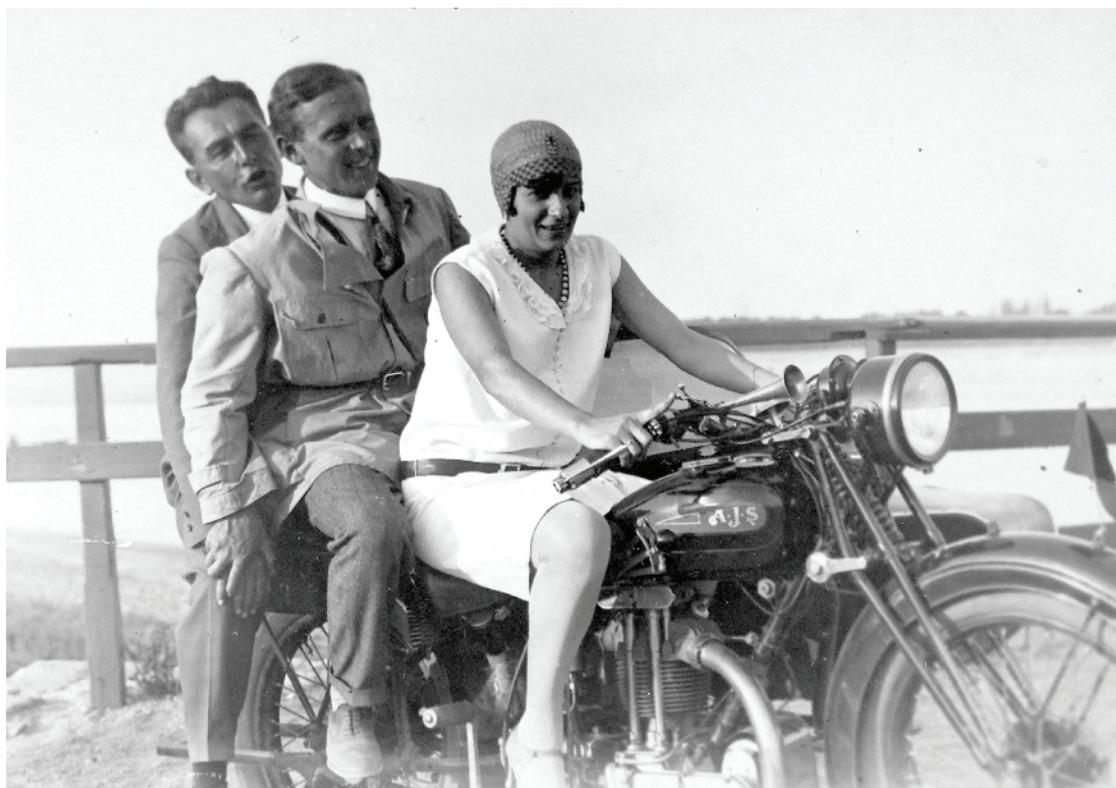


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**BALÁZS SIPOS**



**WOMEN AND POLITICS:  
NATIONALISM AND FEMININITY  
IN INTERWAR HUNGARY**

August 2019

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We no longer encourage submissions to Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies, since this one is the last issue in the series. PEECS as well as its publications series TSEECs close down because East European Studies appears to be a field that can no longer attract the necessary moral and financial support. The Program Director and Editor wishes to express his heartfelt gratitude to all colleagues, MA- and PhD-students, and all the excellent authors and reviewers for their enthusiasm and self-sacrificing work throughout the two decades while PEECS and TSEECs were active.

**Women and Politics:  
Nationalism and Femininity in Interwar Hungary**

**By  
Balázs Sipos**



# Contents

<b>Preface and acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter I</b>	
<b>Women before and after World War I .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Introduction.....	9
The changing situation of women.....	16
The media landscape.....	21
<b>Chapter II</b>	
<b>The periodisation of women’s history in 19–20th century Hungary .....</b>	<b>23</b>
The periodisation of women’s history in Hungary .....	26
The normative approach to women’s history.....	30
The interpretative approach .....	33
The ambivalence of the post- World War I situation .....	36
Conclusion .....	41
<b>Chapter III</b>	
<b>The interwar era.....</b>	<b>47</b>
Two phenomena: the onset of emancipation and the first wave of feminism.....	49
Attempts at transition from war to peace.....	53
Emancipation continues after the anti-feminist turn.....	55
Conservative feminists and the political system.....	58
Summary .....	62
<b>Chapter IV</b>	
<b>Portrayals of women and femininity .....</b>	<b>65</b>
The qualities of men and women.....	66
The portrayal of women’s issues and feminism.....	69
The Neo-Biedermeier portrayal .....	74
An individual outside – a woman at home?.....	76
Mass female employment .....	85

## **Chapter V**

### **National conservative discourses about and for women between the wars .... 91**

A conservative anti-feminist female

periodical: *A Magyar Asszony*..... 91

The hybrid female periodical: *Új Idők* ..... 96

Introductory methodological notes ..... 97

The plurality of views ..... 99

*Új Idők*: Answers to readers' letters ..... 107

## **Chapter VI**

### **Transnational role models: the Flapper, the Girl and the**

### **Garçonne in Hungary .....113**

The flapper .....113

The garçonne.....115

The impact of the flapper and the garçonne on one another..... 121

The impact of the flapper ..... 125

Summary ..... 130

## **Chapter VII**

### **New Women and modern girls in Hungarian films ..... 133**

Weak man, strong woman..... 133

The modern woman as the enemy ..... 135

Marriage as the aim of the woman..... 136

The modern woman ..... 138

The portrayal of divorce..... 139

Summary ..... 140

### **Conclusion ..... 141**

### **Bibliography ..... 149**

Other primary sources..... 150

Secondary sources..... 153

# Preface and acknowledgements

This essay is about women's history between the two world wars in Hungary. But I will discuss longer-term changes as well, since political shifts are not immediately followed by developments in culture, attitude and society, i.e. changes to a political system do not automatically and instantly lead to a new mentality, expectations and patterns in society. That is why I treat the interwar period, the turn of the century and the early 20th century as one unit in my analysis.

From a methodological point of view, my intention is to combine political history, media history and cultural history, treating these three historical disciplines as part of one organic whole. Nevertheless, one restriction will apply. The essay is primarily concerned with how femininity and gender relations were portrayed in the interwar period, and how these portrayals were linked to the political sphere. I assume that portrayals in question were not merely representations. They did also transform the meaning of femininity. They substantially contributed to establishing social standards: what women and men should be like, what women were not allowed to do, etc. The discourse aimed at determining these rules was political as its participants used political arguments. Proponents of traditional gender relations framed those who deviated from the values and norms they promoted as dangerous to the “in-group”, to those who belonged to “We”, and portrayed them as part of the “out-group” or the “Other”.<sup>1</sup> They constructed a We vs Others relationship characterised by hostility, wherein the “Others” were presented as enemies of the nation. In other words, their discourse gave rise to a Friend-Enemy relationship which is the defining characteristics of a political relationship according to Carl Schmitt.<sup>2</sup>

The main thesis of my work is as follows: following the demise of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “The Invisibility of Racial Minorities in the Public Realm of Appearances”, in: *The Phenomenology of the Political*, ed. Kevin Thompson – Lester E. Embree, Kluwer Academic Publisher, Dordrecht, 2000, pp. 179-180.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien. Dunker & Humblot, Berlin, 1991, p. 26.

liberal regime of the dual monarchy, under the right wing and nationalist authoritarian order, a series of wholly or partly conflicting constructs of femininity clashed with one another in the media. The reach (audience) of the mainstream media popularising and seeking to maintain the traditional gender order was smaller than that of the popular media following Western patterns, or the midcult magazines, books and plays supporting both female emancipation and conservative ideology. This is popular and midcult media were run mostly by Western-style, profit-oriented, private enterprises that went out of their way to resonate with the needs and preferences of the audience. It appears, the media promoting the traditional gender order had much less appeal to the audience they wished to reach.

The fact that the audience considered the modern woman more interesting and regarded it as a model to be followed shows a huge shift in mentality. This was the result of a process starting in the late 19th century and in which feminists and the more moderate organisations of women's movement both played a crucial role. The media landscape described above was only one consequence of, and eventually the reason behind, the shift in mentality.<sup>3</sup> Women's employment, the rise in the number of women receiving higher education and the growing role of women in public and political life were also consequences and reasons at the same time.

With respect to the changes in employment, higher education and public engagement, the concept of resilience should be underlined. As will be shown, middle-class families, while adapting to economic pressures, started to accept the employment of women (daughters, wives) to overcome economic difficulties, although they previously rejected this. In other words, their attitude towards female emancipation changed. This adjustment was facilitated by the media in that they popularised the independent, modern woman. I would argue that the media created and transmitted an ideology of female emancipation encouraging women to be prepared for independent life. They helped adaptation to and the acceptance of change by starting to portray what had become a

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<sup>3</sup> Since these media made the modern woman visible, hers was seen by an increasing number of people as a model possible and even desirable to follow.

necessity in a positive light: while earlier working women were considered *déclassé* for middle-class families, in the interwar period they symbolised successful adaptation. At the same time, the portrayal of female types regarded as extreme in the era (vamp, flapper, *garçonne*) defined and reinforced the borderline between the acceptable and unacceptable (norm-breaking) types of independent women.

The first chapter summarises the events in Hungarian and media history that are necessary for understanding the discussion of women's history afterwards. The second and third chapters present the major trends in Hungarian women's history from the turn of the 19th and 20th century until the Second World War. From the fourth chapter and on, the contemporary portrayal of femininity and the gender order is analysed, using various Hungarian media (novels, popular lexicons, women's magazines, movies) on the one hand, and Western media products (novels, movies) on the other.

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Numerous people have contributed to the making of this book. I owe the former and present head of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Hungarian History, Professor Gábor Erdődy and Professor Zsuzsanna Varga gratitude for their support. I would like to thank both of the reviewers of the manuscript for their comments and advices. I am grateful to Dr. Ingeborg Stensrud for **editing** and proofreading my manuscript. I am indebted to the series editor, Professor György Péteri for his help, patience and encouragement.



# Chapter I

## Women before and after World War I

### Introduction

Between 1867 and 1918, the Kingdom of Hungary underwent a dramatic economic, social and cultural transformation as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the dualist system). This period was characterised by westernisation and modernisation. The country's capital, Budapest, became a metropolis with a population of one million (including the outskirts), boasting the continent's first underground railway. The general level of education improved steadily in the country, the number of illiterates dropped substantially. More and more theatres and cafés opened, and the number of newspapers and readers expanded continuously.<sup>4</sup>

Outside the cultural sphere, economic life was modernised as well: the railway system was established, the weight of agriculture within the economy decreased slowly but steadily, while the share of those working in industry increased. These changes are reflected in GDP growth: in 1910, gross GDP per capita in Hungary was 61.2% of the Western European average, while in 2005 it was 38.9%.<sup>5</sup>

Politically, Hungary constituted a liberal system. Freedom of the press, party establishment and religion were guaranteed. The freedom of assembly, however, could be restricted by the government. Only a small share of the population (approximately 6%) enjoyed voting rights, which triggered an increasingly active suffrage movement from the turn of the century. Moreover, open elections were held, which resulted in electoral fraud fairly often. (The same party won all elections, with only one exception.) One of the fundamental problems of the political system was the electoral system. The other structural problem was due to the fact that Hungary was a multi-ethnic state, and different nationalisms stood in conflict with one another. Within

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<sup>4</sup> John Lukacs, *Budapest 1900. A Historical Portrait of a City and its Culture*, Grove Press, New York, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Béla Tomka, "Gazdasági változások és a fogyasztás alakulása a huszadik századi Magyarországon" [Economic transformations and the evolution of consumption in the 20th century Hungary], in: *A mi 20. századunk* [Our 20th Century], ed. Gyöngy Kovács Kiss – Ignác Romsics. Kolozsvár, Komp-Press, 2011, p. 168.

the Kingdom of Hungary, Hungarians constituted the majority, but their share was only a little over 50% of the population according to the 1910 census. (It also has to be mentioned that the Kingdom of Croatia was in personal union with Hungary, which influenced the position and the political movements of the national minorities within Hungary.) The elite of national minorities (who were dominantly Romanians, Slovaks and Serbs) started arguing from the end of the 19th century that the necessary minority rights were not guaranteed, and that Hungarian governments pursued a policy of hungarianisation. During the First World War, due the antagonism between the Hungarian majority and the various minorities, the Romanian, Serb, Croat and Slovak minorities decided to secede from Hungary and unite with their “mother country” (Romania) or join a new state (Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes or Czechoslovakia). Of course, this was possible because the Austro-Hungarian Empire was among the defeated powers of the world war. In 1918, the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy itself ceased to exist.

The Kingdom of Hungary suffered heavy losses as a result of the so-called Treaty of Trianon of 1920: its territory (without Croatia) was reduced from 282 thousand km<sup>2</sup> to 93 thousand km<sup>2</sup>, while its population shrank from 18 million to 7.6 million. Roughly 3 million Hungarians found themselves in the neighbouring countries, reflecting the fact that the great powers had ignored the ethnocultural borderlines prevalent in the region and tended to yield to the demands of the countries that stood to gain thanks to the new borders. This is best supported by the fact that sizeable Hungarian majorities were living in the areas of the new states bordering Hungary (in the southern part of Czechoslovakia, the western swathes of Romania and the northern portion of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). This, and the cession of cities and regions with profound significance in Hungarian history resulted in heightened nationalism and the huge popularity of revisionist policy in Hungary between the two world wars.<sup>6</sup> It was this nationalism that framed the discussions on gender roles and the different female types and fundamentally informed

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<sup>6</sup>For more detail, see Miklós Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary, 1920–1945*, Social Science Monographs, Boulder, 2007.

the portrayal of femininity between the two world wars. In the interest of a “national revival”, women were expected to give birth to boys who would fight in the coming new war. Feminism and female emancipation came thus to be regarded as foreign, international (and even dangerous) ideals.

Nationalism between the two world wars and the discussions on gender roles were affected by the two revolutions taking place between the end of the war (in the autumn of 1918) and the signing of the Treaty of Trianon (in the summer of 1920). First, Hungary became an independent, civic democratic republic where women’s rights were expanded. This was quickly followed by a “proletarian dictatorship” (the Hungarian Soviet Republic) between March and August 1919.

The first episode (between November 1918 and March 1919) can be considered a to have been an attempt to transition from war to peace; the second (March-August, 1919) can perhaps best be characterised by the wars conducted by the Soviet Republic: local wars waged with the aim to protect the soviet system and to preserve the territorial integrity of the country. It is important to emphasise that both episodes were triggered by the preceding political order’s loss of legitimacy. In the first case, this was brought about by the lost war, dramatically falling living standards (primarily due to disruptions in the supply chains) and by the inability of the political apparatus to introduce reforms in order to prevent the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This hesitation or, rather, paralysis is well illustrated by the fact that as late as in the summer of 1918, the Hungarian Parliament still rejected the democratisation of the electoral system (such as giving women voting rights).<sup>7</sup>

Leaders of the new civic democratic regime mainly came from the opposition parties of the dualist Hungary: for example the prime minister, a bit later to become president of the republic, Count Mihály Károlyi, had been an MP and leader of the opposition (a proponent of independence), and the Social Democratic Party of Hungary, the Independent Smallholders’ Party and the Civic National Party all became part of the government. The Feminist

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<sup>7</sup>Lajos Varga, “Suffrage, Parliamentarism, and Social Democracy” in: *Regimes and Transformations. Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, ed. István Feitl – Balázs Sipos, Napvilág, Budapest, 2005, pp. 83–89.

Association also supported the government, and its leader, Róza Bédy-Schwimmer, later performed diplomatic duties in Switzerland. (At the onset of the 1918 revolution, several members of the former governing party and other right wing politicians supported the new system and its leader: such supporters included István Bethlen and Gyula Gömbös who later served as prime ministers in 1921–1931 and 1932–1936, respectively.)

The republic was an “enhanced version” of the liberal system of the late dualist era: voting rights were extended to include women too; women’s applications to university were to be assessed according to the same criteria as men’s and women could no longer be discriminated against in any line of higher education (in Hungary, women could attend university only from 1896, though with restrictions); the mandatory financial collateral to be deposited when establishing political newspapers was abolished; the rights of minorities were planned to be expanded; legislative measures were taken to carry out a major land reform.

In institutional terms, the democratisation brought with it the possibility of political participation for a society that had been in the preceding years mobilized towards the objectives of war. Now it was sought to be “remobilised” rather than demobilised. This possibility, however, failed to materialize since the multi-party, democratic elections planned for April 1919 never took place. In March 1919, the civic democratic regime collapsed.

The end of the democratic episode was brought about by a number of domestic and external reasons. The single most important factor, however, was the territorial issue. The victors of the war (the Entente Powers, Czechoslovakia and Romania) demanded of the Hungarian government to yield more and more territories. In March 1919, after the rejection of such a demand and the overthrow of the government, a Council of People’s Commissars composed exclusively of leftist social democrats and communists was established, and it proclaimed the Hungarian Soviet Republic. The Red Army set up by the Soviet Republic started, in the beginning with some success, pushing back the Romanian and Czechoslovak troops. But by August, the Soviet Republic and its Red Army collapsed. Budapest was occupied by Romanian troops, a

development which, due to its symbolic significance, only increased the sense of national trauma.

Between the two world wars, the official policy/propaganda blurred the lines between the defeat in the war, the Treaty of Trianon, the civic democratic revolution in October 1918, the declaration of the republic, and the Hungarian Soviet Republic. This narrative did squarely put the blame for Hungary's territorial losses on those who led the country between October 1918 and August 1919. Similarly to the "stab-in-the-back theory", they kept silent about the declaration of war in 1914 and the reasons of the eventual military defeat. Instead, they foregrounded domestic political developments, to castigate the politics of the former opposition members who had assumed power after the lost war.

Almost every political-ideological tendency left of conservative ideas and ideologies were declared "criminal". In the early years of the counter-revolution, several literary and scientific works were published to serve as the "foundational myths" of the interwar period.<sup>8</sup> These include "Három nemzedék" (Three Generations) by the well-known historian Gyula Szekfű. The book enjoyed a great deal of popularity in Hungary in the 1920s. In it, Szekfű attributed almost all negative events that happened in and to Hungary to the liberal period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire between 1867 and 1918. These unfortunate developments included, in Szekfű's view, the lost world war, the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the Treaty of Trianon. He believed that Hungarian national awareness and sense of responsibility declined continuously until the superficially assimilated minorities (he lumped together Jews with national minorities in this category) brought the country to ruin.<sup>9</sup>

The influential author Dezső Szabó also portrayed the history of the liberal period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a story of decay. In his novel "Az elsodort falu" (A Village Swept Away), which was just as influential as Szekfű's Three Generations, Szabó attacked feminism and emancipatory efforts in general. He mocked "bluestockings" and women striving for equality. Here

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<sup>8</sup> Jan Assman, *Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Gyula Szekfű, *Három nemzedék és ami utána következik* [Three Generations and What Comes After] ÁKV–Maecenas, Budapest, 1989.

is an example how Szabó went about this. His was a key novel and one of its characters represented Margit Kafka, the well-known Hungarian female writer. Kafka in her writings insisted on referring to women as “humans” (*ember*), a noun that the traditional and still dominant Hungarian discourse reserved for men only. Szabó ridiculed Kafka on account of what he saw as merely “following [foreign] fashion”.<sup>10</sup>

The third emblematic book published in the early 1920s (later to appear in several new editions) was “An Outlaw’s Diary” by Cécile Tormay. Tormay was blunt: she listed Jews, freemasons, socialists, liberals and feminists and specifically Róza Bédy-Schwimmer among the enemies of the nation.<sup>11</sup>

However, one interesting aspect of Tormay’s novel is that it also commemorates the staunch counter-revolutionary women who were “persecuted” by one or both of the revolutions, forced into exile but did surrender neither to the forces of the civic democratic republic nor to those of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Tormay herself towered high among these counter-revolutionary women: she established the National Federation of Hungarian Women (MANSZ) during the days of the revolutions, to become the representative and largest right-wing women’s organisation of the Horthy era. In her novel, Tormay “created a new female role, that of the energetic female author, always ready to act, like a man, uncovering conspiracies lurking everywhere”. The role’s model was of course Tormay’s anti-feminist and anti-Semitic self.<sup>12</sup>

Gyula Szekfű and Cécile Tormay left their mark not only through their books. In the 1920s, they became editors-in-chief of two mainstream journals, the *Magyar Szemle* [Hungarian Review] and *Napkelet* [Orient] respectively, intended to popularize the government’s cultural policies and *Weltanschauung*.

The interwar political system was established only by 1922. This took so long because of the protracted struggle between conservatives, right-wing radicals (racists) and moderate democrats. The conservatives wanted an

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<sup>10</sup> Dezső Szabó, *Az elsodort falu* [A Village Swept Away], Csokonai, Debrecen, 1989, pp. 53–54.

<sup>11</sup> Cécile Tormay, *Bujdosó könyv* [An Outlaw’s Diary], Pallas, Budapest, 1921, pp. 15–16., 18., 56.

<sup>12</sup> Éva Bánki, „Lobogó sötétség. (Tormay Cécile: Bujdosó Könyv)” [Flaring Darkness. Cécile Tormay: An Outlaw’s Diary], *Múltunk* [Our Past], 2008, No. 3, p. 92.

authoritarian system, in which several parties and newspapers with several different world views would function, but the opposition would never win in the elections. The right-wing radicals hankered for military dictatorship and a censored press. The moderate democrats had their origins in the civic democratic system of 1918–1919 (Independent Smallholders' Party and Social Democratic Party).

There was a further reason why the new political system was not established before 1922: the counter-revolutionary, right-wing governments that rose to power from August 1919. The most important among these was the government headed by Sándor Friedrich (between August and November 1919). It introduced a democratic suffrage extended to women, at the same time as it introduced censorship too. This is crucial since in 1920 the elections were held based on the voting rights decree of the Friedrich government. The Independent Smallholders' Party and the Party of Christian National Union were head-to-head in the results and a coalition government was formed by these parties.

Thus, the character of the new political system was determined by who the “strongman” of the country, Admiral Miklós Horthy sided with. Horthy was the leader of the only military force, the National Army and the Regent of Hungary from early 1920 until October 1944. The Admiral rode into Budapest on a white horse, followed by his troops in November 1919 (symbolically reoccupying the capital from the Romanian troops that had already retreated). In an important speech, he denounced the “guilty city” for having “covered itself in red rags” and rejected the nation’s “thousand year old Christian traditions”.

Horthy identified with the efforts of neither moderate democracy nor of the above mentioned early counter-revolutionary governments, wavering between conservative autocracy and military dictatorship. In the end, he sided with the conservative solution and Prime Minister István Bethlen (1921–1931). Bethlen constrained voting rights and introduced open ballot for 80% of the parliamentary seats in 1922. He switched from a competing multi-party system to a multi-party system in which one party (the governing party) set the rules of the competition between the parties. What was at stake in an election was no longer which party won, but rather with what share of the votes

the governing party was to win and how the composition of the governing party's parliamentary faction would look like. Under such circumstances, the 1922 elections changed the balance of political forces in Parliament. The Smallholders' efforts at democratisation became unrealistic and the land reform was implemented not only slowly but also without any serious impact upon the distribution of land ownership dominated by the latifundia.

The restrictions upon voting rights disenfranchised both men and women, yet women were affected more (see below for more details). This was because the government sought to reduce the share of those in society who actively practiced their political citizenship. They wished to 'demobilise' society, especially women.

### **The changing situation of women**

Although this whole book focuses on certain aspects of Hungarian women's history, and I have already mentioned some facts, a few important developments need to be highlighted in advance.

The emergence of so-called modern women in Hungary was part and parcel of the ongoing socio-economic modernisation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1904 the Feminist Association was established which, just like the conservative Federation of Women's Associations in Hungary, aimed at female emancipation. Both maintained international ties: the Federation was founded as the Hungarian section of the International Council of Women, while the Feminist Association became a member of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1905. In 1913 they spearheaded the preparation of the Woman Suffrage Congress in Budapest (see photo 1). The preparations were supported by the government as well as by the municipal authorities of Budapest, and conservative personalities such as the wife of Count Albert Apponyi, a leader of the Federation of Women's Associations in Hungary, also took part in them.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Juss Suffragii. Monthly Organ of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1913, No. 10. (Congress Number) pp. 1–7.



*Photo 1:* Stamp issued on the occasion of the Woman Suffrage Congress in Budapest: the internationalism of the congress was emphasised

The liberal world view of the governments before the autumn of 1918 is also attested by the fact that after a long struggle, they finally allowed women to attend university (although not all courses) in 1895. In the summer of 1918, the government proposed that women acquire voting rights as well, however, this was rejected by a majority in the parliament.<sup>14</sup>

In October 1918, the Feminist Association and its head, Róza Bédy-Schwimmer joined the National Council advocating the civic democratic

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<sup>14</sup> Irén Simándi, *Küzdelem a nők parlamenti választójogáért Magyarországon 1848–1938* [Struggle for the Female Voting Rights], Gondolat, Budapest, 2009, pp. 103–139.

transformation, and Bédy-Schwimmer fulfilled diplomatic duties on behalf of the new Republic and its government. Women acquired voting rights and were able to attend university under the same conditions as men. According to the new regulation, the universities had to admit female students to every faculty.

During the first three months of 1919, in the campaign preceding the multi-party elections scheduled for April 1919, many women participated as activists, supporting a multitude of parties. The aforementioned MANSZ was established at this time.

Under the Hungarian Soviet Republic, everyone received voting rights, except for the “bourgeois”. For example Róza Bédy-Schwimmer and other “bourgeois” feminists were not allowed to participate in council elections. From late 1919, the “unpatriotic” and “un-Hungarian”, i.e. “international” or “European” feminism became an enemy to be suppressed. As a result, the Feminist Association was considerably weakened, and Róza Bédy-Schwimmer decided to emigrate. Merely one or two issues of the newspaper established by the Association in 1907 were published in the 1920s, and in 1927 it ceased publication altogether. Women’s public political engagement, however, continued in the MANSZ and in various parties.<sup>15</sup> They were the most active in the Social Democratic Party of Hungary, in various Christian parties and the liberal parties in Budapest. This is corroborated by the fact that several women became MPs between 1920 and 1944: Margit Sclachta (Party of Christian National Union) in 1920, Anna Kéthly (social democrat) in 1922, Baroness (Mrs.) Fülöp Orosdy, née Baroness Mária Herzog (Christian Socialist) in 1931, Lilla Melczer (Christian Governing Party) in 1932, Mrs. Ákos Toperczer, née Róza Hagara (Governing Party, Right-Wing Christian Party) in 1935. Conservative women’s organisations and female politicians were the proponents of female emancipation: they can be considered conservative or right-wing

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<sup>15</sup> For more detail, see Judit Szapor, „Who represents Hungarian women? The demise of the liberal bourgeois women’s rights movement and the rise of the right wing women’s movement in the aftermath of world war I”, in: *Aftermaths of War: Women’s Movements and Female Activists, 1918-1923*, ed. Ingrid Sharp – Matthew Stibbe, Brill, Leiden, 2011, pp. 245–264.

feminists<sup>16</sup> and the advocates of maternal feminism.<sup>17</sup>

Women's situation in higher education was to some extent undermined by a rightist-conservative backlash after 1919. From the autumn of 1919, right-wing radicals' calls for forcing female and Jewish students out of universities or at least for limiting their ratio became stronger and stronger. The Numerus Clausus legislation that was passed as a result of this in the autumn of 1920 and the corresponding decree to implement it stipulated that the number of "Jewish" students should be restricted (however, "Jewish" was not defined, therefore universities decided for themselves who they considered Jewish). Conversely, in the case of women, universities could decide freely whether they wished to admit female students and if so, in what proportion. As a result, the share of female students temporarily dropped across the whole country, and there were faculties that considerably reduced their ratio. The Faculty of Medicine of the Budapest University of Sciences enrolled no female applicants until 1925.

The minister in charge of this issue, Count Kunó Klebelsberg, urged the universities and the Faculty of Medicine repeatedly to change their policies. Since they did not comply, Klebelsberg ordered the universities to review their stance in a 1924 decree. In 1926, a law was passed which gave Klebelsberg's Ministry, rather than the universities, the right to decide about the share of female students.<sup>18</sup> (In a 1928 amendment, he enabled female instructors to become associate professors.) The situation changed in the 1930s, when minister of education Bálint Hóman used the powers originating in the legislation initiated by Klebelsberg to reduce the share of female students at universities.

The attitude towards female emancipation was ambivalent in interwar Hungary, even though conservative women's organisations got stronger,

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866–1914*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York, 2000, pp. 102–103.

<sup>17</sup> In a nutshell, the latter demanded autonomy, with reference to maternal duties, within the family as well as rights to women in public, employment and higher education. Although they advocated the cult of motherhood, they demanded rights not only mothers. A good example for this is journalist and author Anna Szederkényi who described herself as a nationalist and moderate feminist. In the interwar period she established the Committee of Women of Saint Stephen's Day that provided a "national bonus" to mothers with multiple children every year (King Saint Stephen was the founder of Hungary).

<sup>18</sup> For the interwar legacy, see György Péteri, "The communist idea of the university: an essay inspired by the Hungarian experience", in: *Universities Under Dictatorship*, ed. John Connolly – Michael Grüttner, The Pennsylvania University State University Press, University Park, 2005. pp. 142–145.

female MPs from the governing party made it into Parliament, and Minister Klebelsberg supported the higher education of women. Women acquired voting rights under much stricter conditions than men, the share of female students was reduced by Minister Hóman in the 1930s, proposals to reduce women's rights emerged from time to time, and many people regarded female emancipation in itself harmful, anti-national and foreign to Hungarian traditions. Because of this, women experienced several disadvantages at work as well.

Ideologies aside, there were also some tendencies in Hungarian economy and society that profoundly affected the situation of women and informed the prevailing gender norms. The war significantly increased women's majority in Hungarian society: while in 1910 there were 1,007 women for 1,000 men in the pre-Trianon territory of the country, by 1920 this number had risen to 1,062. In larger cities (so called cities with municipal rights) the number of women per 1000 men rose from 1,015 to 1,110. Whatever norms and expectations may have been, not all women could marry. Thus, the number of independent women performing paid work increased, and they were portrayed increasingly as successful rather than spinsters (see Chapter IV, V and VI).

Women's situation had been affected by the widespread impoverishment taking place during the war and post-war years: middle-class and lower-middle-class families were no longer able to sustain themselves from the husbands' salaries and the wife had to earn money as well. Therefore also the number of working married women increased steadily (for statistical evidence, see the section on "Mass female employment").

All in all, due to the social and economic transformation mentioned above and in spite of the fact that conservative and nationalist ideas came to rule supreme, gender roles changed in certain groups and social strata and the modern type of woman became even more widespread and accepted. This tendency was reinforced by popular culture: by influences from abroad (conveyed, among other things, by American and French movies and novels), and by Hungarian cultural products embracing and promoting the same values.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Maria DiCenzo – Judit Acsády – David Hudson – Balázs Sipos, „Mediating the National and the International: Women, Journalism and Hungary in the Aftermath of the First World War”, in: *Women Activists Between War and Peace Europe, 1918–1923*, ed. Ingrid Sharp – Matthew Stibbe, Bloomsbury, London, 2017, pp. 195–201.

## The media landscape

Since this book focuses in large part on various constructs produced and conveyed by the media, I present a very brief overview about the situation and regulation of the media in Hungary between the two world wars.

Press censorship ceased in Hungary in 1921. However, new newspapers could only be launched with the prime minister's approval. The minister of the interior could prohibit the publication of serial publications for good or for a specified period, and also restrict their circulation. (No legal redress could be sought for such decisions, i.e. no appeals could be lodged.) There were 50 such cases between 1921 and 1931, and 52 between 1932 and 1938.

Nevertheless, the Hungarian press flora exhibited great complexity: many types of magazines and newspapers were published, from social democratic through liberal and conservative publications to far-right newspapers, albeit with certain limitations. On average, 20 national dailies were published each year, and the number of serial publications was 934 in 1926, 1,230 in 1930 and 1,934 in 1938. The two most popular dailies were liberal (*Az Est* [The Evening]) and liberal conservative (*Pesti Hírlap* [Pest Gazette]). Out of the two most popular weeklies, the literary family magazine *Új Idők* [New Times] was a liberal conservative publication, while *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life] with theatre, movie and star news followed American examples.

The Bethlen government (1921–1931) went out of its way to restrict the operation of the opposition's press and to boost the circulation of the press on the government's and, in general, on conservative side. In 1923, they established a major literary journal entitled *Napkelet* [Orient] (with Cécile Tormay as its editor-in-chief, who stayed on until her death). *Napkelet* was expected to counterbalance the western-style literary periodical *Nyugat* [West]. They also founded a high-quality and influential review, *Magyar Szemle* in 1927. Furthermore, they managed to reshape the market for political newspapers. In 1926, 53% of political newspapers were government-friendly or broadly supportive of the government's policies, while in 1930 this proportion was already 64%, a trend that came to continue under the Gömbös government (1932–1936).

Movies and plays were censored throughout the period, and cinema and theatre owners had to obtain a licence. Nonetheless, the Hungarian movie market had been dominated by American films for a long time, and no propaganda films were produced in the interwar period (at least no feature films, although the Hungarian newsreels that had to be run before the feature films sometimes served propaganda purposes). For us, the most important aspect of film censorship was that movies were examined from a “moral perspective” as well. The aim was to protect the so-called family values, the prestige of churches and state institutions. The objectionable parts were cut. The censors defined age groups eligible to see the films. Sometimes the title of the film was changed before it was allowed to be screened.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike the newspapers, movie theatres, theatres and film studios, the Hungarian News Agency (established in 1881) and the Magyar Rádió (Hungarian Radio, established in 1925) were privately owned only on paper. Actually, these companies were controlled and their executives were appointed by the government.

This media system was transformed from around 1938–1939. First, a chamber of press was established, following the German corporatist model: journalists, editors and publishers had to be accredited by the government, and only 6% of the members could be people qualified as Jews. Second, 411 serial publications were banned in 1938. Last but not least, censorship was introduced over book publications from 1938 and newspapers from 1939.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Márk Záhonyi-Ábel, „Filmcenzúra Magyarországon a Horthy-korszak első évtizedében” [Film censorship in Hungary in the first decade of the Horthy era], Médiakutató [Media Research], 2012, No. 2. [http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2012\\_02\\_nyar/12\\_filmcenzura\\_magyarorszagon/](http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2012_02_nyar/12_filmcenzura_magyarorszagon/) Last accessed: August 12, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Balázs Sipos, „Media and Politics in Hungary between the World Wars”, in: Regimes and transformations, op. cit. pp. 195–216.

## Chapter II

# The periodisation of women's history in 19–20th century Hungary

A majority of works reviewing 19-20<sup>th</sup> century women's history would agree that the first wave of feminism in Europe started in the late 19th century and ended sometime around or after the First World War. With the struggle for rights for women in politics, education and employment in its focus, this wave came to an end precisely because these rights had been achieved whereupon a certain degree of confusion, a state of aimlessness followed, which undermined the feminist movement. The period of the "low ebb of feminism" persisted throughout the interwar era. The second wave of feminist activity followed after World War II and was triggered and informed to a great extent by Simon de Beauvoir's influential 1949 book, *The Second Sex* and its philosophical programme.<sup>22</sup>

This simplified periodisation of 20th century women's history in the Western world appears neatly to accommodate women's history in Hungary too. After all, at the turn of the century women's movement was strong in Hungary too and it succeeded in changing the meaning of femininity and what constituted the 'ideal woman'. At the end of 1918, women gained voting rights and were granted access to higher education in all university disciplines. Hungary followed the 'global cycle' also during the interwar period (or the 'Horthy era'), in that the country was brought under the rule of a conservative authoritarian regime which curtailed and restricted women's political and educational rights guaranteed in 1918. The feminist movement got marginalized and it lost its momentum and significance.

The interwar era: The low ebb of feminism or adjustment to new challenges?

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<sup>22</sup> The periodisation of the history of feminism and its historiography is a more complex matter than it might appear from this short paragraph and it will be discussed in greater detail later.

Recently, Maria DiCenzo attempted to re-evaluate the above-mentioned periodisation of “Western” women’s history. In a 2015 presentation she said:

“The presentation will draw on distinctions between phases of mobilisation made by social movement theorists to argue that accounts of the interwar period as one of ‘decline,’ ‘retreat to domesticity’ or, at best, a movement in ‘abeyance,’ have ignored what was in fact a shift from an earlier period of ‘action mobilisation’ (the insurgency of the prewar suffrage campaign) to one of renewed ‘consensus mobilisation’ working to build awareness and support around a much wider range of issues, about which there was considerable disagreement [...]. I will challenge theories of retrenchment or dormancy by arguing instead that the interwar years witnessed the pluralisation and diversification of feminist discourses. Rather than deactivating feminism, the war generated new problems and complicated old ones. At the national level, demobilisation intensified competition between women and men in the workforce, leading to major public policy debates around labour-related and family welfare issues. At the same time, post-war political diplomacy fuelled the involvement of feminist pacifists in international campaigns (such as the recently formed Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom) to debate and intervene in world conflicts and to promote peace. These causes drew support from existing and new constituencies of participants (many of them former suffragists), in a landscape of radically changing social and economic conditions and political opportunities.”<sup>23</sup>

Along with Maria DiCenzo I believe that the interwar period should be re-evaluated in women’s history. Indeed, this era was also characterised by women’s public engagement, which was, in part, an answer to new challenges. One such challenge was the First World War, the first total war, which

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<sup>23</sup> Maria DiCenzo, “Challenging Theories of Abeyance: Feminist Activism in the Interwar Years in Britain. Abstract”, [http://www.socio.mta.hu/uploads/files/2015/jour\\_fixe33en.pdf](http://www.socio.mta.hu/uploads/files/2015/jour_fixe33en.pdf) Last accessed: April 27, 2016.

irrevocably changed the relationship between men and women as well as the social position of women. The war radically transformed social relations on the home front and during the transition from war to peace the new relationship between men and women forced itself into the focus of public attention (see photo 2).



*Photo 2: Field hospital in 1917: Women taking the leap from the *Hinterland* to the front in many fields of socio-economic life (photo by Fortepan).*

In interwar Hungary, the situation of women was characterised by adjustment to new problems, new consensus and new participants rather than by some kind of ‘feminine passivity’. The intention and policies of demobilisation and control on behalf of the government was responded to by way of new tactics on the part of women’s organisations and active modern women. The change can be best understood by studying how the meaning and contents of the notions of feminine, femininity, and ‘ideal woman’ were reconstructed by the women and their organizations themselves.

Our question is whether the apparent weakening of the feminist movement and the installation of a conservative, nationalist, authoritarian regime led to the resurgence and cementing of traditional female roles, traditional understandings of femininity and the patriarchal relationship between men and women? In order to answer this question, I will first turn to the matter of periodisation in women's history in Hungary. Instead of a political history focusing on political organisations and institutions, mine is an exercise in cultural history making individual cases and individualized description the main concern.<sup>24</sup>

## **The periodisation of women's history in Hungary**

Periodisation is a matter of great importance for historians, since it helps us identify distinct periods and get closer to an understanding and explanation of historical developments and facts. Periodisation, however, is a daunting task: one can easily make the mistake of disregarding important changes or aspects and thereby incorrectly identifying the onset and end of a process.

The conventional periodisation of women's history has been fundamentally informed by political history. It attributes great significance to momentous events in political history and is closely tied to the history of women's entry into politics, especially the struggle for political citizenship by feminist movements and organisations.

According to a study by Judit Szapor,<sup>25</sup> the classical and typical periodisation of women's history in Hungary is the following:

1. The first period lasted from the end of the 18th century to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. These years can be considered the prehistory of the feminist movement.
2. The next period was the era when institutions of female emancipation (women's associations, periodicals) emerged. These were the years when women acquired cultural rights.

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<sup>24</sup> See Paula Baker, „The Midlife Crisis of the New Political History”, *The Journal of American History*, 1999, No.1, pp. 158–166.

<sup>25</sup> Judit Szapor, „A magánszférából a politikai közéletbe: a női politizálás története a kezdetektől 1945-ig” [From the private to the political sphere: The history of Hungarian women in politics,

<sup>26</sup> from the beginnings to 1945], in: *A nő és a politikum. A nők politikai szerepvállalása Magyarországon*. [Woman and Public Life. Women's Political Roles in Hungary], ed. Mária PALASIK. Napvilág, Budapest, 2007, pp. 129-144.

3. The “first wave of feminism” started in 1896, when higher education was partially opened to women.

4. The period of decline between 1919 and 1945.

This periodisation is justified by the following reasons. According to the teleological narrative developed by Hungarian feminists between 1895 and 1945, the demands of the female emancipation movement emerged in phases and built upon one another in a sequence of ‘progress from the less towards the more important’. Thus, “development” starts out from cultural and educational rights, and through employment rights it evolves to bring with it the most crucial of female rights: political rights.

Based on a new approach, Szapor suggests a new periodisation of “*women’s political agency*” (*női politizálás*) in Hungary. Szapor argues that the “turning points” in political history (1867, 1914 etc.), “trends in social history” (in socio-economic modernisation and employment) and the changes in emancipation, educational and political rights all need to be taken into account.

Szapor’s welcome suggestions towards developing a more subtle model doing justice to the actual complexities of women’s history in Hungary make one expect some substantial revisions of the conventional periodisation. It comes, therefore, as a surprise that Szapor’s own suggestion for periodisation fails to make any significant departure from the conventional model. According to this, the following periods are to be distinguished:

1. From the early years to 1896;

2. 1896–1904 (the Feminist Association was founded in 1904);

3. 1904–1918;

4. 1919–1945.

Interestingly, Szapor disregards her own “new” periodisation in most of her study, and she actually uses the following periodisation instead:

1. From the early years to 1896;
2. 1896–1914 (this is referred to as “the golden age of feminism in Hungary”);
3. 1914–1919;
4. 1919–1945 (the chapter on the last period is titled: “Women in political life between the two world wars”).

Since here we have a new periodisation (which I will refer to as 2/a), and another one (that which is actually used throughout Szapor’s discussion – 2/b), the two will be presented together.

First, I have to point out that “women’s history” and the “history of women’s political activity” are not the same, since women’s history is a broader category. Yet, we can see that Szapor – rightly – takes a contrary approach and stresses that the historical study of women’s political agency cannot neglect aspects of social history. Significantly enough, Szapor mentions trends in social history, which suggest consideration of longer-term structural changes, and she also writes about modernisation, which appears to reveal a shift from a more conventional social history to cultural history. In other words, it appears, in Szapor’s discussion political history has a less pronounced role in periodisation. Therefore the first (traditional), and 2/a and 2/b periodisations can be different.

As compared to the traditional approach, 2/a distinguishes itself in that the founding of the Feminist Association (1904) is regarded as the onset of a new era of women’s history or “women’s politics” in Hungary. It is interesting, however, that Szapor does not mention the Federation of Women’s Associations in Hungary, the leaders of which included Countess Apponyi (married to a member of government) who also demanded voting rights for women, and Sándor Giesswein, a prebendary who was member of the Hungarian parliament from 1905.

Although the FWAH was more or less conservative, it supported female emancipation. It was established as an umbrella organisation by 43 women’s associations in 1904. By 1906, it had come to include 74 member organisations, by 1913 their number had grown to 89 with approximately 40,000–90,000

persons as their members. The women's associations joined the FWAH from all over Hungary. Most of them were charitable organisations (55% of the member associations in 1906) and churches or religious organisations (20%). These were rather traditional associations. The modern organisations focusing on the education of women and culture, protecting the rights of working women and women's rights in general were in the minority (such groupings included the Feminist Association).<sup>26</sup>

The FWAH performed its core activities in nine departments. One example was the Department for the Protection of Working Women, and a Suffrage Department was also established in 1909. Thus, the FWAH embraced both the demands in favour of the traditional gender order, as well as more radical ones. In other words, the FWAH was an institution and a forum for radical and moderate organisations of the middle-class, religious or civic women's movement. As such it played a central role in building consensus among women's associations. It also contributed to shaping the gender order, because, by virtue of being an umbrella organisation, it amplified the effect of the member associations' activities towards the "outside world", by increasing the visibility of women's associations and women's movements.<sup>27</sup>

The 2/b periodisation, from 1914 to 1918, marks a separate era, characterised by a greater public engagement of, and for, women:

- Because of the war, women substituted men in workplaces and in educational institutions (both of which presented many new opportunities for women).
- As a result of paid employment, women appeared in greater numbers among unionised, i.e. politically "(self-)conscious" workers (the number of female trade union members grew from 6,000 in 1913 to 131,000 in 1918).

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<sup>26</sup> It needs to be noted, however, that some of the more traditional, conservatively oriented organisations did also take care of and promote women's education.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Zimmermann, "Frauenbestrebungen und Frauenbewegungen in Ungarn. Zur Organisationsgeschichte der Jahre 1848 bis 1945", in: Szerep és alkotás: Női szerepek a társadalomban és alkotóművészetben [Role and Product: female roles within the Society and Art], ed. Beáta Nagy – Margit S. Sárdi, Csokonai, Debrecen, 1997, pp. 182–185.; Regina Kaposvári, Női érdekérvényesítés 1945 előtt: A Magyarországi Nőegyesületek Szövetsége a megalakulástól 1918-ig [Female Advocacy before 1945: Federation of Women's Associations in Hungary from its Formation until 1918], MA-thesis, Eötvös University, Budapest, 2018.

· The suffrage movement was strengthened, and when women received voting rights in late 1918, they joined party politics and election campaigns, too.

Compared to the periodisations mentioned so far, the interwar period has been regarded as a step back. This backlash started in 1919, as a result of the counter-revolution taking place from August 1919, and which is frequently regarded as having laid the groundwork for the authoritarian political system introduced in 1920. The interwar period was characterised by the banishment and marginalisation of feminists, and by the previously mentioned curbing of women's rights: female voting rights were restricted in 1922 and 1938, while women's access to higher education was constrained in the autumn of 1920. A "tug of war" followed, in which the ban was sometimes tightened, at other times eased.

### **The normative approach to women's history**

The three periodisations (1, 2/a and 2/b) produce and assume narratives, in which political involvement and the situation of the feminist movement in particular is of paramount importance (this is especially true in the case of 2/a). It follows from this that in women's history and the history of women's politics the majority of women seem to have been passive participants who were guided in part by the independent and personified "state," and in part by the feminist movement. In other words: only feminists and the state were independent actors, and most women either followed one of the two or remained passive.

This approach is characterised by normativity. We can call it normativity since according to the narrative, participants were in a hierarchical relationship, suggested in 2/a: the founding of the Feminist Association is considered the onset of a new era, while the activities of the Federation of Women's Associations in Hungary are not even worth mentioning. In this light, various activities (the fight for cultural, educational and political rights) were in a hierarchical order.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the rationale by Szapor includes specific "standards" that

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<sup>28</sup> This remains to be the case even though Judit Szapor underlines there are no higher-ranking and lower-ranking activities with regard to women's public engagement because the aims as well as their significance and attainability varied through time.

participants should (have) follow(ed). Adherence to these norms seems to be expected by the author. Feminists, for example, are reproached for three reasons.

1. “They were in cahoots [!] with the conservatives” in order to acquire voting rights for women with the appropriate education and wealth (and not for all women).

This assertion (apart from the rebuke for “being in cahoots” with the conservatives) is intriguing because it suggests that feminists were educated and middle class, and found the reform plan by the liberal democratic Vilmos Vázsonyi acceptable (rather than the one by the conservatives), because it would have guaranteed them, i.e. educated middle-class women, voting rights. This shows that the Feminist Association did not rise above “party and class interests,” to which I will return later.

2. The feminists also made the mistake of using the “slogans appealing to national features” in the discourse about suffrage, and they argued that giving women voting rights would fit in with the “feudal traditions of Hungarian history”. They “challenged the norm” by forgetting that they belonged to a supranational movement while using national slogans and arguments. Moreover, this was completely pointless (and I am still following Szapor’s rationale) because feminists were branded as being against the nation by the conservative authoritarian regime after 1919.

The issue of the national frame brings us to a methodological question. Szapor’s study suggests that in politics everyone says what they believe and everyone believes what they say, and there is no difference between national slogans, arguments (i.e. national frame) and nationalism. However, I would like to stress that in this particular case, feminists, in order to achieve their goals, used arguments that were acceptable even to the opponents of feminism. It is widely known that feminists and others “fighting” for women’s rights in general were accused by conservatives all over Europe of being against the nation. And when they succeeded in convincing the majority about this, feminists were excluded from the group of those representing legitimate views. There was only one logical response to this: using national traditions in the political discourse about women’s rights. As Andrea Pető points out, women’s rights are only accepted – in

fact, such demands only appear in politics – if they are put into a national frame.<sup>29</sup>

3. According to the normative narrative of women's history and women's politics, there was a third norm Hungarian feminists were unable to adhere to. The normative narrative maintains that the Feminist Association rose above "party and class interests," which, as we saw in the first point, was not true. Members of the Association joined parties after the turn of 1918/19: for example, some feminists formed the women's faction in the Civic National Party led by Jászi, i.e. they were not "guided by their principles in women's politics". I quote Szapor's study: despite the efforts of the Association's leadership, "their *leading officers* and members left the sinking ship, opted for open party- and class politics and joined all sorts of groupings from communists to budding counter-revolutionary parties".

This implies the assertion of yet another norm on the basis of which feminists are critiqued for joining political parties under patriarchal hegemony upon gaining voting rights. This is considered by the author as much as an act of treachery as the attempts to try and harness the nationalist discourse towards women's advantage. The argument in this respect is built upon the understanding that discrimination against women in various spheres of life is interdependent and constitutes a systemic all-embracing tendency. If this holds true, however, then joining "men's parties" is an act of submission, the acceptance of inequality in a highly important domain.

In this context, of course, the question is not whether the acts of discrimination against women were indeed interrelated (they were) but whether historians can use their own norms while interpreting and explaining historical developments. Or in other words: can we interpret historical developments correctly if, while describing them, we expect people in the past to adhere to our own norms? I do not think so. As I will demonstrate in detail later, this is not a useful approach, (partly) because the inequalities suffered by women and traditional gender norms were indeed interrelated, and disrupting this traditional gender order in any area was a political action. It was politics because it was about conflicts, male

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<sup>29</sup> Andrea Pető, *Napasszonyok és holdkisasasszonyok. A mai magyar konzervatív női politizálás alakzata* [Women of Sun and Girls of Moon. The Morphology of Contemporary Hungarian Women Doing Politics], Balassi, Budapest, 2003, p. 63.

control over women and revisionism (revisionist policy). Organising women's charity clubs or propagating women's intellectual or sexual equality was about female equality *in general*, and it indicated female equality *in general*. In popular culture, when male or female authors discussed the sexual inequality of women or propagated their sexual equality, it had consequences in "big politics" as well, since these authors *depicted women as independent actors (free from male control) whose goal was not only to produce soldiers for the next war for revision of Trianon Peace Treaty*.<sup>30</sup>

In the Horthy era the feminine beauty ideal, the role and reproductive functions of women in the family, were political issues in connection with the revision. According to what was the dominant discourse of the era – the slender woman, who had become the feminine beauty ideal due to the influence of American films, as she was not built to have several kids, she was regarded to be detrimental to the nation's objectives.

Public engagement (e.g. charities) or writing erotic novels are political activities, as is fighting for women's rights as a female member of parliament, i.e. proving that *women are independent actors*. In this context, we cannot establish any hierarchy among actions by women unless we assume that people of those times held values like ours, today. Nor can we assume that women's participation in political life and their organised political actions were of greater importance than the fight for women's cultural equality. We may, however, suppose that there is a hierarchy among actions by women if we believe that political action can provide a solution for gender inequalities in other spheres than the political itself.

## **The interpretative approach**

As we have seen, the normative, prescriptive women's history is based on the following:

1. Expecting adherence to an abstract feminist norm, due to which the events in women's history are interpreted along the lines of resistance and collaboration

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<sup>30</sup> Abbot and Papal Prelate Sándor Giesswein, a Christian socialist MP and the committee member of the Feminist Association also contested the popular political belief that the woman's task was to reproduce and to bear children for the state and the army. Sándor Giesswein, "A mai nő feladatai" [The Tasks of Today's Women], A Nő [The Woman], December 1921, 3–4.

(for example, that is why authors can assert that the feminist movement was “in cahoots” with the conservatives).

2. Interpreting women’s organised engagement in politics as being of greater importance than other actions.

3. Regarding politics from an institutional point of view.

Divergence from normativity may result in an alternative approach. Borrowing the term that is used to characterise Max Weber’s sociology, I would call this the “interpretative women’s history”. I suggest the following:

1.1. Women’s history should not be based on normativity, historians should not prescribe this or that way of thinking for historical actors.

1.2. In addition to the feminist movement, other female movements need to be discussed as well. On the one hand, this is warranted by the hybrid nature of some movements and institutions. On the other hand (and this is of greater importance), when examining a period in women’s history in general, the *unit of analysis* should not be a particular movement or trend (e.g. feminism) but *women as a minority group*. In this case, minority group is not used in a statistical sense, since women outnumbered men in Hungary, and the proportion of women to men increased further after the First World War.

As regards social status, however, the minority female group was made up of a vast array of subgroups. To name but a few examples: day labourers in the countryside, women married to tradesmen and working in unpaid jobs, and middle-class women working or doing domestic chores. They all experienced gender inequalities differently. While the minority female group includes subgroups of females of such diverse backgrounds, publications on women’s history mainly focus on the subgroup of middle-class women. This is partly due to the fact that these women produced the most written sources, i.e. they are the most visible to the historians, and that they were active in the public sphere.

2. In line with the cultural turn in historiography, the central category of analysis should be the political rather than politics. Accordingly, cultural institutions’ activities, representing and constructing social reality, need to be examined as well.

3. In addition to institutions, active individuals (their agencies) and their groups should be studied too. The women who were active in the public sphere belonged to the group of the so-called “New Women” or “modern women”. The concepts mean basically the same, and the literature usually uses them interchangeably. Both comprised various female groups that rejected the hierarchy between men and women in different ways, sought emancipation in some area of social relationships, and/or had lifestyles that diverged from the traditional female roles in some aspects. (On the various new or modern female types and Martha H. Patterson’s approach, see the chapter “Two phenomena: the onset of emancipation and the first wave of feminism”.) Here the concept of modern woman is preferred, and sometimes used as a synonym for the concept of the New Woman (which was also known in Hungary at the turn of the century). Firstly because it is (perhaps) the more widely used concept in media history and narratives about the interwar period,<sup>31</sup> secondly because the concept of ‘modern’ highlights its westernisation aspect and the fact that it was a global phenomenon, and thirdly because this work is about the types of the modern girl such as the *garçonne*, the flapper and the vamp.<sup>32</sup>

Based on the points above, I will now discuss the politics/political change of paradigm, and the shift from the institutionalist approach to the individualist narrative.

In current historiography, the concept of politics does not mean the history of institutions and leaders. The concept also includes the distribution of the state’s resources as well as the issue of controlling these resources (e.g. whether men or women should be in majority at state universities). Politics also encompass the definition of actions and persons in the areas of power (whether the state plays an active role in establishing equality for women or it is merely a legislative

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<sup>31</sup> For example: “The figure of the ‘emancipated’ modern women became to the interwar Parisian modernity what the figure of dandy/flâneur had been to modernity in Baudelaire’s era, personifying the social, political, intellectual and technological changes that shaped the daily life in bourgeois Western urban centers. The modern woman was, above all, an image, mediated and mediated by emerging industries such as the illustrated press, pulp fiction, advertising, and cinema.” Whitney Chadwick – Tirza True Latimer, „Becoming Modern: Gender and Sexual Identity after World War I”, in: *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars*, ed. Whitney Chadwick – Tirza True Latimer, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick – New Jersey – London, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device. Collaboration, Collective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation” in: Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2008, pp. 1–7.

institution, in other words, whether the state should require universities to enrol women in all courses, or whether they let the universities decide). The process by which political outsiders, the minority groups challenging the positions of the “majority” are defined and constructed (exemplified by the discourse claiming that feminists are a threat to the nation) also falls within the political sphere. The way the majority “we-group” is constructed is also part of this sphere.

While examining the sphere of the political, we need to analyse the actions and strategies employed by the individuals and groups subject to political decisions. We also have to study how they interpreted these decisions and what the ensuing reactions were.

This is particularly important because, from 1919, political decisions did not point in one direction only.

### **The ambivalence of the post- World War I situation**

The situation of women after the war was determined by contradictory political decisions. Some female groupings strove to adapt to these decisions.

The most important political decisions were the following:

The number of women allowed to vote increased in 1919, but the Numerus Clausus legislation of 1920 aimed to reduce the number of female students at universities. In 1922, female voting rights were curbed (at the same time as male voting rights were curbed too although not to the same extent). Still, female students were granted access to dormitories, and the government called on the Faculty of Medicine of the Budapest University of Sciences (later: Pázmány Péter University of Sciences) multiple times to enrol female students too. In fact, from 1926, the Act on Female Secondary Schools and Dormitories stipulated that universities must not restrict the admission of female students, although the minister in charge of education was authorised to do so (see photo 3).



*Photo 3: Professor of Geography Jenő Cholnoky with his students at Pázmány Péter University of Sciences in 1929 (photo by Forteapan)*

As regards women's organisations, the situation was similarly ambivalent.

Feminists, pillars in women's politics, were forced to emigrate; if they did not, they were sidelined in Hungary.

Their place was taken by anti-liberal, extremely nationalist, warmongering women's organisations. The most notable of these after 1919 was the National Federation of Hungarian Women (Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége, MANSZ), which was the biggest women's organisation in the interwar period. MANSZ became the platform and institution for women's engagement: in the 1930s, it had far more members than the Feminist Association had in its heyday. MANSZ promoted certain women's rights (access to higher education, the right to work in white-collar jobs), but it defined itself as an anti-thesis to the feminist movement and ideas. MANSZ described feminism as an international idea hostile and destructive for the nation of Hungarians, yet they regarded female

emancipation as an important national issue.<sup>33</sup> There are two interpretations of this:

1. Members of the MANSZ adapted to the nationalism of mainstream power politics in order to reduce the gender disadvantages of the minority, and by using the national frame, they sought to build a consensus with regard to women's public engagement and actions. Such adaptation could be observed in the case of the Feminist Association as well. Let me illustrate this with an example from 1937: at that time, the Feminist Association demanded equal voting rights for men and women by claiming that "Hungarian women have honourably supported *the men of the nation* for a millennium" and women voters have already proven that "they are a reassuring force in the fight for *national goals*".<sup>34</sup>

2. The other possible interpretation is that the conservative and nationalist ideology of the MANSZ did not conflict with their demand for female emancipation.

In the context of nationalism, it is of relevance that certain leaders of the MANSZ, e.g. its president, the author Cécile Tormay, were anti-feminists, nationalists and anti-Semites. The organisation only admitted Christian women, and from 1941, influenced by the anti-Semitic legislation, only women of "Aryan origin".

Before 1918–1919, some of the women who were active in the MANSZ or its affiliated organisations cooperated with the Feminist Association, edited feminist publications and took part in feminist operations. In spite of that, from an institutional standpoint, the MANSZ seems to have been characterised by "the complete lack of continuity with middle-class feminism" (Szapor). Yet, the MANSZ did not pursue "diametrically opposing goals" as compared to middle-class feminism: neither the MANSZ nor its affiliated organisations were feminist, but they had feministic features.

The Feminist Association was a classical political organisation, owing first and foremost to its adherence to social criticism, which was directed at the patriarchal social relationships. In contrast, the MANSZ only took part in politics in the

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<sup>33</sup> Judit Acsády, "Diverse constructions: Feminist and Conservative women's movements and their contribution to the (re-)construction of gender relations in Hungary after the First World War", in: *Aftermaths of War: Women's Movements and Female Activists, 1918-1923*, ed. Ingrid Sharp –Matthew Stibbe, Brill, Leiden, 2011, pp. 309–331.

<sup>34</sup> Irén SIMÁNDI, *Küzdelem a nők parlamenti választójogáért Magyarországon 1848-1938* [Struggle for the Female Voting Rights], op. cit., p. 217.

early 1920s, but it was an active participant in the political sphere throughout the whole interwar period, since it was the primary institution for modern women who led lives that eschewed traditional gender relations.

Of course, the change in the situation of women needs to be examined outside the sphere of politics, too. The main areas to consider are engagement in higher education, paid work, culture and the media. The first two are linked to women’s demands in the 19th century, and the third is inseparable from the political discourse on the situation of women, and the relationship between men and women.

1.Despite the Numerus Clausus, the share of female students in universities and colleges did not drop in the 1920s, except for the autumn of 1921 and spring of 1922. In the academic year of 1918/1919, the proportion of female students in Hungary was 8.4–9.1% (in the autumn and the spring term, respectively); after the Numerus Clausus, in 1921/1922, this figure was 8.5–7.6%. In the autumn of 1925, i.e. before the previously mentioned act of 1926, this proportion rose to 10% and later, in the autumn of 1926, to 10.6%. After the act was implemented, there was a considerable increase: in the autumn of 1928 the share of female students reached 13.2%.

The proportion of female students after the First World War among ordinary and special students (in the first and second terms of academic years)<sup>35</sup>

1918/19	1920/21	1921/22	1922/23	1925/26	1928/29
8.38%	7.2%	8.49%	8.32%	10%	13.2%
9.07%	8.7%	7.59%	8.96%	9.89%	13.53%

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<sup>35</sup> A m. kir. kormány 1919–1922. évi működéséről és az ország közállapotairól szóló jelentés és statisztikai évkönyv [The Annual (1919–1922) Report and Statistical Yearbook on the Operation of the Hungarian Royal Government and the General State of the Country], Athenaeum, Budapest, 1926, p. 195; A m. kir. kormány 1923–1925. évi működéséről és az ország közállapotairól szóló jelentés és statisztikai évkönyv [The Annual (1923–1925) Report and Statistical Yearbook on the Operation of the Hungarian Royal Government and the General State of the Country], Athenaeum, Budapest, 1928, p. 255; A m. kir. kormány 1929. évi működéséről és az ország közállapotairól szóló jelentés és statisztikai évkönyv [The Annual (1929) Report and Statistical Yearbook on the Operation of the Hungarian Royal Government and the General State of the Country], Athenaeum, Budapest, 1931, p. 263.

2. Where paid work is concerned, I refer back to the discussion on periodisation. As I pointed out, the “trends in social history”, those of modernisation and employment, need to be taken into account. It is especially important to note that between the two world wars the proportion of employed women rose, among single women and married women alike. The latter is notable because it suggests that an increasing number of women felt that work was not an obligation, but something they wanted, even in marriage. It shows that work was not only for women who “did not manage to find a husband” (see the section “Mass female employment”).

3. The portrayal of women in culture and the media needs to be analysed in four points:

- Feminist serial publications were hard to keep alive both because few worked with producing them and because they had a rather small audience. Few people bought and/or read this type of publications. For example *A Nő* [The Woman] which was the official review of the Feminist Association was published once or twice a year in the 1920s and eventually it was shut down in 1927.

- Media supported by the government, which I will call “mainstream media”, filled a different role, obviously. They principally popularised the traditional gender relations, and they emphasised the maternal obligations and the domestic duties of women. Sometimes, however, they also advocated women’s access to higher education. Then again, at other times, they protested against it, using bogus arguments.

- The “popular media”, primarily influenced by foreign examples, promoted the modern woman. The popular media in Hungary included American, French and also other, for example Swedish films and novels.

- A fourth type of medium was the so-called “midcult”. It was positioned somewhere between high and popular culture, and presented and represented traditional as well as new female roles.

Both the “mainstream media” and the feminist publications were less popular than the “popular” and “midcult” media.

Based on the three points above, it can be asserted that in addition to the intentions and decisions of the state, the ensuing effects and responses need to be examined, too. With respect to higher education and employment, we can see that the government had an ambivalent attitude towards women’s rights: it curbed political rights, restricted then expanded access to higher education, and propagated women’s maternal and domestic activities. Despite this, the proportion of women in higher education did not change significantly at first, and later it increased. The share of women in paid employment among middle-class and married women also rose. Media consumption shows that media promoting the modern woman were more popular than those that did not.

## **Conclusion**

The traditional, and generally accepted, periodisation of women’s history in Hungarian historiography (contemporary historical canon) can be criticised from several perspectives. The first problem is that it is normative, in the sense that it evaluates actors’ activities, presenting them as right or wrong. This is the judgemental historiography that Marc Bloch cautioned against.<sup>36</sup> The second issue is that it focuses on the middle-class feminist movement, disregarding, for example, the conservative women’s associations and the non-political women’s organisations. It also ignores women’s engagement unrelated to organisations, therefore “everyday women”, as groups of actors, are not examined. All in all, this entails that women’s history is reduced to political history.

My third and fourth critical remarks are related. Since the normative interpretation expects a feminist viewpoint that was considered the ideal at the time, any deviation from that is seen as “wrong” or backward and thus not as important as the opinion or activities of the feminist movement. This “blindness” or blind spot also means that this approach either ranks various types and degrees of women’s transgressions,<sup>37</sup> or that it only notices certain

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<sup>36</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004, pp. 114-116.

<sup>37</sup> Transgression does not mean ‘crime’ in this discussion but violations of gender norms.

types. This is problematic because in the different groups of a given society, the acts considered transgressions varied, since the various social groups did not live in the same sociocultural time and did not follow the same gender order. However, the normative approach disregards all this and homogenises. In other words, the normative approach considers certain modernisation efforts important, while it does not even see others as modernisation achievements: it assumes that there is only one single direction that modernisation can take.<sup>38</sup>

Why is this a fundamental problem, especially from the perspective of the periodisation of women's history? Because the approach referred to here as normative (1) disregards the sociocultural asynchronies within a society, (2) it uses the only, uniform "Western modernity" as a benchmark and (3) therefore it describes and periodises the history of a female group stylised into unity (or an imagined community of women with common interest and agenda) rather than women as a minority group.

The periodisation also raises the question of how much we should concentrate on long-term changes, as opposed to short-term changes brought on by party-politics. Furthermore, the periodisation should not always use specific years (e.g. 1904, 1914 or 1918) because that almost inevitably disregards the continuous activities of various female groups, as Maureen Moynagh and Nancy Forestell pointed out in connection with the traditional periodisation of feminism.<sup>39</sup> In view of this, I believe the periods should be seen as overlapping.

The criteria on which women's history is periodised is also an important issue. I have focused on the following areas: political rights, educational attainment, self-organisation (associations), media products, employment, social rights.

The last methodological question pertains to the applicability of Western models and, put simply, it is as follows: Is the model appropriate for the democratic UK adaptable to authoritarian Hungary in the wake of the First World War? I don't believe so. The challenges women in the countries faced

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<sup>38</sup> V. ö. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, „On Alternative Modernities”, in: *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Duke University Press, Durham—London, 2001, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Maureen Moynagh – Nancy Forestell, “General Introduction: Documenting First Wave Feminism”, in: *Documenting First Wave Feminisms, Volume I: Transnational Collaborations and Crosscurrent*, ed. Maureen Moynagh – Nancy Forestell, Toronto University Press, Toronto – Buffalo – London, University of Toronto Press, 2012, p. XXIII.

were too different to make direct comparisons. Based on the above theoretical and methodological considerations, I suggest the following periodisation for 19th- and 20th-century women's history in Hungary.

1. The first period lasts from the 1860s until the turn of the century. 1867 is not the start of the period from a women's history perspective because women's associations became active even in the years that lay the groundwork for the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 (from around 1860). For example, the National Association of Hungarian Farmers' Wives, focusing on charity and the education of girls, was established in 1861. It was headed by the widow of Count Lajos Batthyány, the prime minister of the 1848 revolution martyred in 1849. Another example is the Jewish Women's Association of Pest founded in 1866.

This was partly a period when women's organisations' proliferated. On the other hand, men admitted the first women to certain white-collar professions at this time. Representative organisations of professional and cultural fields, such as the Petőfi Society, the representative national literary society (1877), and the professional association of journalists in 1906, welcomed their first female members.

2. The second period starts around the turn of the century and ends around the years following the Second World War, in the so-called coalitionary era leading up to the sovietisation of Hungary. This period was characterised in part by the "actionist mobilisation" of women's organisations to achieve new goals, and the consensus-building mobilisation which strove to secure and maintain the accomplishments. Emancipation measures by the state can also be observed. Finally, as a result of this, there were continuous changes in society, culture and mentality.

What does this mean?

In terms of *educational attainment*, the state accepted female equality in certain areas and guaranteed specific rights to women, albeit there were some setbacks. In 1895, women were first allowed to attend universities. In the early 1920s the government overcame the universities' resistance, and the share of

female students stabilised at around 13% in the country.<sup>40</sup> The first woman graduate was appointed to the public sector in 1903, and in 1941 eleven female private teachers (associate professors) were working at Hungarian universities. By the 1930s, educated, independent women performing white-collar work became accepted.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of *political rights*, the women's suffrage movement started with the emergence of the Feminist Association, which was joined by the Federation of Women's Associations in Hungary (FWAH) and the Men's League for Female Suffrage in 1910 (this was established earlier in Hungary than were similar organisations in Austria, the western part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). In the period of the republic, in 1918, women received voting rights, which were reaffirmed by the Christian socialist government at the end of 1919. Voting rights were curbed from 1922,<sup>42</sup> although this turnaround can not only be explained by gender considerations, but also by the fact that the competitive multi-party system was replaced by an authoritarian regime where women's and men's voting rights were limited. However, the number of female legislators and members in municipal local governments remained very low.

With respect to *women's associations and the media products targeting women and playing a role in the definition of femininity*, the Feminist Association was weakened in Hungary after 1919. However, the conservative or right-wing feminist women's associations organised a few actionist campaigns and many consensus-building campaigns. The number of women's associations and their membership numbers both increased sharply in the Horthy era.<sup>43</sup> New types of women's associations appeared, for example those that were especially active in international relations. This did not mean forging ties with international women's movements because the aim was to improve Hungary's foreign relations.

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<sup>40</sup> It has to be noted that women had no access to all courses. For example they were granted access to the legal profession at the end of 1918, during the republic, but only for a brief time.

<sup>41</sup> Mária Kovács M., "Ambiguities of emancipation: women and the ethnic question in Hungary", *Women's History Review*, 1996/4. p. 492.

<sup>42</sup> This setback affected women more than men.

<sup>43</sup> In 1930, there were 125 women's associations in Budapest alone, 34 of them focused on promoting women's interests.

The number of women's magazines and readers also increased.<sup>44</sup> The number of Hungarians consuming Western media products that presented alternative (modern) female lifestyles also skyrocketed, especially from the 1920s, when American movies dominated the scene.

The last two aspects to be taken into account in periodisation are *female employment and social policies*. The number of women performing paid work rose gradually in the interwar period, and, what is even more important, the proportion of women working even after marriage also climbed. An increasing share of working women believed that employment was not the “necessary evil” lasting until the wedding. This change suggests a dramatic shift in attitudes.

Some of the social policy changes that affected women during this the period are also mentioned here, because they show that the state recognised motherhood as work, thereby making women eligible for state allowances.<sup>45</sup> State employees received childcare benefits even before the First World War. This was extended to those working in industry, commerce and mining in 1939. 1918 saw the introduction of the nursing allowance and the confinement benefit, while the maternity allowance was introduced in the autumn of 1919. Their amount was raised in 1928.<sup>46</sup>

Within the period between the turn of the century and the immediate post-World War 2 years, three temporary “subperiods” can be distinguished. These include the First World War and the short post-war period (1914–1922), with major ramifications reaching well into following subperiod; the Great Depression in 1929–1934 that entailed temporary setbacks; and the period of anti-Semitic measures taken during the Second World War when the state intervened in family and love relations, treating men and women quite differently, depending on “racial criteria”: sexual relationship was forbidden between a Jewish man and a Christian woman but it was allowed between a

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<sup>44</sup> Barbara Papp – Balázs Sipos, *Modern, diplomás nők a Horthy-korban* [Modern, Graduated Woman in Horthy-era], Napvilág, Budapest, 2017. pp. 173–226.

<sup>45</sup> Gisela Bock, „Poverty and Mother's Rights in the Emerging Welfare States”, in: *A History of Women in the West V. Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Françoise Thébaud, Belknap Press, Cambridge – London, 1996. pp. 402–432.

<sup>46</sup> Béla Tomka, *Welfare in East and West: Hungarian Social Security in an International Comparison 1918–1990*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2004.

Christian man and a Jewish woman.<sup>47</sup>

In short, in the second period, the measures affecting politics, culture, society and mentality were related, they were part of the same process, and the type of the modern woman and the families living according to the new gender order became more widespread. The exact extent of this change is unknown, however, due to the lack of sources. Women's public engagement expanded almost continuously. The relationship between state and female emancipation remained ambivalent all throughout the period, and this ambivalence urged women's organisations to continuous engagement.

The third period was the prelude to state socialism usually characterised as the "nationalisation of feminism".

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<sup>47</sup>In 1941 the so-called third anti-Jewish Law "forbade 'miscegenation' through mixed marriages and mixed sexual relationships" and "the law only affected Jewish men, and not Jewish women or gentile men who were involved in mixed relations". Laura Palosuo, *Yellow Stars and Trouser Inspections: Jewish Testimonies from Hungary, 1920–1945*, Uppsala University, Uppsala, 2008. p. 84., 85. (Laura Palosuo cited the second allegation as an opinion of a lawyer.)

## Chapter III

### The interwar era

In Hungary between the two world wars, several people were intrigued by the issue of how the First World War changed the situation of women in Hungary. How much did the life of women change after 1918?

The publisher of one of the most popular weeklies of the period, *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], which provided news on theatre and cinema, and contained plays and star gossip, published Baroness Lili Hatvany's lifestyle guidebook, *Ételművészet, életművészet* [The Art of Cooking, The Art of Living] in 1937. In this book, among other things, Hatvany claimed that before 1914 "there were two types of middle-class housewives". The first was the "good housewife," who "barely spoke about anything but the joys and sorrows of running a household, the naughtiness of the maids and the insolence of the market women". The second was the "bad housewife," the "so-called bluestocking,"<sup>48</sup> who

"lived in the clouds, read the *Nyugat* literary journal [... and] boasted about never having entered the kitchen."<sup>49</sup>

These types, however, vanished after the Great War. Due to the general impoverishment of the middle class, all women, including the "bluestocking housewife," had to do domestic chores. Performing household duties became so common and natural even in the middle class that the "good housewife," who kept blathering about housekeeping and such, started to get boring, writes Lili Hatvany.

Gyula Háty, a communist author, depicted the change in a different manner. In his 1919 novel, *Színhely: Budapest. Idő: tíz év előtt* [Scene: Budapest. Time: Ten Years Ago], he portrayed the types of the emancipated and the middle-class

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<sup>48</sup> Bluestocking is a pejorative term here, referring to a woman who is only concerned about her readings, does not care about the outside world and neglects the so-called female tasks (running the household).

<sup>49</sup> Lili Hatvany, "Ételművészet" [Art of Cooking], in: *Ételművészet, életművészet* [Art of Cooking, Art of Living] ed. Lili Hatvany, Színházi Élet, Budapest, no date, pp. 5-6.

woman: the former is a short-haired, smoking woman who wants radical change in the world and the situation of women, while the latter stands for slow and bloodless transition. Háý destined both ambitions to fail, although in different ways: the revolutionary woman dies, and the aristocratic lady marries a fortune hunter. At this point, the omniscient narrator contends that: “the bloodless revolution of women – or the world – it seems, cannot be fought by one generation”. In addition to depicting the inequalities between men and women, however, the author also stated:

“[Since 1918], the feminists have become different, if they still exist at all. Those in the old sense, those who expect everything from female equality, have clearly vanished. [...] Most of them have realised that equality only guarantees equal chances at the start but not at the finish.”<sup>50</sup>

My last example is Ignotus, the founder and editor of the western-style literary journal *Nyugat*. In a 1926 discussion on the “crisis” of marriage organised by the *Nyugat*, he wrote:

“If today authors are more preoccupied with the troubles of marriage than perhaps ten years ago, it is clearly the result of the war. The war destroyed many marriages and promoted the legal, political and social liberation of one side of the couple, the woman’s, and did so at the speed of an aeroplane. Women today are fundamentally different from their mothers, and thus they feel differently about marriage. But this does not necessarily mean that marriage is not for or not desired by women, just like the troubles and flaws of marriage do not necessarily mean that it is not for or not desired by people.”<sup>51</sup>

These quotes bear testimony to the fact that certain contemporaries

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<sup>50</sup> Gyula Háý, *Színhely: Budapest. Idő: tíz év előtt* [Scene: Budapest. Time: Ten Years Ago] Genius, Budapest, no date [1929], pp. 39., 44-45., 47., 50. – At the age of 19, Háý was a low level official in the People’s Commissariat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, then he emigrated to Germany. He returned to Hungary in 1923 for six years.

<sup>51</sup> Ignotus, “A házasság ‘válsága’ “ [The Crisis of Marriage], *Nyugat*, 1926, No. 10. <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/nyugat.htm> (Last accessed: March 12, 2016.)

believed that the Great War changed the situation of women fundamentally. Bluestockings and feminists disappeared, women were emancipated, “since,” as Ignotus claimed, the war brought legal, political and social “liberation,” i.e. emancipation for them.

In this chapter, I will attempt to examine this issue. I will analyse the significance and role of the First World War in triggering and shaping the changes of women’s social and political position.

## **Two phenomena: the onset of emancipation and the first wave of feminism**

Emancipation was a long-term process, as the change in the interpersonal, or rather the social, situation of women started and became apparent in the 19th century. One of the signs of this process was when men admitted the first woman to the Petőfi Society and acknowledged that a woman can be just as good a poet and author as a man. The first feminist magazine was published in Hungary in 1871. In 1872, the National Association of Industrial Women was founded, and in 1873 two Hungarians participated at the International Women’s Congress in Vienna. In 1881, the first swimming contest for women was held in Hungary, in 1899 a female archaeologist received an honorary doctorate, and in 1912 the first female pilot passed the necessary test. The first woman was appointed as a public servant in 1903 (as an assistant physician in a national hospital), and in the same year the Social Democratic Party of Hungary demanded female emancipation in their independent programme.

As we can see from these examples, the new type of women (the so-called modern women) started to emerge in Hungary from the last third of the 19th century, and by the first two decades of the 20th century they gradually became accepted in new areas such as, beyond those already mentioned, the editorial offices of widely-read magazines and journals as well as in publishing houses. Thus, the female voice and perspective appeared in these spheres, and women were not exclusively portrayed by men, i.e. not “only” men determined what women and femininity should be like (on male dominance, see Chapter IV).

If we attempt to give an – in some respect – unified account of these various

activities (as swimming contests and the organisation of industrial women represent different walks of life), we may perhaps claim that modern women strove for equality with men in various areas (in one or more areas) of their lives. As regards their social position, they did not wish to be bound by that of their husbands, fathers or other male relatives, they wanted to determine their own position. Women in the media often described this using the notions of ‘liberated’ and ‘liberation,’ in fact, we might call these “the Hungarian versions” of the notion of emancipation.

How can we group the aforementioned spheres and activities by type? In her short study, Martha H. Patterson identifies, among others, the following “New Women”: the suffragette, the university student, the teenage girl who lives for consumption, i.e. fashion and fun (also known as the flapper), the socialist woman, the woman who sets up and is an active member of, for example, religious, cultural or charity clubs (the “club woman”), the vamp, the woman who is in command of her own body, and the masculine woman, i.e. she who does not embrace traditional femininity, and, in the eyes of those around her, performs male jobs and strives for financial and intellectual independence, and who marries of her own free will, regardless of her family’s wishes.<sup>52</sup> Based on the nature of the “setting” or relationship, these types fall into three groups.

1. The first group includes women who reform interpersonal relations, in the fields of marriage, gender relations and consumption.

2. Women in the second category modify social and political relations (the suffragette, the socialist woman and the club woman).

3. The third group is some kind of a hybrid of the previous two: it includes women who influence social relations through reforming interpersonal relations (the university student, the independent woman and the woman performing male jobs).

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<sup>52</sup>Martha H. Patterson, “Introduction”, in: *The American New Woman Revisited. A Reader, 1894–1930*, ed. Martha H. Patterson, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2008, p. 1. – Although she writes about the American situation between 1894 and 1930, these categories can also be used in other parts of the Western world, like Hungary, where these types of women appeared as a consequence of globality.



*Photo 4.:* Modern girls in Hungary in 1929: fashion could be linked to identity construction (photo by Fortepan)

I differentiate between two types of consumption. In the first case, relating to group one, I view it as the tool for self-fulfilment or identity construction (see photo 4), which is the new type of consumption (for example, the alcohol consumption of middle-class women). In the case of the third group, however, women represent the image of the social and economic position of the middle-class family through consumption. In this, wives played a major role, since, in part, they determined how to spend their husbands' earnings. The middle-class lifestyle was also a public representation, the organisation of which was partly the task of the woman, the wife.

It has to be noted that the distinction between the different types is not clear-cut, because there may have been differences in "degree," i.e. to what extent individuals exhibited the various features of the modern woman: for example, a woman may have smoked but not worn the clothes characteristic of vamps. Or, to employ an even odder example: a girl may have attended university but not

consumed alcohol. According to contemporary and “external” narratives, the latter was rather typical of flappers.<sup>53</sup>

We know that before the First World War, the modern woman became increasingly popular in Hungary, too. This manifested itself in various ways. Among others, it meant that in *certain* groups, the modern woman’s fashion became tasteful and/or the feminist ideology became accepted, or – “simply” as a result of individualisation – the question of what women wanted became open for debate. The latter is exemplified by the author Szefi Bohuniczky. In her memoirs, she made it clear that for her, being a bluestocking, i.e. immersing oneself in literature, was actually a way of getting to know alternative female behavioural patterns and/or the opportunity for intellectual freedom. It also meant that although she in an otherwise unsuccessful marriage could at least “forge a marvellous friendship” with her husband, a secondary school teacher, based on their mutual interest in modern literature. Later, in the 1920s, her passion for modern Hungarian and European literature seemed to be the source of her career as an author. And Bohuniczky – as a result of her writing – became partly independent financially and lived apart from her husband for years.<sup>54</sup>

The modern woman was free to take advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves outside of her home, i.e. in “society,” or she could try to continue living differently under unchanged conditions (like Szefi Bohuniczky in the beginning) in her marriage. This, however, required an accepting husband. The modern woman could also construct her identity from elements that were seemingly incompatible with the feminist movement, such as piety or the respect for social hierarchy, which were characteristic of many women who were committed to female equality.<sup>55</sup> At any rate, the “New Woman” lived in the public sphere and/or at home according to a new female image and identity.

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<sup>53</sup> Ernő Szép, “Pista” [Steve], in: *Az Est hármaskönyve, 1935: Asszony, szépség, szeretet* [Tripartitum of ‘The Evening’ 1935: Woman, Beauty, Love], *Az Est*, Budapest, 1935, p. 125. – ‘Az Est’ (‘The Evening’) was one of the most popular newspapers of Budapest. It belonged to The Evening Holding Company. This concern owned and ran three dailies in interwar Hungary. Their subscribers received every year a yearbook / almanac titled *Triple Book of ‘The Evening’*. The volumes of these yearbooks were probably the most widely read books of the era.

<sup>54</sup> Szefi Bohuniczky, *Otthonok és vendégek* [Homes and Guests], Szépirodalmi, Budapest, 1989, p. 193., 201–202., 384., 424.

<sup>55</sup> Katalin Sárjai Szabó, “Normakövető női emancipáció. A konzervatív nőmozgalom Magyarországon a 19. század végén, 20. század elején” [Norm Abiding Female Emancipation: The Conservative Women’s Movement in Hungary at the Turn of the Century], *Replika*, 2014, No. 1–2, pp. 85–106.

This type of “new-woman” (sic!) was portrayed by Margit Kaffka in an article she wrote in the last year before the war.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, the emancipated modern woman may or may not have been a feminist.

The First World War accelerated the spread of the various types of the modern woman. On the so-called home front women were mobilised in the interest of victory, and they had more tasks and opportunities due to the absence of men. This made possible, out of necessity, women taking the vacant positions of men who had been conscripted. Positions became available in all sorts of workplaces; women got jobs as teachers, and many who had previously been shut out from universities could now attend them.<sup>57</sup> Women also became more active in politics.<sup>58</sup> It has to be emphasised, however, that the Great War “only” sped up or intensified a process that had been going on for decades, and this may be worth considering as a part of a bigger subject: democratisation. After the hostilities ended, as a reward for their efforts during the war, men and women received voting rights and became equal members in the nation – according to the contemporary interpretation of this change. The demand for women’s suffrage (usually narrated as a struggle for voting rights) started before 1914.

### **Attempts at transition from war to peace**

Directly after the world war, *the first (democratic) attempt at transition from war to peace* embraced the idea of involving the masses in politics and thereby maintaining, institutionalising or “channelling” their activity and it entailed an expansion of women’s engagement and reinforced the idea of the modern woman. In the summer of 1918, parliament voted down women’s suffrage. However, the People’s Act I of the Hungarian People’s Republic – that

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<sup>56</sup> Margit Kaffka, “Az asszony ügye” [The Woman’s Cause], in: Margit Kaffka, *Az élet útján: versek, cikkek, naplójegyzetek* [The Road of Life: Poems, Articles, Diary Notes], ed. György Bodnár, <http://mek.oszk.hu/05400/05475/05475.htm#161> (Last accessed: October 30, 2014.)

<sup>57</sup> Katalin Szegvári N., *A nők művelődési jogaiért folytatott harc hazánkban (1777–1918)* [The Struggle for Female Education Rights in Hungary, 1777–1918], *Közgazdasági és Jogi*, Budapest 1969, pp. 389-391.

<sup>58</sup> For example, the number of female members of the social democratic trade unions increased by 6,000 to 131,000 between 1913 and 1918. (Balázs Sipos, “Adattár” [Statistics], in: *A magyar szociáldemokrácia kézikönyve* [Handbook of Hungarian Social Democracy] ed. Lajos Varga, Napvilág, Budapest, 1999, p. 510.)

functioned between the autumn of 1918 and March 1919 – guaranteed voting rights to women, even though male and female suffrage was not equal and no elections were held under this law. This political system also bestowed the same educational rights on women as on men; women were allowed to enrol in legal and engineering classes, and female students were granted the same student status as men.

The next, and for a long time last significant stage of the expansion of women’s rights, was the voting rights decree by István Friedrich that guaranteed universal, equal voting rights to a further 1.7 million women, and which promised elections held by secret ballot.

The democratisation of politics, which involved the mobilisation of women, ended in late 1919. It was followed by the *second attempt at transition from war to peace* with the establishment of a conservative and nationalist authoritarian political system. At this time, the aforementioned trend changed, and the so-called demobilisation was launched. As a part of this, only 1.6 million men and 1.4 million women were allowed to vote in the elections of January 1920, because the rest (400,000 men and 300,000 women) were no longer included in the electoral register. By 1922, when the next elections were held, a further 500,000 women got disenfranchised due to a new decree regulating voting rights.<sup>59</sup>

The so-called Numerus Clausus Act (Act XXV of 1920) contributed to the demobilisation of women as well. Thus, in contrast to the policies of the people’s democratic regime, the nationalist authoritarian state did not regard it to be its obligation to guarantee gender equality. Indeed, the primary objective of the proponents of the Numerus Clausus was originally to exclude women, not Jews.<sup>60</sup>

It has to be added that the feminist movement was marginalised because its detractors stressed its international origin and the “sinful” role it played in the revolution of 1918 (see Chapter 1). An example of someone holding such views

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<sup>59</sup> Irén Simándi, *Küzdelem a nők parlamenti választójogáért Magyarországon 1848–1938* [Struggle for the Female Voting Rights] op. cit. 140., 150., 157.

<sup>60</sup> Mária Kovács M., *Törvénytől sújtva. A numerus clausus Magyarországon, 1920–1945* [Down by Law: the Numerus Clausus in Hungary, 1920-1945], Napvilág, Budapest, 2012, pp. 64-65.

is Cécile Tormay, who counted feminists among the enemies of the nation in *An Outlaw's Diary*, one of the widely-read origin myths of the Horthy period.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, it seems that the second attempt at transition from the world war to peace brought significant long-term changes. In the course of these changes, politicians steering the transition regarded the democratisation of politics, the spread of new female role models, and even feminism and emancipation before 1914 as signs of crisis. They believed that the reason for the lost war and the Treaty of Trianon (the peace accord after the Great War), was not the military defeat but the country's political and cultural decline that had been going on for decades before the war. In their view, furthermore, the decline was reflected in and propelled by the rejection of national feelings and values. Feminism and the idea of female equality, on the other hand, were regarded to have been rooted in internationalism and, therefore, their emergence before 1914 was also seen as part and parcel of the decline.

But how much did the anti-feminist and anti-emancipation policy influence the situation of women? This must be a central question in the study of interwar women's history in Hungary.

### **Emancipation continues after the anti-feminist turn**

After World War I, the newfound engagement by women, the new opportunities and the new female role models transformed the lives and informed the goals of even such people who did not support the so-called progressive trends and movements, like feminism, and who did not engage in politics. These people received continuous reinforcement in the 1920s: translations of foreign popular novels, such as *I Won't Be Home For Dinner* by the Swedish author Alice Lyttkens, contributed to the popularisation of the working woman-type, and lifestyle guidebooks also discussed the new gender relations within the family. An example of the latter was *The Book of Marriage* – edited by the well-known German essayist of the age, Hermann Keyserling, which examined, among other topics, the crisis of marriage. Challenges to marriage constituted the focal point of many publications between the two world wars in Hungary

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<sup>61</sup> See Chapter I.

as well, side by side with the effects of the Great War. The decline in morals and subsequent laws that enabled divorce were seen as the primary reasons for the crisis of the institution of marriage. In contrast, Marta Karlweis, one of the authors featured in Keyserling's book, claimed that marriage becomes problematic not because of the Great War and the concomitant moral decay. According to her, the crisis ensues as and when the woman no longer wants to be "treated as a minor" anymore, which "instinctively" prompts the man to "deny her the right to liberation," or he becomes insecure alongside a woman who "seeks light" and asks: "Who guarantees [...] that she will remain faithful after her transformation?"<sup>62</sup> In this context, one is reminded of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a key play for the feminist movement as a literary portrayal and an indirect model, and parts of the memoirs by Szefi Bohuniczky, in which the author discusses her "coming of age" in marriage. Both works illustrate the challenges to traditional views of marriage and gender roles.

The emergence of the modern woman, with its many types, was more widespread than progressive feminism. This was a general phenomenon in post-war Europe, but it was far from onefold. Along with the growing number of women working and studying, were women who wished to work and study, but who were ushered back to the family to fill traditional female roles once more. This was the so-called cultural demobilisation. Yet, women who identified with the modern woman, resisted this effort. A treatise by Allison Scardino Belzer, for example, shows that in certain respects, similar changes were taking place in Italy. Alongside the maternal figure of the "donna brava," the politically engaged "donna italiana" appeared during the First World War, followed by the economically independent "donna nuova" in the first years of peace. Despite similarities, fascism made the situation different from the general Western European setting in the 1920s. This was the time when the bellicose and maternal "donna fascista" emerged as a role model for women and became increasingly popular. This type of woman put meeting the obligations

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<sup>62</sup>Marta Karlweis, "A házasság és az átalakult nő" [Marriage and the Transformation of the Woman], in: *Könyv a házasságról. A házasság értelmezése kiváló kortársak felfogása szerint* [The Book Of Marriage: A New Interpretation By Twenty-Four Leaders Of Contemporary Thought], ed. Hermann Keyserling, Nova Irodalmi Intézet, Budapest, 1927, p. 179., 180., 181.

towards the state first and towards the family second. In this context, however, it is unclear whether this was an ideal of a modern woman active in public life or rather a return to the situation before the war by using new slogans and expanding the meaning of the 19th century “good woman” with a marked national aspect and putting her into a new frame. Depending on what one focuses on, this can be regarded either as the preservation of mobilisation (in the literature, this is called remobilisation) or as a unique strategy of demobilisation. One may either attach primary importance to the active roles available to the “fascist woman” in the public sphere or to the fact that she was, in fact, not active in national politics because she was assigned a mere reproductive role in the life of the nation, since her duties towards the state were reduced to giving life to children and raising them.<sup>63</sup>

Another possible take on all this is that although the role of women in maintaining the nation was giving birth to and raising children, this was not a passive task limited to private life. After all these women “protected the borders of the nation culturally and symbolically” in these roles. Childbirth and raising children became a political issue, whereby women’s role appear to have received a national-political nature. Yet, I believe that this was merely the appearance. There were no real new roles for women, only a new political framework for their traditional duties: a new identity linked to a pre-existing role.

In addition to the above, yet another alternative interpretation seems plausible. The war had changed people’s lives forever, and the anxiety that followed was what created the need for new types of modern women. According to this approach, there was no way to return to the prewar times due to objective (structural) and subjective (attitude-related and cultural) reasons. This was so because, as a result of the human losses, the male population constituted a demographic minority and because the total war shook the foundations of patriarchal hegemony.

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<sup>63</sup> Allison Scardino Belzer, *Women and the Great War. Femininity under Fire in Italy*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010; Linda Reeder, “Women and the Great War. Femininity under Fire in Italy”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 2012, No. 3, p. 993.

## **Conservative feminists and the political system**

Until now I have argued against the notion of the low ebb of feminism by pointing out that the intensity of women's engagement aimed at emancipation did not decrease during the Horthy era, and that the definition of femininity was a political question. Women active in the public sphere were apparently successful in the latter discourse, and what is more, foreign media (movies, books, plays, musicals) supported them in this definitional struggle.

The notion of the low ebb of feminism is also problematic because it conceals that putting a stop to the expansion of women's rights and curbing those rights affected other social groups as well, i.e. it was part of a more comprehensive process of rightist-conservative turn. The purpose of this demobilisation was to guide society, which had been "shaken up" by the world war, back to a "normal," everyday life. Thus, men and women who had suddenly become active were again "guided" to withdraw from public life within the frameworks of the authoritarian political system.

Proponents of female emancipation both adapted to this political situation and – as I have already discussed – contributed to the nationalist discourse.

We have seen that there were modern women who concurred with the conservative discourse, and that there were those who strove to link and consolidate conservative principles and emancipation. I will now briefly write about three such conservative and governing-party members of parliament and I will demonstrate how the anti-democratic system, nationalism and female emancipation were combined in their case.

The three MPs were Baroness Fülöpné Orosdy, née Baroness Mária Herzog (1931–1935), Baroness Lilla Melczer (1932–1944) and Mrs. Ákos Toperczer (1935–1939). They all supported the governing party when they were elected, although Fülöpné Orosdy only did so for a few months. All three got into politics through their charity work, and all three had some kind of political ties through their fathers, husbands, or other male relatives. The father of Ákosné Toperczer was a lord lieutenant [főispán] and MP, her husband and brother-in-law were undersecretaries of state. The husband of Fülöpné Orosdy was an MP and later a member of the House of Magnates. (Her husband's and her

own families converted to Christianity and they received a barony in the first decade of the 20th century.) Lilla Melczer's grandfather was a deputy lieutenant [alispán], and both her uncle and her son-in-law were MPs. Orosdyné was a member of the Hungarian Red Cross' directorate during the First World War; she managed a military hospital and she set up a convalescence home at her country estate that functioned even during the war. She created a foundation for disabled servicemen, and she was active in Catholic public life. Toperczerné was a member of the Party Alliance of Hungarian Christian Women, and a board member of the Hungarian Association Against Girl Trafficking. According to the contemporary press and recollections, Melczer "helped everyone in need and poverty".<sup>64</sup>

Orosdy and Melczer got a taste of the operation of the political system, or more precisely the electoral system, i.e. how election violence and fraud worked. As candidates, they both supported the governing party, although they campaigned against the official government candidate. Fülöpné Orosdy was first beaten by the official candidate of the bigger governing party, but, after she vetoed the results, the governmental candidate's fraudulent practices were revealed, and his mandate was revoked. At the next election, however, she was not this lucky, and she lost her mandate as a result of fraud by the government.

The chief judge [főszolgabíró] of the county tried to force Lilla Melczer to withdraw from the election, and accused her of "circulating illegal election leaflets" based on an official report forged by himself. Melczer was first beaten as a consequence of fraudulent practices but in the end she received the mandate after voters vetoed the results and the official winner decided to step down instead.<sup>65</sup>

During their time in the House of Representatives, they all gave speeches in support of women's political equality. In 1933 Melczer and Orosdy complained that women in municipal assemblies, who were among the greatest taxpayers

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<sup>64</sup> Balázs Sipos, „Konzervatív új nők – konzervatív feministák a Horthy-korban” [Conservative New Women – Conservative Feminists in the Horthy Period], in: Társadalom – demokrácia – szolidaritás: Tanulmánykötet Kozáry Andrea tiszteletére [Society – Democracy – Solidarity: Collection of Studies in Honour of Andrea Kozáry], ed. Katalin Molnár, L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2013, pp. 118–128.

<sup>65</sup> „Melczer Lillát egyhangúlag országgyűlési képviselővé választották” [Lilla Melczer Was Elected as Member of Parliament unanimously], Pesti Hírlap [Pest Gazette], 1932. november 29.

in the county, could only exercise their membership rights through their male deputies, i.e. they needed a male political guardian. They both argued in vain: in accordance with the applicable legislation, women continued to be treated as minors in politics.<sup>66</sup>

In 1937 Ákosné Toperczer urged the abolishment of discrimination between the voting rights of men and women. On the intellectual front, women had caught up with men, she said, therefore nothing warranted that their voting rights were subject to different conditions. Of course, this did not change anything either.<sup>67</sup>

Ákosné Toperczer also attempted to convince the minister for justice in 1936 that, within the framework of the lawyer reform, legislation should ensure that women could become lawyers (this was only a theoretical problem, since women could not attend legal courses at universities, except for those who started their studies in 1918-19). We know of Toperczer's attempt because the minister himself declared that he was lucky to have "discussed the issue with Ákosné Toperczer, who used her well-known persuasive power." Then he added:

"I feel the deepest possible respect, nay, devotion towards the female sex [...] Please believe me when I say that no matter how much we talk, the difference between the male and female sex cannot be abolished [...] And I would not wish to do so. As regards equality [...] our ancient Hungarian laws and our present legal system guarantee women several rights that men do not enjoy."

At this point Ákosné Toperczer interrupted: "True! I admit that." However, Lázár continued his speech in a repudiating and patronising manner: "I refuse to *disrupt* the legal institutions established in the interest of women *for the*

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<sup>66</sup> Az 1931. évi július hó 18-ára hirdetett Országgyűlés nyomtatványai. Képviselőházi napló [Printed material of the National Assembly convened on July 18, 1931. Minutes of the House of Representatives], Vol. XIII, Athenaeum, Budapest, 1932, p. 417 (March 1, 1933); Ibid., pp. 482–483 (March 2, 1933).

<sup>67</sup> Az 1935. évi április hó 27-ére hirdetett Országgyűlés nyomtatványai. Képviselőházi napló [Printed material of the National Assembly convened on April 27, 1935. Minutes of the House of Representatives], Vol. XII, Athenaeum, Budapest, 1937, pp. 587–590 (May 5, 1937).

*sake of a theoretical emancipation.*” The issue of women’s rights was “not emancipation anymore,” he claimed, but an aberration.<sup>68</sup> Needless to say, he rejected Toperczer’s proposal.

It was not uncommon to speak in such a condescending tone to the three female MPs in the House of Representatives, although they held the same world view (they were conservative and governing-party MPs) as their male counterparts.

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The war and the emergence and popularisation of the modern woman induced changes in gender relations that were, in many ways, irreversible. Proponents of the demobilisation of women were not able to address this issue with traditional arguments or ways of portrayal. In my opinion they did not achieve their goal – demobilisation in order to reverse development and return to a society they had known before the war, even before the birth of the feminist movement. I believe that in Hungary, at least, they did not. In the following chapters I will endeavour to demonstrate that the fight for female equality continued after 1920. The main question of what women should be like remained unresolved, and the conflict continued to be centred around the definition of femininity (see photo 5).

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Vol. X, Athenaeum, Budapest, 1936, p. 380 (December 4, 1936).



*Photo 5: Woman riding a motorcycle in 1928: although there were only a few female motorcyclists in Hungary their photographic presence in popular media was all the more conspicuous (Photo by Fortepan)*

## **Summary**

According to contemporary men and women, women were more emancipated after the war and in the interwar period, than before 1914. As we have seen, the number of women performing paid work increased even in social groups where this had not been typical prior to the world war, because at that time working women were rare and to be pitied. Women increasingly acquired secondary school diplomas; many attended universities, and went on to have scientific careers. Women's public and political engagement also became more pronounced. Voting rights were extended to women, and five female MPs were elected in the interwar period. Many women experienced and interpreted this as living as feminists, in line with the earlier goals of the feminist movement. But they had no time to be feminists and take part in "feminist organisations"

precisely because of emancipation: the mounting duties of paid work kept them too busy.<sup>69</sup> Such self-portrayal suggests ambivalence: they equalled female emancipation and the feminist movement (due to their “origin”), and at the same time they also distinguished the two. Distinguishing between female emancipation and feminism was important because it enabled certain conservative, liberal and right-wing men and women to promote female emancipation in the authoritarian and nationalist political regime without being branded “internationalist feminists”. This allowed them to avoid being portrayed by the proponents of the traditional gender order as threats to the “we-group” and being classified into the “they-group”.

In short, the war and the emergence and popularisation of the New Woman induced changes in the gender order that proponents of the demobilisation of women, those who could only accept the traditional gender order, were unable to address with traditional means. Significant progress was made in terms of female emancipation relative to the summer of 1918. Yet various state and non-state actors attempted to undermine the achievements (from time to time), which perpetuated the struggle for women’s rights in this age. Thus, the policy of demobilising women was a failure. Besides the engagement in politics and associations, the media also played a key role in this process. The following chapters will present this in greater detail.

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<sup>69</sup> See for example: Erzsébet Simán, „Nem vagyok feminista” [I’m not a feminist], *A Nő* [The Woman], 27 December 1926, p. 17. (*A Nő* was published by the Feminist Association.)



## Chapter IV

# Portrayals of women and femininity

How were the types of modern woman portrayed in the Hungarian media? Which type of woman was shown as exemplary? Could the strengthening of nationalism be perceived and if so, in what ways? I will now attempt to answer these questions. First, I will show that it was mostly men who provided answers to them, and I will also give short examples. Second, I will analyse the portrayals in the most popular encyclopaedias of the era. Third, I will present the outlets of the mainstream media and of the midcult.<sup>70</sup> In connection with the latter, I will point out certain social history aspects of the paid employment of women.

It needs to be established that women were primarily portrayed by men because among authors, journalists, scientists and those working in the theatre and films men far outnumbered women. The first six volumes of *Magyar írók élete és munkái* [The Life and Works of Hungarian Authors], an encyclopaedia by the famous littérateur Pál Gulyás, listed 1443 women, which means that the proportion of women among writers and poets was 8.1%.<sup>71</sup> The 1923 almanac of the greatest press conglomerate in the period (*Est Hármaskönyve* [The Tripartitum of 'The Evening'], 1923) included 128 authors and poets, of whom only 11 were women.<sup>72</sup> These sources are, however, subjective and merely the portrayals of authors. About journalists, however, census data is available as well, according to which the proportion of women in 1920 and 1930 was 3–4%.

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<sup>70</sup> Middle culture or 'midcult' is an 'intermediate form' between mass culture and high culture. It "has the essential qualities of Masscult [...] but it decently covers them with a cultural fig leaf [...] It pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them." Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult", in: Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1983, p. 37.

<sup>71</sup> Az 1930 évi népszámlálás VI. Rész [Census of 1930, Vol. 6], Magyar Királyi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1941, p. 164; Magyar Asszonyok Lexikona [Encyclopaedia of Hungarian Women] Ed. Margit Bozzay, Budapest, 1931. The first six volumes of *The Life and Works of Hungarian Authors* published between 1939 and 1944 had statistics about the authors and poets receiving entries.

<sup>72</sup> Lengyel, András, "A magyar írói rend összetétele 1922-ben. Kísérlet egy forrástípus irodalomszociológiai elemzésére" [The Composition of the Hungarian Writers' Estate in 1922: An Attempt at the Analysis of a Special Type of Source as An Exercise in Sociology of Literature], in: András Lengyel, *Útkeresések. Irodalom- és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok* [Orientations: Essays in the History of Literature and Culture], Magvető, Budapest, 1990, pp. 13–33. – According to *The Tripartitum of 'Az Est'*, the most important female writer was Lola Réz (Mrs. Kosáry). It also mentioned Judit Beczássy, Margit Vészi, Margit Bethlen, Renée Erdős, Sári Ferenci, Lili Hatvany, Alice Havas, Sarolta Lányi, Szikra (Mrs. Sándor Teleki), Júlia Kende, Zseni Vámai.

Some authors openly declared the fact that female writers were considered inferior to male writers and that there were fewer women writers. One of the best-known female authors of the interwar period, Sophie Török, described the result of the dominance of men as follows:

“In literature, both men and women were depicted by men, and in most cases women, accepting the male aspects, did not talk about themselves but imitated the woman prescribed by literary works.”<sup>73</sup>

For example Cecil Pál Bognár, a Benedictine monk and psychology professor, wrote in 1941 that men were more concerned with the female soul than women with the male soul. He believed that “general psychology [...] was male psychology” because it was chiefly written by men. In works about the soul of women one frequently “reads [...] that there is something mystical about the female soul and that women’s thinking is not logical”. In the opinion of Cecil Bognár, the reason for such remarks is that “if one examines the female soul through the eyes of a man, and if the emotional characteristics of women are measured against those of men, they seem peculiar indeed”.<sup>74</sup> He writes that: “When [others are] talking about a masculine soul, it also involves a value judgement.”

## **The qualities of men and women**

Masculine and feminine characteristics were principally defined by men. According to Cecil Pál Bognár, masculine qualities include a good sense of humour, sticking to one’s principles and being matter-of-fact. Men also hold moderate views in politics, they regard knowledge as important in and of itself and like to boast with it, and they prefer having their power acknowledged rather than exercising it. In contrast, women give good advice, they are more empathetic and persevering. They want to feel their power rather than having it

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<sup>73</sup> Sophie Török, „Kafka Margit halálának 20. Évfordulójára” [On the 20th Anniversary of Margit Kafka’s Death], *Magyar Női Szemle* [Hungarian Women’s Review], 1939, September–October, p. 163.

<sup>74</sup> Cecil Bognár, *Mi és mások, A mindennapi élet lélektana* [We and Others: Psychology of Everyday Life], Magyar Királyi Egyetemi Nyomda, Budapest, no date, p. 261.

acknowledged, they prefer radical politics and they are motivated in acquiring knowledge by the desire to earn others' appreciation. Success is important for both sexes, however, women have "much more constrained means" for this than men, because the real duties of women are being a spouse and a mother. Yet, according to Bognár's initial thesis, "there are a large number of shared qualities in men and women," although people often "overlook the [...] person" in the female soul "because of the woman". In his view, the differences are simply the different manifestations of the general human qualities, the reason for which is only partly biological because "they may be due to external circumstances".

József Halasy-Nagy, a philosophy professor, portrayed differences in another way: the "champions of female emancipation [...] only like to know about the 'person' of abstract humanism instead of the concrete individual who is either a man or a woman," although "the differences in intellect are just as obvious as the physical ones". According to his categorisation, men are strong, dynamic, active, creative, belligerent, and prone to loneliness; they are "their own masters and they are ruling over their surroundings". Their character is also more fragile and they handle suffering less well than women. Women are weak, more conservative, passive and accommodating, social creatures who are "unhappy if they do not find someone whom they can join and serve with their entire being". They are under no circumstances selfish, and they can handle suffering and hardships better, i.e. they are heroic in another manner than men. According to Halasy-Nagy, men and women are two halves who can only make a whole through love. In his opinion, the fact that men and women are not equal in marriage is due to the wish of the female soul.<sup>75</sup>

The portrayals of women and constructions of femininity were, of course, also influenced by whether the author cultivated the well-known essentialist attitude towards women. According to this approach, women have a unique emotional structure due to biology, they are guided by their feelings and thus

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.; József Halasy-Nagy, *Ember és világ* [Human Being and World], Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, Budapest, no date, pp. 113–114; Péter Varga, "Az ember problémája Halasy-Nagy József gondolkodásában" [The Problem of Human Being in József Halasy-Nagy's Thought], *Valóság* [Reality], 2002, No. 4. pp. 53–54; Sándor Karikó, „Halasy-Nagy József filozófiai örökségéhez” [On the Philosophical Legacy of József Halasy-Nagy], *Ibid.*, p. 75.

unable to think rationally or write logically, and they are generally unable to create a structure. “This stronger tone of feelings hinder women in their creative pursuits in various respects,” wrote Jób Bánhegyi, a literary historian, in 1939. According to Bánhegyi, women need to fulfil roles fit for their biological features, and if they want to be “creative women,” they need to choose the art and genres “biologically” suitable for them. They are, for example, unable to become architects, sculptors, authors, playwrights or composers; they can, however, become musicians and poets. They can pursue other forms of art, as well, but they cannot excel in any of the above listed fields.<sup>76</sup>

Cecil Pál Bognár gives a similar account of female skills in his previously cited book. On the equality of men and women, he asserts that “we find talented creative women in all walks of life,” in fact: “even in mathematics.” However, “great creative talents are rare among women”. In order to support the latter “fact,” Bognár cites two opinions:

“Guardians of female intellectual equality say to this that women do not lag behind men with respect to talent. They are “at a disadvantage due to their situation,” because “much fewer of them can entirely dedicate themselves to science or arts, [and] nowadays their upbringing also works against this”.

Still, Bognár contends that

“women also lag far behind men in fields where they can devote themselves just as much as men. Rubinstein notes that more women learn to play music and sing than men, yet, there is not even one excellent female composer, and they have not composed any love songs or cradle songs.”<sup>77</sup>

The question of whether there are any differences between creative men and women, and if so, what these are, may have been linked to the attitude

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<sup>76</sup> Jób Bánhegyi, *Magyar nőírók* [Hungarian Female Writers], Szent István Társulat [St. Stephen Association], Budapest, 1939, pp. 12–15. – The St. Stephen Association was founded in 1848 and it is the Publishing House of the Holy See.

<sup>77</sup> Cecil Bognár, *op. cit.*, pp. 264–265.

towards the essentialist approach but it may also have emerged independently. There are many examples of male authors perceiving differences between male and female writers with regard to their intellectual capacities, in which male authors were considered better than female ones. Antal Szerb, an author, characterised the life's work of Margit Kaffka, the most prominent female author in the first half of the 20th century, as follows: "Just like in the case of most female authors, one senses that she makes up few stories, most of them have indeed happened."<sup>78</sup> Similarly, in his aforementioned book, Cecil Pál Bognár attributed abstract thinking to men and practical thinking to women. According to philosophy professor József Halasy-Nagy, men have a more "vivid imagination" and "they are not as bound to reality as women," who "live more in nature," in the "concrete reality". Author and politician Gyula Pekár also portrayed abstraction as "masculine" and ascribed to women a lively imagination, while also being bad at abstraction.<sup>79</sup>

### **The portrayal of women's issues and feminism**

According to the entry "women's issues" in the third volume of the *Katolikus Lexikon* [Catholic Encyclopaedia] published in 1932, the woman is an assistant to the man due to biological reasons and her special qualities, and "she is to some extent socially inferior to him (the head of the family). Yet, as a *similar*, fully-fledged human, the woman is also a moral character". This dual situation of the woman is misunderstood in two ways: by either degrading her or, on the contrary, in a "feminist fashion". The "modern women's movement" (apart from protecting women) endeavours to achieve equality for women in culture and politics (see photo 6), while disregarding women's duties and skills. Its misguided goal is to engage women in the same mental efforts as men, and it considers it right that women perform paid jobs, although this is not only detrimental to men but also to women.

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<sup>78</sup> Antal Szerb, *Magyar irodalom története* [History of Hungarian Literature], Magvető, Budapest, 1992, p. 475.

<sup>79</sup> Cecil Bognár, *op. cit.*, pp. 265-273; József Halasy-Nagy, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114; Gyula Pekár, *A nő szabadságharca* [The Freedom Fight of Woman], Singer és Wolfner, Budapest, no date, p. 86.

Tasks outside the family are to be entrusted (“mainly”) to unmarried women (here only charity, educational and religious tasks are mentioned).<sup>80</sup>



*Photo 6:* Shindig of the Foederatio Americana: this Roman Catholic federation of male and female students existed between 1921 and 1946 (photo by Fortepan)

Under the entry “Woman” in the 13th volume of *Tolnai Új Világlexikona* [Tolnai’s New World Encyclopaedia] published in 1928, we can read the following: “The struggle for *making* women equal to men has recently intensified,” but this goal is unattainable since “sexual and social differences based on the laws of nature can never be abolished, which should have legal effects as well”. On the issue of the women’s movement, however, one can read that “it seeks to have the special requirements of women acknowledged in social life,” and to achieve equal political rights and full access to higher education, equal pay for equal work, access to well-paid careers and equal

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<sup>80</sup> Katolikus Lexikon [Catholic Encyclopaedia], Vol. III., Kultúra, Budapest, 1932.

rights in marriage. The “appropriateness” of these demands and the equality of the two sexes are demonstrated by the successes of women working in scientific jobs who proved that “the female sex has fairly swiftly made up for the disadvantages caused by the mental tutelage they endured for a millennium”. This is the same assertion that, according to Cecil Bognár, was used by “the guardians of female intellectual equality”.

The definition of feminism in the fifth volume of *Tolnai Új Világlexikona* was characterised by a duality:

“... the approach that regards men and women as enjoying equal rights and being of equal value. Its scientific basis: due to the overwhelming majority of the identical *human* qualities present in both sexes, the smaller number of differing *sexual* characteristics cannot inhibit women from performing full-scale human work.”

“In the interest of the life harmony of humanity” it is also important that “the world view of women be acknowledged in all walks of life in a society.”<sup>81</sup>

A similar duality characterises the description of women in the 19–20th volumes of *Új Idők Lexikona* [The Encyclopaedia of New Times]. According to this book, women’s “physiological purpose is undoubtedly maternity, which is proven by [apart from women’s physical characteristics] their special intellectual and emotional disposition”. The encyclopaedia states that according to the Christian world view, men and women are equal in value but not in rights. From a public law perspective, women were disadvantaged in Hungary, because they did not enjoy equality with men in terms of voting rights, employment and access to education. The aim of the women’s movement was to abolish the differences resulting from precisely these traditions, i.e. to achieve “total equality”. “Women fighting for women’s rights and against traditions, the so-called feminists, were often subject to ridicule, but most of their demands

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<sup>81</sup> Tolnai Új Világlexikona [Tolnai’s New World Encyclopaedia] Vol. V., Tolnai Nyomdai Műintézet, Budapest, 1926; Op. cit., Vol. XIII. 1928. (Emphasis added.)

were met,” states the entry on feminism.<sup>82</sup> The *Pesti Hírlap Lexikona* [The Encyclopaedia of Pesti Hírlap] presents feminism in a similar fashion: the goal of the “women’s movement originating from England” was to “achieve equality for the female sex, to abolish, above all, artificial constraints that inhibit women in their rights, career choice and public activities”.<sup>83</sup>

These representations about *women*, *women’s movement*, and *feminism* were published in encyclopaedias that were popular in the era and produced for middle-class readers. The impact of these, and later the portrayals of women in cookbooks, was obviously greater than the writings of Bognár, Halasy-Nagy or Pekár. In this regard it is important to note that (apart from the portrayal of women in the *Katolikus Lexikon*) all the above-mentioned books characterised the situation of women by inequalities. The so-called Neo-Biedermeier portrayal, repudiating the need for equality, was far from exclusive. In fact, there are examples of a unique mixture of arguments used by the feminist/feministic and the anti-feminist approaches, a hybrid based on an interpretation of feminism as a form of “masculinism”.

Finally, the social democratic representation of the issue has to be mentioned. According to its entry on feminism, the encyclopaedia published by the Social Democratic Party of Hungary claimed feminism was progressive because “its reform struggle undertakes to change one of the fundamentals of today’s world, the present power relations between the sexes”. But it hastens to add, on the other hand, that feminism is a middle-class movement that fails to reach beyond “the boundary of middle-class society”.<sup>84</sup> Based on this view, *Népszava*, the social democratic daily, explained the reason for the subdued activities of feminist movements after the world war as follows:

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<sup>82</sup> Új Idők Lexikona [The Encyclopaedia of New Times], Vol. 9-10., Singer és Wolfner, Budapest, 1938; Op.cit., Vol. 19–20., 1941. – Új Idők (New Times) was the most popular literary journal for women. From the point of view of female emancipation it was a hybrid media outlet. See the chapter “The hybrid female periodical: Új Idők”.

<sup>83</sup> A Pesti Hírlap Lexikona. A mindennapi élet és az összes ismeretek kézikönyve egy kötetben [The Encyclopaedia of Pesti Hírlap: The Handbook of Everyday Life and Everything to Know in One Volume], Pesti Hírlap, Budapest, 1937. – The Pesti Hírlap [Pest Gazette] was a liberal-conservative and one of the most popular nationwide daily between 1878 and 1944.

<sup>84</sup> Társadalmi Lexikon [Social Encyclopaedia], ed. József Madzsar, Népszava, Budapest, 1928. (The Népszava Publishing House belonged to the Social Democratic Party.)

“Feminism advocated *universal female emancipation*. By virtue of its middle-class nature, however, it only achieved partial liberation for *women of the middle class*. With this, it more or less *fulfilled its purpose*, and that is why it abated. *Today, only socialism* fights for universal emancipation. Now, *true feminism means socialism*.”<sup>85</sup>

In interwar Hungary these representations existed alongside each other. We do not have the sources required to assess the contemporary reception among the readers of these texts. But we know that people at the receiving end did not read and understood them in the same manner at the time – in other words, contemporary recipients did not necessarily give the so-called preferred reading<sup>86</sup> to these texts. It is uncertain how the text in the *Katolikus Lexikon* on the “woman imprisoned in the family” (on traditional gender norms) was received by upper middle-class women who were in salaried employment during the First World War, worked as a voluntary nurses, or took an active role in a political movement. In 1919 many middle-class women took part in some kind of counter-revolutionary activities (or their actions during or after the Hungarian Soviet Republic were deemed counter-revolutionary), or joined Christian-oriented political movements, such as the Christian Social Women’s Party, the Christian Women’s Group (Catholic Women’s Party), the Party Alliance of Hungarian Women or the far right Association of Awakening Hungarians, in the first leadership of which there was a woman, too.<sup>87</sup> How was the Lexicon text interpreted by Karola Biskey, a post office head supervisor, who was “one of the pioneers to embark on an independent career of a salaried white-collar worker”? Biskey had been concerned with safeguarding the interests of female clerks in the post office since the start of the century, and

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<sup>85</sup> A nő szabadságharca [The Freedom Fight of Woman], Népszava [People’s Voice], May 4, 1935.

<sup>86</sup> On Stuart Hall’s distinction of different types of (preferred, negotiated and oppositional) readings recipients tend to give media texts, see Andy Ruddock, *Understanding Audiences: Theory and Method*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2001. pp. 125–126.

<sup>87</sup> Tibor Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923* [The Heyday of Awakenings], Akadémiai, Budapest, 1989, p. 16. – For the political activities of women see József Vonyó, „Női szerepek a Nemzeti Egység Pártjában (1932–1939)” [Female Roles within the Party of National Unity], in: *Szerep és alkotás: női szerepek a társadalomban és az alkotóművészetben* [Role and Creativity: female roles within Society and Arts], op. cit. pp. 279–289; Margit Balogh, „Slachta Margit, a ‘keresztény feminista’”, [Margit Slachta, the ‘Christian Feminist’], in: *Asszonyorsok a 20. században* [Fate of Women in the 20th Century], ed. Margit Balogh – Katalin S. Nagy, BME, 2000, pp. 229–237.

“during the revolution she was a member of the newly-founded Hungarian Women’s Club that started its counter-revolutionary activities right after the revolution with the involvement of the leading ladies of Christian society”. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic she was a committee member of the municipal council of District I in Budapest, president of the National Association of Female Clerks at The Hungarian Royal Post, Telegraph Offices and Telephone Exchanges founded in 1920, the Grande Dame of the Federation of Hungarian Girl Scouts, and of course, a committee member in the National Federation of Hungarian Women.<sup>88</sup> Such divergences from “normal” (traditional) middle-class life may rightly call into doubt the impact of conservative anti-feminist texts like *Katolikus Lexikon*.

In light of the above, we cannot take the influence of the conservative, anti-feminist approach on society for granted and we should not think it was as great as these texts would have us believe. In fact, popular media reached a far greater readership. Nevertheless, there was a variation within popular culture as well. The portrayal of women in the novels that sold tens of thousands of copies was highly diverse. The heroine of Cronin’s *Citadel* is a faithful partner of her husband and only performs salaried work until marriage, while Ursula Parrott’s *Ex-wife* tries everything “men are allowed to do”.

Let us now proceed and examine the mainstream and midcult media channels.

## **The Neo-Biedermeier portrayal**

In his historical essay titled *Három nemzedék és ami utána következik* [Three Generations and What Comes Afterwards], Gyula Szekfű, a famous historian, depicted the era following the First World War, the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the Treaty of Trianon as a new kind of conservative era. Szekfű called Hungary in the 1920s a Neo-Baroque society characterised by the lifestyle of the gentry and aristocracy, authoritarianism, and by the policies of

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<sup>88</sup> Magyar Asszonyok Lexikona [Encyclopaedia of Hungarian Women], op. cit., pp. 160–161. – The encyclopaedia detailed the life of 1339 women of whom 64 were nurses during the First World War and 1071 had salaried jobs.

representation and conservation.<sup>89</sup> Writer and literary historian Antal Szerb did not either fail to notice the thrust of neo-conservatism in political life as well as in cultural policy or the sway of Neo-Biedermeier tendency in literature. According to Szerb, the latter was characterised by “the dreamy cult of the good old days” and “the low-brow romantic,” but also by a return to elements that modern Hungarian literature had discarded before 1920. Szerb accorded prime place in this tendency to Cécile Tormay and claimed that her and her followers’ Neo-Biedermeier writings “sensed only the atmosphere in but failed to see the middle-class roots in old [Buda-]Pest, from which an independent civic middle-class culture could and should have developed under more favourable circumstances.” Szerb thought Neo-Biedermeier authors were nostalgic about middle-class prosperity, but they did not consider the development of the middle-class to prominence in society particularly important.

Antal Szerb also mentioned a male author, Kálmán Csathó, whom he thought “utilised Neo-Biedermeier opportunities with more ease and in a more popular fashion” than Tormay. Szerb, in his discussion, not lacking a touch of sarcasm, pointed out that Csathó’s work catered to particular needs on a market divided along the well-known Mary vs Magdalene dichotomy.

“From the point of view of sociology of literature, the most important peculiarity of [Csathó’s novels] is [...] whiteness [an ideal purity and innocence]. He was perhaps the first in Hungary to have realised that novels in Hungary were primarily read by women, and women liked two kinds of novels: the completely white novel, the heroes of which saw women shine in ideal purity, and the opposite of the white novel, in which women found answers to their erotic problems. As the latter type of novel is rather the female writers’ turf, Csathó chose the former.”<sup>90</sup>

As Szerb explained, Csathó’s decision “was registered by female readers with great satisfaction”.

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<sup>89</sup> Gyula Szekfű, *Három nemzedék és ami utána következik* [Three Generations and What Comes After] op. cit. pp. 405–415.

<sup>90</sup> Antal Szerb, op. cit., pp. 483–485.

Indeed, if Neo-Biedermeier means bowing to authority and power, moralizing, religious devotion, the cult of family life, and sentimentality, then the novels of Csathó did no doubt make a substantial contribution to a renaissance of this tendency.

According to the critic of *Napkelet* [Orient], a mainstream, right wing literary journal, his novel, *Lányok, anyák, nagyanyák* [Daughters, Mothers, Grandmothers], “depicts the life of the Hungarian aristocracy in the past half century”. Its sequel, *Asszony a bakon* [Woman at the Reins], was also reviewed in the *Napkelet*. Sándor Gulyás, the journal’s literary critic, cited the novel’s key sentence vindicating male dominance: “if women are at the reins, the cart runs into a pothole”. In the same issue Gulyás also praised Katinka Máriássyné Szemere’s poetry, which he thought displayed “the moving beauties of female soul”: motherhood and piety.<sup>91</sup>

## **An individual outside – a woman at home?**

Although middle-class women’s presumed attitudes towards work between the two world wars may demonstrate these above mentioned different interpretations perfectly, in current historiography mostly only the next interpretation has been emphasized. Several sources attest that working upper middle-class women “earned enthusiastic and appreciative looks from others, who, however, let out a sigh of relief” that they did not need to do that. Thus, working was regarded as a “necessary evil, a temporary activity before the lucrative [sic!] marriage and the real duty of women: motherhood”.<sup>92</sup> If we regard the assertions thus summarised as historical facts, we have to suppose the following: (1) at best, middle-class women worked until they got married, (2) their motivation for employment was to pass the time until marriage, (3) paid work was “unnatural” and had no intrinsic value, (4) middle-class men could provide for their families in line with

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<sup>91</sup> *Napkelet* [Orient], 1927. Vol. I. p. 438., Vol. II. p. 1055., 1141. – This literary review was sponsored by the Hungarian Government and it was founded as a “nationalist counterpoint to the famous literary journal, *Nyugat* (West)”. Eliza Ablovatski, “Between Red Army and White Guard”, in:= *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, ed. Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2006, p. 75.

<sup>92</sup> Cited by Andrea Pető, „Minden tekintetben derék nők’: A nők politikai szerepei és a nőegyletek Magyarországon a két világháború között” [“Good Women in All Respects’: The Female Political Roles and Women’s Associations in Interwar Hungary], in: *Szerep és alkotás: Női szerepek a társadalomban és az alkotóművészetben* [Role and Product: female roles within the Society and Art] op. cit., p. 273.

the traditional roles of the sexes. But can we hardly regard these assertions as historical facts. They reflect a view among many contemporary views; a view based on the traditional division of labour, the separation of the traditional male/female roles within the family, the complementarity of the husband providing for his family and the wife being a perfect homemaker, a crucial element of the conservative, anti-feminist “great narrative”.

It comes hardly as a surprise that this view informs numerous contemporary writings, including István Andor Szabó’s etiquette guide published in five editions between 1923 and 1931. According to this guide, many “refined” ladies “who hardly think beyond the curling iron, dresses and chattering at balls” look down on “their classmates who were *forced* to seek paid employment” but this is inappropriate since:

“Even wealthy girls may benefit from a degree or from training themselves in some skill. Not only because it might prove useful but because they know that it saves them from an indolent and empty life. And this does not hinder them in helping their *mothers* with the *household*. Children need to be instilled with a respect for the value of working people, even if the latter *did not have the chance to learn good manners.*”<sup>93</sup>

On this issue, Kunó Klebelsberg, the minister for religion and general education wrote the following at this time (or more precisely in 1928):

“[If] middle-class girls do not attend girls’ secondary school or a girls’ lyceum and then college, having finished four years in middle school, they sit at home after the age of 15 or to be exact, they read magazines and novels and go to the cinema, beaches and to dance, *they have too much free time because in today’s city flats there is hardly a chance to do any so-called housework.*”

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<sup>93</sup> István Andor Szabó, *Az úriember. A jó társaság szabályai* [The Gentleman: Conventions of the Respectable Society], Gondolat, Budapest, 1990, pp. 89–90. (Emphasis added.) – Although the main title of this book is “Az úriember” which means “The Gentleman”, it covers the norms of polite behavior for both gentlemen and genteel ladies (úrinők).

On the issue of women obtaining degrees, Klebelsberg held the view that a learned woman is “a more understanding partner of a man’s higher endeavours than a less well-educated woman,” and what is more, “such women are more modest and engage in physical work more willingly than girls in the lower strata of the middle class”. The latter “see it a degradation or declassing of their middle-class status if in hard times they need to do the washing,” while “better educated women are [...] conscious of their inner value, and they do not seek symbols of their social status in ridiculous appearances, such as manicured hands.”<sup>94</sup>

Based on the assertions by Szabó and Klebelsberg we might believe that the aim of female (perhaps temporary) work and education was a better functioning marriage, the understanding of the husband’s intentions and situation, and the ability to better adapt to him. This, however, the authors claimed, was mostly achieved in the upper middle class and above, since women who had or wanted to work, educate themselves, and/or pursue cultural activities were looked down on by girls and women in the “lower strata” of the upper middle class. Both writers depicted the “uneducated woman” as the cause of the conflict between (upper middle-class) husbands and wives. Such women were frivolous and more priggish and “perhaps even proud of the violence and snobbery of their husbands”.<sup>95</sup> In contrast, a “well-educated married couple” means “two equal” parties with distinct “scopes of authority”:

“In *most of the issues* concerning the *outside world* [...] *men decide* after consulting with their wives. [...] An educated woman appreciates the efforts of her husband at work, and a decent husband does the same with respect to the actions of his wife *at home*.”<sup>96</sup>

Klebelsberg, however, pointed out another potential source of conflict: “many

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<sup>94</sup> Kunó Klebelsberg, „Női Eötvös Collegium” [Eötvös College for Women], in: Tudomány, kultúra, politika. Gróf Klebelsberg Kunó válogatott beszédei és írásai (1917–1932) [Science, Culture, Politics: Selected Speeches and Writings of Count Kunó Klebelsberg, 1917-1932], ed. Ferenc Glatz, Európa, Budapest, 1990, pp. 474-475. (Emphasis added.) With the Paris École Normale Supérieure as its model, Eötvös College was established in 1895, as an elite school for above-the-average, talented university students.

<sup>95</sup> I will come back to this statement in connection with József Halasy-Nagy.

<sup>96</sup> Andor István Szabó, op. cit., pp. 69-70. (Emphasis added.)

men are concerned how they will lord it over college-educated wives”. This idea is already familiar from *The Book of Marriage* edited by Hermann Keyserling, in which Marta Karlweis discussed something similar.<sup>97</sup>

Szabó’s guide to polite behavior did not consider the conflicts between men and women and the oppression of women as general social issues, but as problems that were rooted in the interactive relationship between man and woman itself.. According to Szabó’s portrayal, women were just as responsible for their oppression in marriage as were men (since they might even be proud of their husbands’ tyranny over them). Halasy-Nagy gave a philosophical justification for this phenomenon because he believed that love and marriage were the union of the male and the female halves,

“and in a partnership men mould women and women mould men. Both of them shape the other into what they wish. Tyrannical and violent men are created by women, just as weak, empty-headed women who are preoccupied with fashion and constantly titivate themselves are created by men. Both parties look for their missing, desired half in the other.”<sup>98</sup>

These writings represent an attitude according to which the woman’s place is in the family, paid work and education are only (or primarily) preparations for traditional female roles (being a wife and mother). In view of this we can conclude that all texts (irrespective of whether they were written by a man or a woman) represent the acceptance of the inequality and subordinate relationship between men and women. This is the concept of “a woman outside, a woman at home,” which means the rejection of emancipation.<sup>99</sup>

Nonetheless, there were important differences between the claims asserted in our sources. In Szabó’s portrayal, women did not have other choice but to accept a subordinate role. In contrast, Klebelsberg promoted the notion of “a

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<sup>97</sup> Kunó Klebelsberg, op. cit., p. 475.

<sup>98</sup> József Halasy-Nagy, *Ember és világ* [Human Being and the World] op. cit., p. 108. – Far from rejecting essentialism, Halasy-Nagy believed that the differences between the psychological needs of man and woman were biologically conditioned.

<sup>99</sup> Gisella Bock, “A nőkkel foglalkozó történetírás az NSZK-ban és nemzetközi összefüggésben” [Women’s History in the Federal Republic of Germany and Internationally], in: *A német társadalomtörténet új útjai* [New Trends of the German Social History] ed. András Vári, BKE, Budapest, 1990, pp. 33-34.

human individual outside, a woman at home.” Considering that he, as a member of the government, was engaged in the “great issue of women’s success”, this is hardly surprising. Writing about the intellectual talent of women, he declared that “it would be a pity if cultural policy barred one half of the nation from the regions of higher culture and knowledge.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, “in exchange” for guaranteeing them equality in public institutions (acceptance as individuals outside), women could not expect equality at home.

Anna Szederkényi, an author and journalist who was actively involved in the conservative women’s movement, prepared her listeners for this situation in the radio broadcast Women’s Education Seminar. The ideal woman, she said, “is a partner in breadwinning – beyond the threshold of the home – and in this she is so intelligent, cultured and self-conscious that she can lower herself to the humble and voluntary submission of the biblical wife at home”.<sup>101</sup>

There was, however, a third notion, namely “a woman outside, an individual at home”. One of the possible reasons that middle-class single women entered employment was to become equal partners to their (future) husbands, in order to find a good match for themselves. This is “domestic feminism”.<sup>102</sup> Its existence is proven by several texts, for example Izidor Kálnoki’s book, *Újságíró-iskola* [Journalist School], in which we can read that women

“need a vocation too. [...] Not necessarily for practising it but for finding a better husband if they wish to do so. Having an income [...] facilitates marriage.”<sup>103</sup>

The same was portrayed in Lili Bródy’s 1932 novel, *Manci*. The heroine, the frivolous and unskilled middle-class single woman that appeared in the texts of István Andor Szabó and Kunó Klebelsberg, “trains herself in some skill”: she learns shorthand and typing before getting a job in the private sector. She works in a bank as a clerk and over time becomes her male colleagues’ equal. After a

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<sup>100</sup> Kunó Klebelsberg, op. cit., pp. 474-475.

<sup>101</sup> Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Department of Manuscripts, Ms. 10 225/h.

<sup>102</sup> Gábor Gyáni, “Női munka és család Magyarországon (1900–1930)” [Paid Work of Women and Family in Hungary, 1900-1930], *Történelmi Szemle* [Historical Review] 1987–1988, No. 3, p. 378.

<sup>103</sup> Izidor Kálnoki, *Újságíró-iskola* [Journalist School], Athenaeum, Budapest, 1915, p. 85.

while, the bank manager proposes to her, and then, concerned precisely about her modernity, he becomes “pensive” and asks her: “Tell me, are you going to make a good wife?”<sup>104</sup>

As a result of the Great Depression, a new type of text was produced to portray the paid employment of women as necessary and natural. Authors wished to discuss the question of dual income in marriage, more precisely the decision by the government – induced by the expansion of unemployment – that in families with two earners wives were to give up their jobs while men could retain theirs. The jobs that thus became vacant were given to members of families without income. Thus, if the wife was the only breadwinner in the family, her job was not threatened by the government’s measure. In this context, a journalist for *Magyar Kultúra* [Hungarian Culture], a Catholic journal edited by Béla Bangha, considered it natural and desirable that upper middle-class women should learn and work, even after marriage.<sup>105</sup> This is intriguing because the papal encyclical that started with the words “Quadragesimo Anno” and was issued two years earlier, in 1931, deemed it “intolerable” that women were forced to do paid work outside their homes, and argued that this practice should be “abolished at all costs”.<sup>106</sup>

The 1934 novel by Mária Sz. Szabó, *Irén évei* [The Years of Irén], is also about the conflicts caused by dual-career marriages. It portrays a married couple’s fight against being fired and the ensuing consequences. Since they need both incomes to provide for their children, the parents divorce on paper. Their daughter then decides to accept the proposal of her suitor and becomes

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<sup>104</sup> Sophie Török wrote: “Structurally, the novel consists of two parts: first is about Mancsi as a silly, vulgar, easy woman – while the second part is about the educated, clear, moral and triumphant Mancsi. In other words: the way that it might have happened – and as it should happen. As Szomaházy wrote this latest story in his mawkish Neo-Biedermeier novel.” Sophie Török, “A Mancsi”, *Nyugat*, 1932. No. 5, p. 287.

<sup>105</sup> Zoltán Zsolnay, “A „kettős” állások körül...” [Around the ‘Double’ Employment], *Magyar Kultúra* [Hungarian Culture], 1933, No. 2, pp. 77–79.

<sup>106</sup> Vid Miholics, *Keresztény-szocializmus* [Christian Socialism], *Magyar Szemle Társaság* [Society of Hungarian Review], Budapest, 1933, p. 76. – The Society of Hungarian Review’s primary purpose was to publish a monthly political and cultural journal *Magyar Szemle* (Hungarian Review) which was the conservative journal par excellence and one of the outstanding periodicals of interwar Hungary. Inspired by Prime Minister István Bethlen (1874–1946) and for many years edited by the prominent historian Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955), the journal represented the most significant gathering of conservative intellectuals to be found during the period of Admiral Miklós Horthy’s regency (1920–1944).” The Society also published three book series: the Books of Hungarian Review, the Treasury of the Hungarian Review and the Classics of the Hungarian Review. The cited book was published within the second series. Matthew Caples, “Et In Hungária Ego: Trianon, Revisionism and the Journal *Magyar Szemle* (1927–1944)”, *Hungarian Studies*, 2005, No. 1, p. 51, 67, 69.

his mistress. She later “changes her mind” because she realises how great a sacrifice her parents made and because she finds her true partner, a young teacher.

Abolishing dual-earner families, however, caused economic problems because it brought about a drop in families’ standard of living. Women who until then were active breadwinners were restricted to one place, the family, and this also became a source of conflict. Sári Evva, a university-educated author who published her works under the male pseudonym Péter Balásházy, acknowledged the values of “the movement called feminism” but believed that it “went too far” by wanting to make “individuals [of women] outside the home as well”. When writing about this issue, her starting point was that the employment of middle-class women was a mere necessity, i.e. paid white-collar work for women was not an “acquired right”. But, she contended, whatever the rationale for women’s paid employment:

“the economic crisis will gradually bar women from most of their earning possibilities. It should be the task of men to *make the atmosphere of the sheltered family home bearable or rather pleasant* for the woman who returns to her home and who is disillusioned with the chances of breadwinning.”

But how can this be achieved? The man needs to acknowledge in family life that the woman “has grown out of the child or maid mentality of previous ages and that she has earned the rights of a life partner.” Hence, the husband should let his wife or daughter partake in his job, be it as a doctor, a lawyer or a merchant. One possible reading of Sári Evva’s text is that men should acknowledge and show that their wives and daughters are “individuals at home,” while wives and daughters (even if they work) should not seek “outside” roles that are alien to their characters. In other words, Sári Evva

left the implementation of “domestic feminism” to the man’s discretion, and portrayed it as his duty.<sup>107</sup>

Working women faced various potential conflicts while trying to reconcile their paid (public) employment with their domestic chores. On the one hand, as traditional roles were upset, the power relations at home were potentially eroded, i.e. the wife may have objected to lowering herself into “humble and voluntary submission”. On the other hand, “women took the jobs from male workers” since they received lower wages for the same job, and thus employers preferred women over men when hiring. Yet, “the amount earned through the underpaid female employment hardly covered the expenses paid to people doing household chores that were not performed by the wife anymore.”<sup>108</sup> And third, “women forced into public employment toil incessantly throughout their lives. After public work, they need to perform their natural duties and the associated activities. They do family-related tasks long into the night, and then, after a couple of hours of sleep, they start the day from the beginning.”

Working women will thus be “charged with a dual responsibility: a natural and a professional duty”.<sup>109</sup>

These conflicts clearly arise even if the reason behind women’s employment is not an economic necessity. This possibility is depicted in Anna Szederkényi’s 1932 novel, *Felszabadultak* [The Liberated]. Its heroine, Tamásné Héderváry is a lawyer, mother and an active public figure (a member of parliament) who tries to reconcile these roles. Her profession is relevant because in reality women were not allowed to work as lawyers in Hungary,<sup>110</sup> and there were only five female members of parliament in the whole era. Miss Héderváry’s attempt fails, despite the fact that she has help in the house, and that her husband accepts their untraditional relationship. (“I have actually come to terms with the fact that I am the husband of the famous female MP,” he says). Her public activities

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<sup>107</sup> Péter Balásházy, “A feminizmus és a női lélek válsága” [The Feminism and the Crisis of Female Psyche], *Magyar Kultúra* [Hungarian Culture]. 1933, No. 2, pp. 94-96. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>108</sup> Andrea Pető, „Minden tekintetben derék nők” [‘Good Women in all Respects’], op. cit., p. 274; Gyula Rusznyák, *A nő a modern társadalomban* [The Woman in Modern Society], Szent István Társulat [St. Stephen Association], Budapest, 1936, p. 40.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41, 46.

<sup>110</sup> Except for those three women who could start the study of law in the revolutionary period of 1918 and 1919, when female students were admitted to the faculty of law.

“gradually detach her from her home,” and she has to realise that the traditional role of a wife and mother suits her more. Thus, the author – at least according to one of the contemporary interpretations of the novel – “guided” the heroine back into the family and showed that women had to accept the traditional female role.<sup>111</sup> In another interpretation the novel portrayed the inequality of men and women: in Hungary working women had to face various potential conflicts while trying to reconcile their paid (public) employment with their domestic chores and as a consequence of it “struggling to achieve men’s goals as a woman is an uphill battle”.<sup>112</sup> The reading that is preferred (by Szederkényi) is closer to the latter. As she put it in a letter to Margit Bozzay on 11 September 1932:

“You can engage in feminism in two ways: by propagating it or by leading a life in which your child, family and duties wait for you at home and your job waits for you at your workplace.”<sup>113</sup>

Szederkényi – for example in this letter – portrayed herself as a feminist who on the one hand rejected the “exaggerations” of feminism and on the other hand wished to achieve and implement emancipation in everyday life. In her own eyes, she was a “liberated,” i.e. emancipated woman and an equal party in male/female relationships. Nonetheless, she was not a “masculine woman” because she wanted to fulfil the roles of the mother and the wife, too. According to her the most important reason for the employment of middle-class women was the “desire for liberation” that encourages them to perform paid work even after getting married.

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<sup>111</sup> Jób Bánhegyi, *Magyar nőírók* [Hungarian Female Writers], op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>112</sup> Sophie Török, *Nők az irodalomban* [Women in Literature] = *Nyugat* [West], 1932, No. 24, p. 629.

<sup>113</sup> Szederkényi Anna’s letter to Margit Bozzay, September 11, 1932. Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Department of Manuscripts, Ms 10 225/u.

## Mass female employment

I have presented some examples of woman who were employed before marriage, examples that do not represent paid work as a necessary evil. Through Anna Szederkényi's texts I have also discussed the potential problems of reconciling work and family after marriage.



*Photo 7:* Female and male clerks in the interwar Hungary: the working woman was a natural and widespread phenomenon (photo by Fortepan)

Considering a broader spectrum of publications from the Horthy era, we can register that the working woman was a widespread phenomenon (see photo 7). In addition to the cited sources above, we can read in Jób Bánhegyi's aforementioned book that "today's woman may live her life independently and freely," and that "in our times, the independent, breadwinning woman has become common."<sup>114</sup> The same is suggested by several books written for women and informed by the traditional understanding of gender roles. In *Öltözködés*

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<sup>114</sup> Jób Bánhegyi, *Magyar nőírók* [Hungarian Female Writers], op. cit., p. 7.

*és divat* [Clothing and Fashion], “the young couple is happy” as both husband and wife hurry off to work in the morning; and the salaried work of the woman does not ennoble her, but rather “does something better, more delightful: it satisfies her and cheers her up.” According to Lucullus, the author of *Nagy-Magyarország szakács-könyve* [The Cookbook of Greater Hungary]:

“People used to believe that women who cannot cook are not worthy of the name ‘housewife’. Today, luckily for women who work, do sports, promenade or even flirt, public opinion is not so rigorous, and neither are husbands. [...] Nowadays, girls compete with boys in learning and working, and getting a taste of the troubles of a household only comes second or third in their lives because they do not have enough time.”<sup>115</sup>

Lili Hatvany depicted the difference between a bygone era and her time in a similar manner. There were “two types of middle-class housewives” before the war, she wrote. The “good housewife [...] barely spoke about anything other than the joys and sorrows of running a household, the naughtiness of the maids and the insolence of the market women”. The “bad housewife was a so-called bluestocking. She lived in the clouds, read the *Nyugat* [modernist literary journal] [...] and boasted about never having entered the kitchen.” However, according to Hatvany’s writing, these types vanished after the world war. Firstly because: “doing household work is nowadays not a merit” and secondly because “due to the development of economic conditions, all housewives need to stand in the kitchen, whether they want to or not.” She emphasized, this did not mean, however, that “all women should learn and be able to cook [...]. Only those who are talented should learn it, just as only those who have an ear for music and are dexterous should learn to play the piano.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Lucullus, *Nagy-Magyarország szakács-könyve* [The Cookbook of Greater Hungary], no publisher, Budapest, no date, p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> Magda Bácskai, “Mai hölgy ruhája a bölcsőtől a sirig” [Dress of Modern Lady from Cradle to Grave], in: *Öltözködés és divat* [Clothing and Fashion] ed. Géza Laczkó, Pesti Napló – Az Est – Magyarország, Budapest, no date, p. 127, 129; Lucullus, *Nagy-Magyarország szakács-könyve*, op. cit. p. 3; Lili Hatvany, *Ételművészet* [Art of Cooking], op. cit., pp. 5–6.

These three texts attest that women's duties do not necessarily belong in the kitchen and its vicinity. Traditional female roles are not obligatory, because they are shaped by social changes, and on the other hand (to employ Ida Bobula's thoughts) only women themselves can determine what their calling is.<sup>117</sup>

Lili Hatvany's book also underlines that the reason for domestic chores may be the same – economic necessity – as performing paid work. A similar depiction of domestic work can be found in Gyula Ruzsnyák's *A nő a modern társadalomban* [The Woman in Modern Society], a staunchly anti-feminist book. The author declares that the woman's place is intended to be in the family, and what is more:

“Even if we take a purely materialistic perspective, we have to admit that the most prudential caretaker of a family household is the mother. [...] Even we confine ourselves to the economic side of things, it is better when mothers stay at home.”<sup>118</sup>

One might wonder whether domestic work was indeed common (as portrayed in these texts), and if so, to what extent. It is also to be examined whether paid work had become more widespread among women, and if so whether this meant that wives became breadwinners in a greater proportion. In this context the question is whether the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (irrespective of the conservative turnaround after 1919) was, to a certain extent, the period of the emancipation process from the viewpoint of women's employment.

Between 1900 and 1930 in Hungary, one-fourth to one-third of the female population over the age of seven performed paid work, and the numbers declined in the course of the period.<sup>119</sup> The data for Budapest, however, show a more active, and rising, female participation in the labour market,

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<sup>117</sup> Ida Bobula, “A nő a modern társadalomban” [The Woman in the Modern Society], *Társadalomtudomány* [Social Science], 1938, No. 4–5, p. 159. – Ida Bobula was the first female associate professor of history at the Budapest University of Sciences (later Pázmány Péter University of Sciences) in the interwar period. Her important book was published under the title *The Woman in the 18th Century Hungarian Society (A nő a XVIII. század magyar társadalmában)* in 1933.

<sup>118</sup> Gyula Ruzsnyák, *A nő a modern társadalomban* [The Woman in Modern Society], op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>119</sup> Gábor Gyáni, “Női munka és a család Magyarországon”, op. cit., p. 369

since the share of women among earners in the capital was 34.8 and 38.6 per cent in 1900 and 1930, respectively.<sup>120</sup>

In the context of the relationship between performing paid work and emancipation, the proportion of married women performing also paid job is important. Another important question is whether single women who lived on their own income were regarded as successful or, on the contrary, as miserable “spinsters”. Beáta Nagy contends that “the majority of young women earned money for their families until marriage or childbirth. After that they appeared on the labour market in a smaller proportion, and only as casual workers.” In contrast, based on the data for Budapest, Nagy shows that in 1910 12.4 per cent of women in paid jobs were married, while in 1935 this figure had risen to 22 per cent (simultaneously, the proportion of single women dropped from 70 to 56 per cent).<sup>121</sup> If we look at the share of single women performing paid work, we see that it did not change between 1910 and 1935 (approximately half of them were earners),<sup>122</sup> while the proportion of breadwinning married women increased significantly.<sup>123</sup> Concurrently, the age distribution of women performing paid work changed: although the most active was the age group between 15 and 19 years during the whole period, the share of breadwinners among them decreased from 75 to 56.3 per cent. Simultaneously, among 20-to-39-year-olds 46.4 and 53.2 per cent were in paid employment in 1910 and 1935, respectively.<sup>124</sup> There are two reasons for this change in women’s employment and working women’s average age: the expansion of the share of married women in the workplace, and the fact that the average age of single working women increased in the first third of the 20th century.

The contemporary interpretation of the social status of independent women varied greatly. The members of this group could be characterised as having implemented a successful life strategy, or as “spinsters” who failed in traditional society. Society in the capital, however, was not as traditional as in

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<sup>120</sup> Beáta Nagy, “A nők kereső tevékenysége Budapesten a 20. század első felében” [Income Generating Activities of Women in Budapest in the First Part of the 20th Century], in: *Férfiuralom. Írások nőkről, férfiakról, feminizmusról* [Male Domination: Essays on Women, Men, Feminism] ed. Miklós Hadas, Replika Kör, Budapest, 1994, pp. 158–160.

<sup>121</sup> In this case 100% refers to all the women having paid employment.

<sup>122</sup> In this case 100% refers to single women having paid employment.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160–161.

the Hungarian countryside, therefore the interpretation of these lives may have been different depending on whether they were assessed by a community in Budapest or in a country town. The opinion set out in the media texts produced in the first half of the 20th century presented the independent life without a husband as a virtue, although they were mostly based on the acceptance of celibacy (or more precisely purity or “whiteness”). In *Új típusok* [New Types], a 1903 story by Margit Kaffka, the teacher was regarded by university girls to be “a skinny, shrill-voiced, wrinkled spinster, a frightening, sad portent of the future.” However, the “boyish” heroine of Kaffka’s 1918 short story, *Szép Olga* [Olga the Fair], who became a civil servant and remained independent after graduation, talks about herself as follows:

“I am slowly becoming old, but do not think that my life is bad. I am learning English, and I just love Dickens. [...] I am a little bit proud to be a girl. [...] I think it is a virtue. It means some kind of purity, permanence, power. You might be right: I may be destined for virginity.”<sup>125</sup>

Anna Szederkényi did not depict the situation of single, earning women in this way: in a talk she probably gave in 1929 in the Women’s Education Seminar, she claimed: “Today we need to raise girls who can live independently on their own because they cannot always stay in the shelter of the family.”<sup>126</sup> The readers of *Magyar Női Szemle* [Hungarian Women’s Review], the journal for university-educated women, agreed with this notion: they praised women who asserted their independence, from the female bank clerk proud of living independently to those who wrote letters “in defence of spinsters.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> György Bodnár, Kaffka Margit válogatott művei [Selected Works of Margit Kaffka], Szépirodalmi, Budapest, 1974, p. 96., 887.

<sup>126</sup> Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Department of Manuscripts, Ms 10 225/h.

<sup>127</sup> “A mai bankkisasszony élete” [The Life of the Modern Female Bank Clerk], *Magyar Női Szemle* [Hungarian Women’s Review], 1939, September–October, p. 193; “Milyen volt a békebeli leányélet?” [What Was the Maidens’ Life Like before the War?], *Ibid.*, 1939, November–December, pp. 238–239.

Where women university students were concerned, statistics show that the majority of graduates intended to work.<sup>128</sup> A contemporary survey demonstrates that in girls' dormitories of the universities in Budapest, as well as in the teacher training institute of the Szeged Middle School, most of the female students claimed that they were studying because they wanted to earn money.

It is, however, uncertain whether most of the women in so-called white-collar jobs indeed chose work instead of family. Undoubtedly, "not getting married at all was the most likely in the most popular white-collar jobs," but in the first half of the 20th century this also changed. For example, in 1900, only 24.2% of primary school teachers were married, while in 1930 this figure was 36%.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, according to census data from 1930, only 50.6% of female doctors were single (in contrast to the 54.5% among female primary school teachers), 43.1% were married, 1.5% were widows and 4.8% were divorced. In effect, the 5,453 midwives were also white-collar workers: 54.7% of this group were married and 8.4% were single. Becoming a teacher in a middle school was also popular among women: 35.8% of women choosing this career were married and 56% of them were single, the same as for primary school teachers. But can we interpret census data with the assumption that a big amount of women in white-collar jobs chose work instead of the family? I do not think so. First, women in these professions were *younger* than their male colleagues, because women were only allowed to enter certain professions later, and second, the average age of first marriage increased over the level of the earlier years. Thus, the lower age of working women partly explains their marital status. In 1930, for example, a large number of female teachers were under the average age of first marriage and there are no historical sources about the subsequent change in their marital status.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Barbara Papp, "Nőoktatás és képzett nők a két világháború között" [Female Education and Educated Women in the Interwar Period], in: Zsombékok. Középosztályok és iskoláztatás Magyarországon a 19. század elejétől a 20. század közepéig: Társadalomtörténeti tanulmányok [Tussocks: Middle Classes and Education in Hungary from the Beginning of the 19th Century to the Middle of the 20th Century. Studies of Social History] ed. György Kövér – Csaba Sasfi, Századvég, Budapest, 2005, pp. 732–741.

<sup>129</sup> Gábor Gyáni, "Női munka és a család Magyarországon", op. cit., p. 378.

<sup>130</sup> Private language teachers, private tutors and governesses were an exception. Married women comprised 3.6% among private tutors and governesses, and 12.7% among language teachers. Az 1930 évi népszámlálás [Census of 1930], op. cit., p. 164.

## Chapter V

# National conservative discourses about and for women between the wars

The discourse going counter to feminism was carried, among others, by one of the most popular weeklies of the era, *Új Idők* [New Times] (1894–1949). It was edited by Ferenc Herczeg and its readership consisted primarily in middle-class women. The other major voice critical of feminism was *A Magyar Asszony* [The Hungarian Woman] (1921–1940),<sup>131</sup> the organ of the largest women’s organisation, the National Federation of Hungarian Women (MANSZ). *Új Idők* was much less belligerent and aggressively anti-feminist than *A Magyar Asszony*, but a closer reading of the two periodicals’ contents with regard to the different types of modern woman reveals that none of them stood on a homogeneous and consistently maintained platform.

The analysis of the two publications raises different methodological issues. *A Magyar Asszony* was a government-backed magazine with a small editorial team, supporting political activism, while *Új Idők* was a profit-oriented private enterprise. *Új Idők*’s readership and editorial team were more heterogeneous in terms of their world view, social background and age, and hence its texts require a more careful analytical approach.

### **A conservative anti-feminist female periodical: *A Magyar Asszony***

Although none of these magazines had a consistent standpoint on feminism and women’s issues and there were serious differences of opinion between their contributors, their overall attitude was made abundantly clear for the readers. Géza Kenedy, Károly Lyka or Gyula Fodor (*Új Idők*), just like Cécile Tormay and Prince Károly Hohenlohe (*A Magyar Asszony*) wrote that in war women had become faithful *auxiliaries* to men, and they appeared convinced that

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<sup>131</sup> In Judit Acsády’s rendering the title of this journal in English should read “The Hungarian Matron”. Judit Acsády, *Diverse constructions*, op. cit., p. 331.

this new position brought real equality for women. They wished to promote a female role model that they claimed had been neglected in the modern literature: that of the housewife, the “natural woman”. They claimed that a working and studying woman was neither of much help to her husband nor a good mother and, therefore, not feminine (Kenedy went as far as suggesting that the majority of educated women were infertile).<sup>132</sup> They deemed it important and even necessary for a woman to fight alongside the man, who had been wounded emotionally (and often physically) during the war. But this partnership was called for only as long as he was incapable of fighting alone for the nation and Christianity. As soon as he was healed women were to return to family life at once and devote themselves solely to that.<sup>133</sup>

Prince Károly Hohenlohe, who had appeared in Cécile Tormay’s *An Outlaw’s Diary*, went even further and declared at a 1922 MANSZ meeting in Kecskemét that a war “is waged in the whole world against the Christian world view,” therefore men and women should both work until victory is achieved, “but only as long as it is necessary. After that [women] should return to the hearth and devote their lives to their families”.<sup>134</sup> At the same meeting, Tormay said:

“[Women] should erase the bleeding lines that run across the body of the nation as throbbing wounds. The man has been wounded in the war physically as well as emotionally. Until he rests, women should kindle the fire.”<sup>135</sup>

Alongside with the above quoted authors, contributors like the reformed pastor László Ravasz, Károly Mártonffy and the President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Albert Berzeviczy emphasized in unison in the early 1920s that the pacification of women was not an aim, at least for the time being. Mártonffy

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<sup>132</sup> Sz. J. [Károly Lyka], “Nők az alkotmányban” [Women in the Constitution], *Új Idők* [New Times], 1920, No. 5, p. 99; Géza Kenedy, „Az első fecske” [Early Bird], *Ibid.*, 1920, No. 10, pp. 192–193; Gyula Fodor, „A dáma, a démon és az asszony” [The Lady, the Vamp and the Woman], *Ibid.*, 1920, No. 7, pp. 116–117.

<sup>133</sup> “Asszonyok munkája az országban” [Women’s Work in the Country], *A Magyar Asszony*, 1922, No. 3, pp. 27–31.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

and Berzeviczy stated as a timeless, universal norm that women were obliged to take part “in the work of the national society”.<sup>136</sup> Ravasz, in his essay, outlined the ideal “type of New Woman” who does not adopt “unbridled” individualism but wants to be “more national[ly oriented],” Turanian and cosmopolitan at the same time. In other words, a woman’s obligation towards the nation, her duty to the national community come first.<sup>137</sup> Her public activity (performed outside the family and the home) is not “unnatural” because “tending to” and “healing” the nation, as caring in general, is a “natural” feminine activity, and it is part of the role of the mother.<sup>138</sup>

At this point it is worth remembering the Italian example and asking whether this was a return to the traditional female role (to the role of the “good” woman who behaves appropriately) or some kind of cultural remobilisation. The further examination of the anti-feminist discourse (as opposed to the progressive feminist movement) shows that the aims were the preservation of women’s public engagement and the remobilisation of women for national goals. This, in turn, meant that the types of the modern woman active in public life had to be accepted and they had to be portrayed as natural and feminine. A good example of this is *An Outlaw’s Diary* that commemorates staunchly the counter-revolutionary women who were “persecuted” by the revolution, forced into exile but did not budge in the face of the upheaval. The “raw material” for the book appears to have been the lived experience of the author, Tormay herself. She had experienced the war-time and end-of-the-war upheavals and and who founded MANSZ during the revolution of 1918. A counter-revolutionary anti-feminist and anti-Semite, Tormay had also been a member of the editorial board of the *Nő* [Woman], a feminist journal (revealed in its subtitle “*Feminista folyóirat*”), published between 1914 and 1917. She was also

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<sup>136</sup> Albert Berzeviczy, “Néhány szó a magyar nők hivatásáról” [A Few Words about the Women’s Vocation], *A Magyar Asszony*, 1922, No. 7–8, pp. 1–3; Károly Mártonffy, “A nemzeti lélek integritása” [Integrity of the National Spirit], *Ibid.*, 1922, No. 4, pp. 14–15.

<sup>137</sup> László Ravasz, “Az új női típus” [The New Type of Woman], *A Magyar Asszony*, 1922, No. 3, pp. 2–4.

<sup>138</sup> Andrea Pető–Judith Szapor, „A női esélyegyenlőségre vonatkozó női felfogás hatása a magyar választójogi gondolkodásra 1848–1990. Az „állam érdekében adományozott jog” feminista megközelítésben” [Female Thought About Gender Equality and Its Impact Upon Hungarian Legal Theories on Electoral Law, 1848–1990: ‘Rights Granted in the Interests of State’ from the viewpoint of feminism], in: *Befogadás és eredetiség a magyar jogban és jogtudományban. Adalékok a magyarországi jog természetrajzához* [Adoption and Originality in Hungarian Law and Jurisprudence: Contributions to the Natural History of Hungarian Law], ed. András Sajó, Áron, Budapest, 2004, pp. 138–139.

one of the organisers of the 1913 world congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance held in Budapest.

How are these changes to be understood? Were they simply an about-face? Did the “masculine” and, according to her jealous husband (a count), lesbian Tormay establish and run a women’s organisation to help strengthen the position of men (as it was interpreted by some feminists)? (See photo 8.)

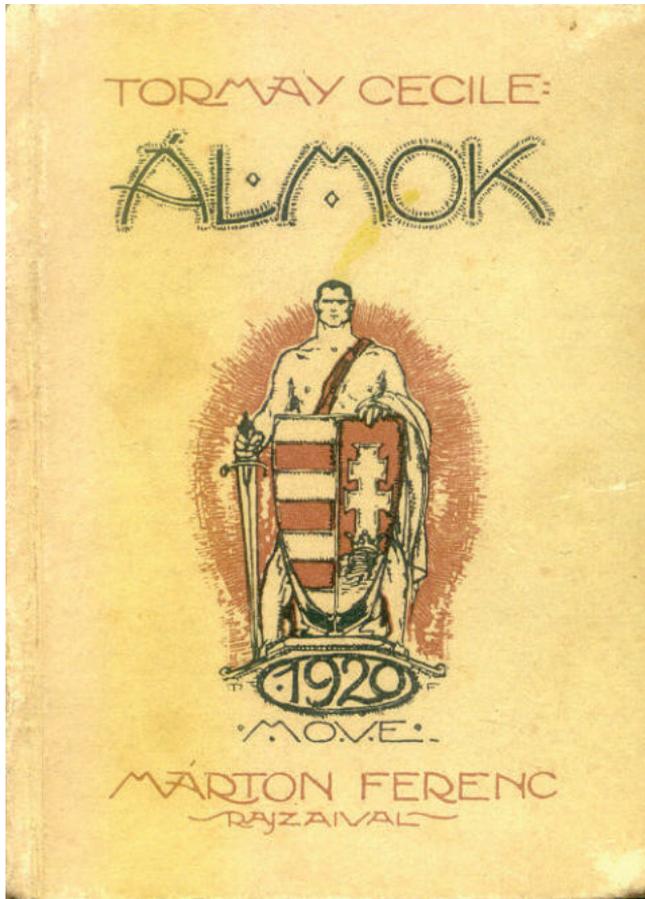


Photo 8: The cover of Cécile Tormay’s short stories with the title “Álmok” [Dreams], presenting the image of a strong and brave warrior with sword and Hungary’s coat of arms and the abbreviation of Magyar Országos Véderő Egylet (Hungarian National Defence Association), a right-extremist political movement

Based on the articles in *A Magyar Asszony* in the early 1920s, we could say that the latter was the case (despite the idiosyncrasies already mentioned).

In addition to the examples cited earlier, *A magyar nő nemzeti hivatása* [The National Duty of Hungarian Women], an essay by Evangelical bishop Sándor Raffay points to this. Raffay discussed the two-generation-long decline in national consciousness before the world war. The sign and reason for this was that novelties from abroad were thought by some to be Hungarian or national, even though they were the products of the “false Western civilisation, ailing internationalism and cosmopolitanism stifling national consciousness” that permeated and infected Hungarian life, “our art, literature, daily papers, world views, customs, social life, morals and goals”. “Hungarian women were heavily involved” in this harmful process: idleness, the “pretence of would-be Europeans” and the “horrible habit of openly frequenting cafés” were widespread among them. In the new, post-war world, on the other hand, the duty of women was to promote “national consciousness” and to urge men to bravery and the protection of national values.<sup>139</sup> Thus: Before 1914, the ruinous European customs encountered through the media transformed the rules of everyday behaviour and the views on the world, and after the world war it was women’s duty to raise better Hungarians – at home. These “opportunities” became available to women because of the “cowardice”, emotional wounds and failure of men presented in *An Outlaw’s Diary* and *Asszonyok munkája az országban* [Lady’s Work in Hungary], a work that has already been cited.<sup>140</sup>

However, if we look at the activities, publications and writers of the MANSZ as a whole, we can see that they propagated publicly active women and the working modern woman. The latter was popularised by, for example, the previously cited *Magyar Asszonyok Lexikona* [Encyclopaedia of Hungarian Women]. As it was mentioned above, out of the 1339 women featured in the book and serving as role models, 1071 were working, more than half of whom (540) were married, i.e. they did not only focus on their duties in the family, which was contrary to the traditional interpretation of the role of women.<sup>141</sup> Let us look at another example: after the Numerus Clausus Act was passed and the

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<sup>139</sup> Sándor Raffay, “A magyar nő nemzeti hivatása” [National Vocation of the Hungarian Woman], *A Magyar Asszony*, 1922, No. 9, p. 2, 3.

<sup>140</sup> According to Tormay, coward middle-class, upper middle-class, etc. men allowed that “anti-national” actors took the power in 1918–1919.

<sup>141</sup> *Magyar Asszonyok Lexikona* [Encyclopaedia of Hungarian Women], op. cit.

first experiences of its implementation proved to be unfavourable, the MANSZ issued a joint declaration with the Feminist Association and the National Federation of Hungarian University and College Students, demanding that the discrimination of women be ceased. MANSZ was also involved in setting up dormitories for female university students (Sarolta Girls' Home, Horthy Miklósné Girls' Home in Debrecen), which was supported, among others, by the wife of the regent, Miklós Horthy, prime minister István Bethlen and Kunó Klebelsberg, the minister for religion and general education. This was, of course, regularly reported in *A Magyar Asszony*.<sup>142</sup> It must be added that, despite the policies of certain universities and faculties, the proportion of female students did not drop significantly after the act was passed. In fact, women's share even increased by the mid-1920s (see the chapter "The ambivalence of the post-war situation"). After that the number of students fluctuated. In 1921/22 it was close to 18,000, while in the first term of 1922/23 there were 23,182 students, in the second term this figure was 20,815. In 1925/26 and 1928/29 there were 16,160 and 16,689 university and college students, respectively, while in the second terms their numbers dropped to 15,200 and 15,678, respectively.

### **The hybrid female periodical: *Új Idők***

*Új Idők*, edited by Ferenc Herczeg, was a remarkable weekly publication in the era between 1894 and 1945. It was a very popular conservative literary magazine. Irén Gulácsy's contemporary assessment tells that "its contributors included the best national-minded personalities of Hungarian literature".<sup>143</sup> In what follows, however, I will ignore the belletristic contents (poems, short stories and serialised novels) carried by the magazine and will, instead, focus on the correspondence between the readers and the editor as well as on political articles, reports and illustrations. My main questions are the following: How conservative was the "woman policy" of *Új Idők*, a conservative and nationalist

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<sup>142</sup> „A Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége az Egyetemi Ifjúságért” [The National Federation of Hungarian Women to Promote the Interests of University Students], *A Magyar Asszony*, 1927, No. 7–8–9, p. 207; „Jelentés a debreceni Horthy Miklósné Leányotthonnak 1926–1927. első évi működéséről” [Report on the First Year of Mrs. Miklós Horthy Female Students' Dorm of Debrecen] *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>143</sup> „Az Új Idők Emlékkönyvéből” [From the Scrapbook of *Új Idők*], 1936, No. 4, p. 128.

literary weekly for women? How did it present women and what (Hungarian and/or foreign) “role models” did it consider exemplary and convey to its readers between the two world wars?<sup>144</sup>

## **Introductory methodological notes**

As we have already seen, after the First World War and the revolutions, Hungary entered a new era of women’s history and feminist movements.

From 1919, the hybrids between feminism, which can be called progressive, and the approaches repudiating emancipation, became more prominent compared to earlier periods. These hybrids were portrayals that attempted to unite both argumentative traditions, i.e. those that combined the elements of two world views that were seemingly hard to reconcile. This characterised approaches that were collectively known as conservative feminism, and that put the goal of female emancipation into the frame of the nation and the mother. In other words, they were feminists and national conservative at the same time, i.e. they were feminists and rejected the internationalism of feminism.

Nevertheless, even progressive or liberal feminists used the nation/mother frame in order to have their goals accepted. (They sought to legitimise their goals by referring to positive values in the nation/mother frame.)<sup>145</sup>

But this is only one of several aspects that we need to discuss when assessing the Horthy era from the point of view of women’s history. Another one is that in the social makeup of big cities, especially as a result of the Great War, the type of modern independent woman performing paid work, acquiring a university degree became (more) common. In other words, the long term trend of female emancipation continued to play itself out under a new conservative-nationalist, Neo-Biedermeier cultural-political order, which *in general* opposed equality.

The nationalist discourse, however, that acquired a hegemonic position

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<sup>144</sup> Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 10–12. – Ulrich Beck mentions among of the attributes of the globality “The stream images from the global culture industries”. According to him the “concept of globality may be distinguished from the concept of a globalization process (a dialectical process, one would say in old-fashioned language), which creates transnational social links and spaces, revalues local cultures and promotes third cultures (‘a little of this, a little of that, is the way new things come into the world’ – Salman Rushdie).” *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>145</sup> Andrea Pető, *Napasszonyok és holdkisasszonyok*, op. cit., 63.

under the Horthy era, could be constraining as well as enabling. More often than not, it would stand in the way of those trying to promote emancipation. But, under certain circumstances, it could also be turned into a resource for the same tendency. For “national” was surely used as a restrictive category (even before 1914) defined in line with alleged state interests, when the aim was to undermine feminism by labelling the movement as anti-national. What is more, in debates about women’s issues, representatives of the hegemonic conservative-nationalist tendency preferred to view all aspects of women’s life (their work, their position within gender relations inside the family, sexuality, love, marriage, divorce, fashion, the use of cosmetics, dieting, cooking skills) and the national issue (the revisionist objective: the “revival” of Hungary and its preconditions) as all parts of an organic whole. In their rendering whatever women did in one particular sphere of life it would substantially affect all the other spheres. When they claimed to stand for women’s right to participate in public affairs, they did so with the proviso that this should only happen “in line (and proportionally) with their level of education and the needs of their country,” and in a way that did not endanger “their motherhood and their status as wives”.<sup>146</sup> The limit to equality was thus the “nation’s interest”.

Others, however, treated these spheres of life individually, and demonstrated one by one that steps towards emancipation did not contradict the values and aims deemed national; in fact, they may even have been compatible with those. Therefore, certain demands that pointed towards female emancipation were reconciled with what was defined as the national and conservative agenda.

This is then the context within which I will discuss in the following the position of *Új Idők* in the interwar period. I will proceed in a slightly different manner from Judit Kádár’s 2002 pioneering study. Based on fictional works from around the turn of the century, an advice given in response to a reader’s letter from 1914, and a “women’s ten commandments” from 1944 (which stated that the sole purpose of women in this world was to “serve their husbands,” partly by running a perfect household), Kádár concluded that the magazine

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<sup>146</sup> Géza Kenedi, “Magyar feminizmus” [Hungarian Feminism], *Magyar Figyelő* [The Hungarian Observer], 1911, No. 1, p. 55.

propagated well-known stereotypical views about men and women. In contrast to this approach, homogenizing a long period as a unified era, I will show that through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stereotypes changed and evolved just like gender roles and the views held about these. Stereotypes need to be interpreted in their own historical context and when distinct periods coalesce into one homogeneous unity it is exactly these contexts that we lose sight of.

My approach raises two further methodological questions. First, whether *Új Idők* can be discussed as a women's periodical, and whether it is true that it was not a family-oriented publication that provided entertaining and instructive reading for both men and women. In this question, the aforementioned study by Judit Kádár is of invaluable help because it demonstrates through the analysis of texts and advertisements that it was a literary periodical directed at women. We may also add that between the two world wars the magazine regularly published recipes, articles on fashion and occasionally sewing patterns, and its steadily increasing subscriber list contained mostly female names, averaging around 80% of all subscribers. Letters to the editor were also generally written by women about issues considered feminine (love, marriage, work, education), and sometimes just to emphasize how important the magazine was in their lives. Much more seldom, letters from men were included too, but these also tended to address issues of private (and love) life.

The female readership of *Új Idők* – as attested by these letters – was heterogeneous: working women, married women, women who were “restless like a man”, women who undertook roles in public life, and even conservative women. As I will demonstrate, these categories often times overlapped one another. Furthermore, we often find among the readers of the magazine, modern female youth and teenagers.

### **The plurality of views**

Judit Kádár concluded in her study that *Új Idők* took a paternalistic approach, strengthened gender stereotypes, and sought to convince its readers that the endeavours of emancipation were harmful. Nevertheless, alluding to

Kádár's study, Virág Varga also points out a "not so controversial" fact that the magazine also published "works of literary value that could perhaps be considered feminist".<sup>147</sup> First, I would like to mention an example of this hybrid position from 1920: two signed articles were published two issues apart, but from the perspective of female emancipation they were light years apart. Publishing in the same weekly a work that sympathises with the type of the modern woman and another that is decidedly hostile towards feminism is remarkable.

The author of the anti-feminist article was lawyer and journalist Géza Kenedy. Perhaps the most confounding statement in his article was that "the majority" of educated women were infertile. He reached this conclusion by citing a letter he had received a couple of years earlier about the United States of America. In connection with this letter, he emphasized that the thoughts and emotions of women in the USA were alarmingly removed from the institution of the family and this was dangerous to humanity. In his article from 1920 Kenedy depicted the Hungarian situation too. He opposed feminism and instead of female equality he "offered" a kind of camaraderie between men and women. He stated that in post-war Hungary women became the "comrade" of men in "the great and difficult tasks inflicted upon us, and our faithful comrades in the fight against fate". "Equal rights" (not equality!), he argued, would not be achieved through "feministic theories" (like the "feminism of old" or the "reddish feminism before the war") but through "shared suffering" (meaning the war, revolution, and the Trianon Peace Treaty). Conversely:

"The feminism of old wanted to ensure happiness by upsetting the internal order of the family, and forced itself onto humanity by all available means."<sup>148</sup>

There are other instances that show Kenedy's anti-feminism was far from

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<sup>147</sup> Virág Varga, „Előszó. Íróknak, költőknak a 20. század első felében” [Preface. Female Writers, Poets in the First Part of the 20th Century], *NemCsakNem* [NotOnlyGender], 2011, No. 1, <http://www.nemcsaknem.hu/index.php?menu=3>, Last accessed: August 2, 2012.

<sup>148</sup> Géza Kenedy, "Az első fecske", op. cit., p.192.

idiosyncratic within the ideological environment of *Új Idők* in 1920. In one case deserving attention, the author argued that, after the “suffering”, the “natural woman” would become popular again. He claimed this had been a “genre of women” (the natural woman or housewife) that “had been treated rather badly” in literature. Yet, what “proved to have been” the greatest help to a man was a woman who knew how to run a household from little money. A university-educated woman would be incapable of doing so.<sup>149</sup> The well-known art historian, Károly Lyka, was also of the opinion that even feminists could not wish for more than being a housewife, and that they – having achieved their goal – would no longer be put in such high positions as during the time of that “most wretched of governments”, Count Károlyi’s, when Róza Bédy-Schwimmer, the leader of the feminist movement, was posted as a diplomat to Switzerland.<sup>150</sup>

The idea that the experience of suffering and healing of the nation transforms women into comrades of men was at this time popular in *A Magyar Asszony* as well. Here János Csernoch, the Archbishop of Esztergom, Károly Mártonffy and Albert Berzeviczy, the President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, all wrote that Hungarian women, just like women in the Bible “set an example in faithfulness to the humiliated and crucified Hungary,”<sup>151</sup> and that for them “taking part in the work of the society of the nation was not merely a right but an obligation”.<sup>152</sup>

*Az új női típus* [The New Type of Woman], an article by reformed bishop László Ravasz also published in *A Magyar Asszony* exhibits a high degree of similarity with Kenedy’s way of thinking. Particularly the assertion that after the world war women need to be “more humane,” which according to Ravasz meant that women needed to abandon the “unbridled individualism” of the previous era, “that had been constrained only by one thing: moral laws”. The type of the “New Woman” had to be “more national-minded,” Christian and “cosmopolitan” at the same time – as declared by several authors from Kenedy

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<sup>149</sup> Gyula Fodor, “A dáma, a démon és az asszony”, op. cit., pp. 116–117.

<sup>150</sup> [Károly Lyka], “Nők az alkotmányban”, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>151</sup> János Csernoch, “A nemzeti feltámadás” [National Resurrection], *A Magyar Asszony*, 1922, No. 4, p. 3.

<sup>152</sup> Károly Mártonffy, “A nemzeti lélek integritása”, op. cit., 1922, No. 4, p. 14.

to Mártonffy – if Hungary was to achieve cultural superiority.<sup>153</sup>

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Two weeks after the article of Géza Kenedy was published, a three-page-long account of Ferencné Mrs. Mók, about her experiences in America, appeared in the magazine. Mrs. Mók, who had previously been unknown to the editors, assessed the change in the relations between men and women in a completely different way than did the men just discussed. At the beginning of her article she voiced her happiness about the “healthy philosophy” and “simply gracious psyche” of American women. She believed that American women were “honest, clever, impulsive, unaffected and independent, broad-minded and adventurous,” determined and free from sentimentalism. “All careers are open” to them, they are faithful friends at the university, and they take part in male students’ “every amusement, completely free from petty prudery”.<sup>154</sup>

“The independence and good manners of young girls is demonstrated by the fact that they respect their parents unconditionally, but arrange their lives according to their own tastes, wishes and affinities. [...] They meet whomever they want and they present their parents with a *fait accompli* when choosing a husband. Chaperoning is unknown here.”<sup>155</sup>

Mók’s article is interesting because the feministic voice was represented by way of relating a foreign (the American) example. Thus, readers were presented with a “model” from afar as an alternative to the traditional and anti-feminist world view.

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This kind of ambivalence can be observed in *Új Idők* from time to time. For example, an image by Károly Mühlbeck, the permanent illustrator of *Új Idők*, appeared in 1937 with the caption “Unemployed teachers demand jobs or

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<sup>153</sup> László Ravasz, *Az új női típus*, op. cit., p. 2,4.

<sup>154</sup> Ferencné Mók, “Az amerikai nőkről” [On American Women], *Új Idők*, 1920, No. 12, pp. 242.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

husbands”.<sup>156</sup> It rhymed with the idea that women became independent or feminists when they could not get married. In other words, “healthy women” did not want to perform salaried work. The same issue was thematised by a piece of the amateur poet Lenke K. Tóth. In her *Mai asszony* [Woman of Today], she wrote about the differences between women in the past and in the present. The poem declared that “women before the war were silent” like a “dewy flower”. In the past, husbands struggled for their wives, now women struggled to help their husbands get a job.<sup>157</sup> *A kereső feleség* [The Breadwinning Wife], a sketch by Adorján Bónyi appeared in early 1936. It was a diatribe of the husband against his wife who started working, brought home money but did not care about the household anymore.<sup>158</sup> Also, in his 1936 review about a play, György Ebeczki claimed that there was no “lack of understanding with respect to women” anymore, because they worked to able to the “help their spouses”.<sup>159</sup> The contrasting portrayals are apparent even in these works: although women are subjugated in both cases, the latter states that their work is useful, while the former deems it pointless and futile.

On the other hand, Julianna Serák’s review is clearly “pro-work”. She juxtaposes the feminine (the “idle aristocratic lady”) and the humane (the working girl), and she presents the latter as being of a higher order.<sup>160</sup> An account of Canadian experiences that appeared in the “Answers to Correspondents” section also discussed gender relations and their “masculine” transformation. Furthermore, husbands are very active in domestic chores.

*“Even the most conventional husband here would be considered henpecked in Hungary. If guests arrive, the man of the house serves dinner. [...] Men are often seen carrying shopping bags. [They help so that] afterwards they can read or go out with their wives.”*<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 1937, No. 13, p. 465.

<sup>157</sup> Lenke K. Tóth, “Mai asszony” [Today’s Woman], Ibid., 1937, No. 1, p. 476.

<sup>158</sup> Adorján Bónyi, “A kereső feleség” [The Breadwinning Wife], Ibid., 1936, No. 5, pp. 164–166.

<sup>159</sup> György Ebeczki, “Házasság. Bemutató a Magyar Színházban” [Marriage. Premiere in the Hungarian Theatre], Ibid., 1936, No. 5, p. 179.

<sup>160</sup> E. Gy. [Julianna Serák], „Éva és Évi. Bokor Malvin új regénye” [Eva and Evie. The New Novel of Malvin Bokor], Ibid., 1936, No. 3, p. 103.

<sup>161</sup> “P. V. Vancouver”, Ibid., 1936, No. 1, p. 37.

The author was impressed by the standard of living, the quality of life as well. She mentioned Vancouver where there were lots of free beaches and tennis courts as well as a huge park without an entry fee. The account also claimed that “there are bathrooms and central heating in even the poorest neighbourhoods.” These remarks can be interpreted as a criticism of life in Hungary. The article obviously intended to present an alluring example, because it linked – from a Hungarian perspective enviable – standard of living to modernised and harmonious family relations.

A year later, *Új Idők* published some excerpts from *Ausztrália közelről* [Australia Up Close], a book by Jolán Sz. Weress. The excerpts explained that in Australia only the most affluent could afford to have maids, and even these people treated their servants as humans. Furthermore, men and women were equal to such an extent that “women could invite men to a restaurant, an afternoon snack or dinner, and not accepting the invitation was considered an insult”.<sup>162</sup>

Finally, as yet another example for the ambiguity that prevents us from pinning down *Új Idők* as a magazine consistently promoting traditionalism or anti-feminism, we might consider the debate it published about female employment. It was initiated by historian Dr Ida Bobula, art historian Dr Edith Hoffman, writer Gizella Kenessey, ethnographer and teacher Dr Margit Luby, member of parliament Lilla Melczer, author and journalist Anna Szederkényi and Dr Dóra Teszler.<sup>163</sup> The magazine also published readers’ comments in the “Answers to Correspondents” section, one even from Canada.<sup>164</sup>

## The “restless like a man” and the “mother/nation” frames

In early 1937, *Új Idők* not only discussed the issue of working women but also that of politically engaged women. In connection with the latter, I would again like to quote Éva Bánki who argues that in *An Outlaw’s Diary* Cécile Tormay “created a new female role, that of the rambunctious female author who was restless like a man and uncovered conspiracies everywhere.”<sup>165</sup> Using Bánki’s narrative we can

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<sup>162</sup> [Jolán Sz. Weress], “Ausztrália közelről” [Australia Up Close], *Ibid.*, 1937. 9, p. 316.

<sup>163</sup> “A nő és a hivatal” [The Woman and the Office], *Ibid.*, 1937, No. 4, pp. 123–125.

<sup>164</sup> „Egy volt dolgozó nő” [There Used to Be A Salaried Woman], *Ibid.*, 1937, No. 8, pp. 253–254; „Erzsébet asszony” [Madam Elizabeth], *Ibid.*, 1937, No. 9, pp. 323–324.; „I. Z.-né Winnipeg, Kanada” [Mrs. Z. I., from Winnipeg, Canada], *Ibid.*, 1937, No. 13, p. 481.

<sup>165</sup> Éva Bánki, „Lobogó sötétség”, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

say that right-wing feminist women were *in general* portrayed, on the one hand, as perhaps being a little bit “rambunctious,” “restless like a man” and, on the other hand – also *in general* – their “restlessness” was interpreted and/or portrayed in the mother/nation frame. This is only partly true of Tormay, but completely true of Lilla Melczer, a member of parliament whose life story readers could learn about from *Új Idők* in 1937. Melczer was an unofficial government candidate in the 1931 elections with a conservative, Christian programme (see Chapter “Conservative feminists and the political system”). She lost the election due to fraud but managed to get into the legislature in the 1932 by-elections. According to her résumé, she got divorced at the age of 28, then entered politics, campaigned and managed her 3,400-acre family estate alone. She stressed in her self-portrayal, that she only got engaged in political/public activities after raising her three children, because she believed that the most important task for a woman were her family and children. She also stated that she drank together with the men (it was unusual at that time) during the election campaigns. Moreover, Melczer claimed that she was not bothered by women wearing lipstick. These statements were notable, because a 1931 decree for the city of Budapest prohibited female civil servants from wearing lipstick at the workplace, i.e. the city hall, and smoking like men and stipulated that women should wear “plain and serious” clothes.<sup>166</sup> Melczer believed that such issues were not a problem in and of itself. She did not want to restrain working women because the problem laid in the “*private life*” of the “idle,” “so-called *mondaine* woman”.

“Fashion, trifling vanities: these make up their days. How much more serious a working woman is! And yet, her rights are increasingly curbed. If she provides for her family, if she is forced to do so, we cannot deny her the right to influence her own fate. I admit that despite her voting rights, an ordinary woman does not understand too much of politics. *But neither does an ordinary young man!*”<sup>167</sup>

Ákosné Mrs. Toperczer was also an interesting “restless” woman. She was a member of the La Fontaine Literary Society and the Party Alliance of Hungarian

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<sup>166</sup> h. i. [Irén Horváth], “A rúzs- és púderrendelet margójára” [Commentary on the Decree About Lipstick and Powder], *Dolgozó Asszonyok Lapja* [Journal of Working Women], 1931, No. 6, p. 99.

<sup>167</sup> “Asszonyok a parlamentben” [Women in the Parliament], *Új Idők* 1937, No. 11, p. 374.

Christian Women, a board member of the Hungarian Association Against Girl Trafficking, a member of the Budapest Municipal Committee and the Hungarian Theosophical Society, and she was also a member of parliament between 1936 and 1939. However, while she found it acceptable to entrust women with social work and, in such capacity, to allow them to partake in public life, she was against complete equality. As she declared in *Új Idők*: “I am careful never to make my husband and children feel that the wife and mother in the family is not at home.”<sup>168</sup>

Thus, in the discursive and everyday practices of “restless” women, old and new female roles seemed far from being contradictory, rather they appeared to merge into a seamless unity. These roles were interpreted, or at least portrayed, within a nationalist frame resorted to by a broad spectrum of groupings and tendencies in the Horthy era, as is demonstrated by the cover of the first issue of the *Dolgozó Asszonyok Lapja* [The Magazine of Working Women]. The magazine was speaking to and promoting specifically the ideas of “New Women”. The cover image by Lucy Szabó depicted a young, short-haired woman dressed in urban clothes, sowing in the sunrise (see photo 9). This representation of the working “New Woman” created a linkage to fertility, as the source of legitimacy for the modern role model. Perhaps it is not either too far-fetched to read the sunrise in this imagery as an allusion to the “Hungarian dawn”, i.e., the “Hungarian revival” by reclaiming the lost territories and a bright future for Hungary. Indeed, from 1919 and on, the concepts of “dawn,” “Hungarian dawn” and “revival” were often linked in nationalist and revisionist discourses.<sup>169</sup> In this same spirit, the female editor of *Dolgozó Asszonyok Lapja* introduced the first issue by emphasising that safeguarding the interests of working women and supporting them would bring closer a “happier, more understanding and peaceful future and the revival of Greater Hungary”.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>169</sup> See for example Cécile Tormay, “A magyar nemzeti hadsereghez” [To the Hungarian National Army], in: Cécile Tormay, *Küzdelmek, emlékezések* [Battles, Memories] Genius, Budapest, 1937, p. 18. (This article was published originally in 1919.)

<sup>170</sup> Mrs. Ernő Bródy, “Dolgozó asszonyok, leányok” [Working Women, girls], *Dolgozó Asszonyok Lapja* [Journal of Working Women], 1928, No. 1, p. 3.

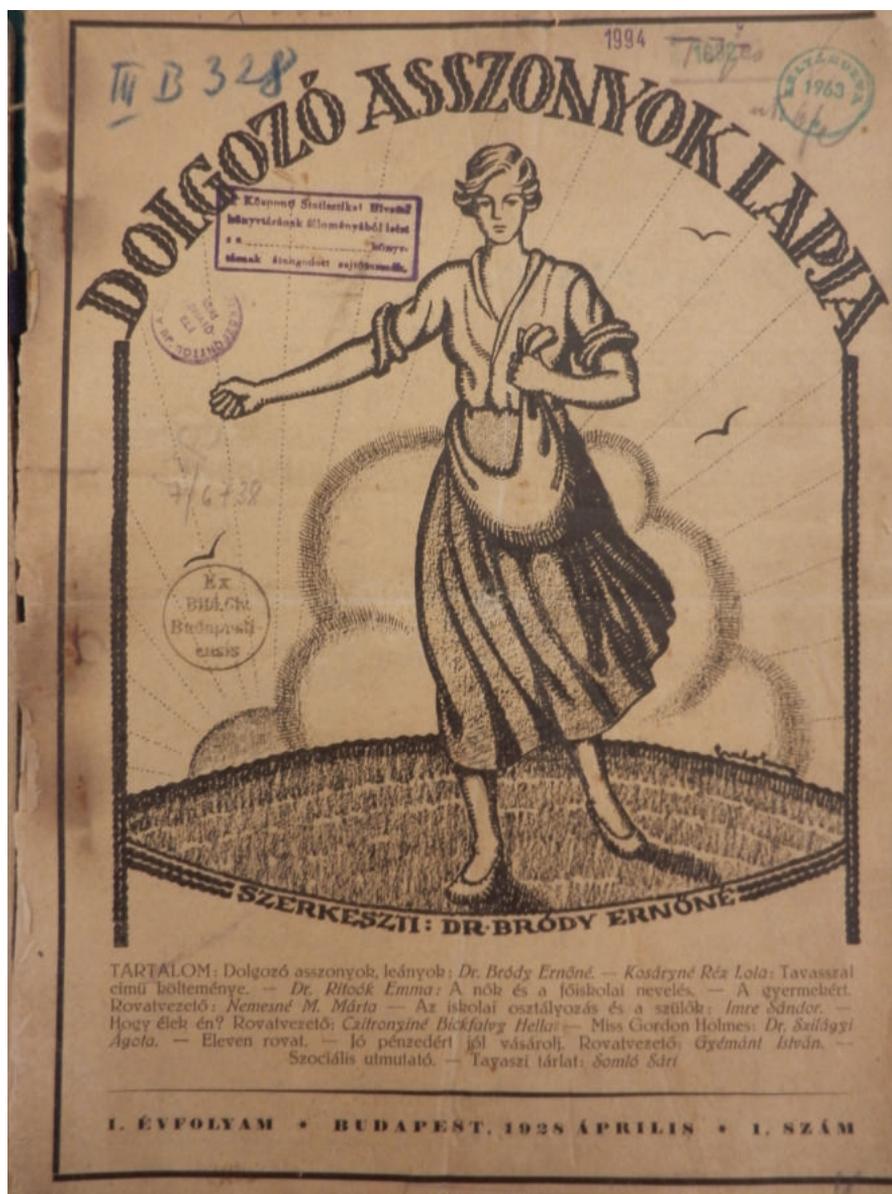


Photo 9: Dolgozó Asszonyok Lapja: the first issue from 1928

### **Új Idők: Answers to readers' letters**

The signed articles of *Új Idők* discussed above probably don't reflect as much the views of the magazine's editors with regard to women's place in society as the internal pluralism prevalent, with shifting emphases, during the interwar years. As we have seen, over time an increasing number of feminism-inspired

articles were published. In this respect, the political profile of *Új Idők* was also shaped by the (self-)portrayals of women writing often politically charged texts for the magazine.

Based on answers to letters to the editor, we can say that readers received various and often inconsistent pieces of advice. One issue on which readers sought advice was whether or not young girls should marry for love, affection, or interest. Should they mimic the new type of women and make an independent decision based on their feelings, or should they choose the traditional solution and accept the conventional reasons, such as financial position and social standing, for getting married? In 1920 a young girl was advised, rather confusingly, not to give up her dreams: she should wait for the ideal man who was either very rich, or one she could fall in love with:

“Giving an advice would be troublesome, since the only help would be if “He” came along and said: ‘Let’s go to the church, my love.’ The problem is that these magic words are spoken not by “Him” but by someone else. “He,” as in most cases, is young, handsome, nice, witty and brave. His only fault is that he is poor. The other suitor, as almost always, is older, perhaps even a little bit hoarse, clever but not witty, rational but not understanding. However, he has a great advantage: he can provide for a woman. [...] If, indeed, he were very rich and he could offer an aristocratic life that would compensate for many other things then... then perhaps it would be wise to forget the dreams. In the present situation, however, you seem to feel too easy about giving up hope.”<sup>171</sup>

Two weeks later, in their response to a woman seeking advice, they turned a blind eye to the fact that she let two men woo her at the same time, which earlier would have been considered indecent. The advice remained similar, emphasizing that feelings were of primary importance, and that there was no wealth that could compensate for the lack of love.

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<sup>171</sup> “János 32” [John 32], *Új Idők*, 1920, No. 2, p. 41.

“Do not think of material goods and social standing, just ask yourself which man do you truly, really love? A decent and happy married life can only be based on mutual love, and anything else is merely a lie and self-deception, which sooner or later leads to regret.”<sup>172</sup>

A month later, however, interested readers found that a safe livelihood was more important than feelings. It was argued that the wife would sooner or later fall in love with a man of character and charm who could provide for a woman:

“Do not cry, young lady, about not having been blessed by the fate as other girls who love their fiancés, but be happy that Providence, as you write, sent you a fiancé of solid financial background from a good family, a young man of character and charm. Squandering this opportunity for the sake of an absurd fantasy, an unrequited, secret love would be a fatal folly that you would deeply regret later. When you marry, you will not understand how you could have even thought of such things, because it is certain that you *will fall in love* with your husband.”<sup>173</sup>

It is intriguing, however, and symptomatic of the conflicting views prevalent at the time, that shortly after this conservative reply from the editor, a girl who had been left by her partner was advised to flirt with another boy to make the former lover jealous, so that he would come back to her.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> „Asszony, aki szeret” [Woman who loves], Ibid., 1920, No. 3, p. 61.

<sup>173</sup> „Fehér almavirág” [White Apple Blossom], Ibid., 1920, No. 6, p. 121.

<sup>174</sup> „Egy előfizető leánya” [Daughter of a Subscriber], Ibid., 1920, No. 6, p. 121.

About a decade later a new type of answer was given. It ran as follows:

“While it is true that affection and appreciation are more important in marriage than love, we say that an 18-year-old young girl, who is not even forced to get married, should realize it is no good being married without love. [...] Being a fiancée in love is undoubtedly one of life’s most beautiful gifts.”<sup>175</sup>

Yet, this did not mean that a woman’s purpose in life was considered to be only marriage and children. Getting married “does not bring happiness in itself,” the reader was advised, and “even single girls can have a nice, eventful, calm and harmonious life”.<sup>176</sup>

Thus, the “Answers to Correspondents” section shows that there was no uniform standpoint with respect to an important element or aspect of women’s issues. Moreover, there were “modernist” answers too, such as, beyond those already mentioned, the one supporting female employment and not even mentioning specifically female jobs,<sup>177</sup> or the texts presenting divorce as more decent than “being together dishonestly,”<sup>178</sup> or the acceptance that women could take the initiative and not wait for the man to start courting.<sup>179</sup> The reader who complained about modern women as “exceptionally vain, striving for independence, life, adoration and the limelight [...]” “dancing pressed against each other” and flirting, received a middle-of-the-road answer:

*“Deep in their heart women have not changed, they were only forced to change their behaviour and appearance. Admittedly, this suggests some degree of weakness. It would be nice not to make compromises and not give in fifty per cent to the spirit of the age [... but] in our hearts we also stayed ‘old-fashioned’ [...]”*<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Hortenzia 185 [Hydrangea 185], Ibid., 1931, No. 4, p. 123.

<sup>176</sup> „Új Idők 32” [New Times 32], Ibid., 1931, No. 4, p. 129.

<sup>177</sup> „Hóra I.” [I. Hóra], Ibid., 1920, No. 13, p. 265. (Hóra is a Romanian folk dance; in this case it must be a family name.)

<sup>178</sup> „Csalódott 3” [Disappointed 3], Ibid., 1920, No. 6, p. 121.

<sup>179</sup> „Ad Astra”, Ibid., 1936, No. 1, p. 39.

<sup>180</sup> “Szeretném, ha szeretnék” [I would love to be loved], Ibid., 1931, No. 6, p. 191.

This “new form, old essence” answer can be interpreted as a good example of the hybrid nature of the message carried by *Új Idők*, combining elements of traditional and modern femininity. The instances where these components appear side by side in the magazine abound. One of them is the cover of one of the first issues in 1930 revealing this tendency of presenting “new form, old essence.” It advertises the new novel by Kálmán Csathó, a noted Neo-Biedermeier author, with the image of a modern girl with short, curled hair, wearing lipstick and eyeshadow. Or the issue encouraging to go against the “spirit of the age” at the same as it was carrying an unmistakable and strong image of the modern woman: while pausing during skiing, a short-haired woman wearing trousers, lights up the cigarette of the man standing next to her with her own.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 1931. No. 6. (Front page). Among the fashion photos published at the beginning of the decade we can also find modern women: tall, slender, short-haired and wearing masculine clothes, even a tie. “Tavaszi divat. Hollóházi Radványi Magda rajza az Új Idők számára” [Spring Fashion. Magda Hollóházi Radványi’s Drawing for New Times], Ibid., 1930, No. 12, p. 370, 371.



## Chapter VI

# Transnational role models: the Flapper, the Girl and the Garçonne in Hungary

In the Horthy era, the relationship between men and women and the meaning of femininity was shaped not only by Hungarian media, but also by cultural expressions from abroad. In this chapter I set out to find out which female types one could meet in this period and how they were represented in popular culture.

Certain foreign films and novels propagated the Girl type of women. They also showed strong and independent women, the naïve and somewhat silly and uninhibited flapper, the *femme fatale* or vamp, and the completely uninhibited and boyish garçonne. These foreign types were similar in many respects. Over time, although we can tell where each of them originated, they became transnational and spread across Europe. For example in German illustrated magazines there were three types of the “New Woman”: the Gretchen, the naïve, ponytailed young girl who was somewhat feeble, to whom religion and traditions were important and who did not have much to do with sex. The Girl who did sports, was sexy, cold and calculating. Finally there was the “androgynous” garçonne, an independent artist and the opposite of the Gretchen in every aspect.<sup>182</sup>

### The flapper

In the 1920s, the Hungarian film market was dominated by American films. These films popularised the figures of the Girl and the flapper, and to a lesser degree the vamp, with her alleged “coldness.” In the 1930s these types were joined by different versions, the “rollicking Brooklyn girl with a fiery temperament who was always ready to dance” and the “tough, independent,

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<sup>182</sup> Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the War: Feminism and Film History*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2002, p. 149.

hounded and lonely” autonomous woman.<sup>183</sup>

Flapper was originally a British English expression that used to mean debutante. From it a figure evolved, that of the young girl dancing Charleston, smoking publicly and drinking cocktails. The American film *The Perfect Flapper* depicted precisely this transformation: The heroine is a boring, old-fashioned, unpopular girl who suddenly starts behaving like a flapper and immediately becomes popular. The protagonist of *Ella Cinders*, a poor stepdaughter from the countryside, becomes a film star – her character’s development takes an even more radical turn than that of *The Perfect Flapper*, since she becomes “somebody” out of “nobody”.<sup>184</sup>

The first so-called flapper film (*The Flapper*) was made in Hollywood in 1920 and informed femininity and the meaning of the feminine in the period until the Great Depression. In America the decade is often referred to as the Jazz Age. The makers of the film wanted young female viewers to identify as flappers. Another film striking the same kind of strings was *Wildness of Youth* (1922). Its advertisement said the following: “The great American flapper can now see herself!... Read the title and take a guess how many young people will dare to stay away!”<sup>185</sup> This shows that Hollywood discovered and constructed the market of young people and young people as goods as well as products. All this brought with it a change in the female, as well as the male, beauty ideal: flappers became protagonists. By making films that particularly targeted young audiences, filmmakers wanted to turn young people into devoted cinemagoers.<sup>186</sup> This was a new milestone in the industrialisation of American popular culture.

Many flapper films were screened in Hungary too, including several

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<sup>183</sup> Gyöngyi Balogh, “Vecséstől Hollywoodig (Putty Lia életútja)” [From Vecsés to Hollywood: The Life of Lia Putty], *Filmkultúra* [Film Culture], 1998. <http://www.filmkultura.hu/regi/articles/prints/putty1.hu.html>, Last accessed: August 12, 2014); *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 222–223.

<sup>184</sup> Corry Landay, “The Flapper Film. Comedy, Dance and Jazz Age. Kinaesthetics”, in: *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean – Diana Negra, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002, pp. 227–228. – See Tilda Szenes, “Self-made women”, *Literatúra*, 1933, No. 3, pp. 105–106.

<sup>185</sup> Sara Ross, “The Hollywood Flapper and the Culture of Media Consumption”, in: *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, ed. David Desser – Garth S. Jowett, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 68, 79.

<sup>186</sup> Cynthia Felando, “Hollywood in the 1920s: Youth Must Be Served”, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 82–90. – Some flapper feature films from the 1920s are: *The Flapper* (1920), *The Country Flapper* (1922), *The Married Flapper* (1922), *The Cowboy and the Flapper* (1924), *Flapper Wives* (1924), *The Painted Flappers* (1924), *The Perfect Flapper* (1924), *The Exalted Flapper* (1929).

“modern, in fact, ultramodern” works that were considered extremely daring by certain viewers and critics.<sup>187</sup> Really daring, or to be exact, “outrageous” was not the figure of the flapper but that of the *garçonne* and the vamp, which influenced the image and perception of the flapper as well. The flapper and the *garçonne* were not two entirely distinct types, not even “conceptually”: the unique style of Coco Chanel was identified in France as *garçonne*, but in England and America as *flapper*.<sup>188</sup>

## The *garçonne*

The 1922 novel *La Garçonne* by French author Victor Margueritte is the story of a certain Mademoiselle Lerbier who claims the rights of men for herself before marriage.<sup>189</sup> Contemporaries tended to perceive the book as highly controversial and an intense debate emerged over its meaning and moral value. In the meantime, the book sold in more than one million copies and its popularity was underscored by a song with the same title. The heated controversy even cost Margueritte his high distinction, the *Légion d'honneur*.

In Hungary it was one of the most popular novels in the 1920s: in 1923 it was published in the translation of Miklós Kállay, the literary editor of *Nemzeti Újság* [National Newspaper], a Catholic daily, under the suggestive title of *Lerbier kisasszony legényélete* [The Bachelor Life of Mademoiselle Lerbier]. The translator added a certain twist to the story. It is surprising that the translation was published at all (a publishing house took the financial risk), since the original French work was banned in Hungary because it was deemed “an agitation against the institution of marriage, demanding equality for

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<sup>187</sup> Budapesti Hírlap [Budapest Gazette], November 14, 1929, p. 11. – The article without title reported on a feature film titled “Our Dancing Daughters” (1928). Its Hungarian title was “Legénylányok” (Bachelor Girls) which referred to the French novel *La Garçonne* written by Victor Margueritte and the boyish life of modern women in general. The novel was published under the title *Lerbier kisasszony legényélete* (Miss Lerbier’s bachelor life). (See in the next chapter.)

<sup>188</sup> Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper. A madcap story of sex, style, celebrity, and the women who made America modern*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2006, p. 156.

<sup>189</sup> Erdős Renée’s novel, *The Big Scream* (A nagy sikoly, Dick Manó, Budapest, 1923), was published a year later and it focused “on an exploration of sexuality, and, as the title suggests, female sexual pleasure.” This novel also “was branded sheer ‘pornography’ by the Catholic press. At the other end of the spectrum, leftist publications found it ‘too Catholic and too conservative’.” Agatha Schwartz, *Shifting Voices: Feminist Thought and Women’s Writing in Fin-de-Siècle Austria and Hungary*, McGill-Queen University Press, Montreal, 2008, p. 175.

women”.<sup>190</sup> It was obvious that the translation would be banned as well which happened in 1923, the same year it got published.

The reason for the ban is explained in the diary of Gábor Oláh, a Hungarian author. He noted that:

“It contains everything good under the sun: sexual excitation in the darkness of theatre boxes and during parlour games, opium-fuelled debauchery, a naked male dancer, ‘aristocratic ladies’ sneaking into brothels for carnal pleasures, lesbianism, you name it. (Thank goodness that homosexuality was left out.) The heroine of the novel is Mademoiselle Monique. [...] When she is cheated on by her fiancé with a former lover, she decides to lead as free a life as bachelors before marriage. And indeed she does so. The best part is the ending: when everybody tramples over her, an ideal teacher marries her, accepting her past. [...] It is unfair [...] that while men can be promiscuous before marriage, we expect girls to preserve their virginity for their husbands. This moral attitude was certainly contrived by men, and poor good women have basically sanctioned it. Although I believe that girls not only lead a bachelor’s life in Paris but also in Budapest. Especially since the war. There must be very few true virgins left.”<sup>191</sup>

Sándor Eckhardt was ranting about the novel in *Napkelet* [Orient], a mainstream literary journal. He wrote it was “the lowest order of pornography,” an “utter piece of filth. It feigns an educational and satirical tendency, and yet it is an assortment of tastelessly linked vulgarities”.<sup>192</sup>

The allusion to “educational tendency” is not a coincidence. Other viewers

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<sup>190</sup> Cited Györgyi Markovits, “Francia vonatkozású kiadványok és a horthysta cenzúra” [Publications relating to France and the Horthyist Censorship], *Magyar Könyvszemle* [Hungarian Book Review], 1964, No. 3, p. 258. Cf. Györgyi Markovits, “Üldözött irodalom. Kitiltott, elkobzott, inkriminált prózai írások a Horthy-korszakban” [Persecuted Literature: Banished, Confiscated, and Incriminated Prosaic Writings in the Horthy period], in: *Az Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Évkönyve, 1961–1962* [The Yearbook of the National Széchényi Library, 1961–1962], OSZK, Budapest, 1963, p. 337.

<sup>191</sup> Gábor Oláh, *Naplók: 1918–1927* [Diaries, 1918–1927], ed. Lajos Lakner, Kossuth Egyetemi, Debrecen, 2002. Vol. 3, p. 315.

<sup>192</sup> Sándor Eckhardt, “Három francia könyv magyarul” [Three French Books in Hungarian], *Napkelet* [Orient], 1923, No. 6, p. 554.

and critics argued that the novel is ultimately the rejection of the indecent, promiscuous lifestyle. These people based their opinion on the ending, when Mademoiselle Lerbier becomes a happy fiancée. According to them, the novel “proved” that the essence of a woman’s life was to get married and not to be free. This interpretation or analysis is reflected in the first review about the novel in *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life]. It was dubbed a novel of a “whole new society” that “acquired the instruments of the greatest prosperity and affluence over the past years with suspicious suddenness, and bewildered by this wealth now vents its rage in extravagance, extremes and debauchery.” Mademoiselle Lerbier would like to abandon this lifestyle but first she goes astray. She wants to live as a man, but she is sickened by it and she looks for another way: she chooses “married life” alongside “a real man” where she achieves happiness.<sup>193</sup> Thus the novel claims that the only right solution for women is marriage.

The journalist of *Színházi Élet*, Andor Váró, who saw the film made from the novel as part of a six-member Hungarian censorship committee, was also of the opinion that the film was “pro-marriage” because at first the protagonist “demands the freedom of men for herself” but, then, she leaves the screen as a “happy fiancée”. Váró admitted that there were astounding scenes in the film, but also added that women dancing with one another and the “female pianist in a man’s hat” were characteristic of real Paris, and the film could not be blamed for that.<sup>194</sup>

The film was authorised for screening in Hungary after the fifth “inspection”, under the condition that it should not use the title *La Garçonne* or *Lerbier kisasszony legényélete*, not even an allusion could be made to these in the trailers and advertisements of the movie and the names of the characters had to be changed. Also, the most sexually explicit scenes were cut.<sup>195</sup>

In order to analyse a more general aspect of women’s issues, it is worth taking a closer look at the arguments aired during the authorisation process.

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<sup>193</sup> „Lerbier kisasszony legényélete” [Miss Lerbier’s bachelor life], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1923, No. 10, p. 45.

<sup>194</sup> Andor Váró, “A párizsi vörös malom. Filmbemutató hat ember előtt” [The Parisian Red Mill. Film premiere with Six Viewers], *Ibid.*, 1924, No. 7, p. 36.

<sup>195</sup> “A hírhedt Lerbier kisasszony – álarcban. Hogyan lett a La Garçonne-ból filmen Madame X?” [The Notorious Miss Lerbier – in Mask. How did La Garçonne transform into Madame X in the Feature Film?], *Ibid.*, 1925, No. 14, p. 53. – This weekly reported the complete process of the censorship: 1923, No. 45, p. 38; 1924, No. 15, p. 48; 1925, No. 17, p. 64.

The first time the film was rejected on account of three objections.

1. First, it was claimed that sexual equality of men and women was open for debate but not in cinema. The audience went to the cinema to have fun and therefore “paid no heed to the philosophical and socio-ethical aspects of a higher order behind the topic”. Thus it was the manner of media consumption that made the film inappropriate for screening. It was argued that “the idea behind the *garçonne* and the approach represented by it would not reach the souls through the filter of the intellect. It would attract people’s interest by the instinctive sophistry of the senses.”

2. Ideas about the impact of media also held the censors back from granting authorisation. As the censorship committee declared: “it would be entirely futile and harmful if the public of Hungarian cities and villages would get preoccupied by the issue of the *Garçonne*.” This kind of woman remained a foreign phenomenon in Hungary despite the “moral destruction” of the world war and the revolutions, and no film should be allowed to popularise it.<sup>196</sup>

3. Finally, the censorship committee employed the argument voiced by Sándor Eckhardt: although it was more “restrained” than the novel, among others, in portraying sexuality, the film could not convincingly show the triumph of morals, since the heroine had indulged in too much “indecenty” before she eventually chose the right path (marriage).

However, the interior minister took an opposite view and authorised the screening with the above-mentioned restrictions.<sup>197</sup>

The comment of the censorship committee about the impact of the media deserves more attention. Their remark about villages<sup>198</sup> strikes one as an exaggeration: why should one worry about the possible appeal of the *Garçonne* in smaller, rather conservative, and provincial communities? Yet, there is an example to show that the fears of the committee may have been well grounded (as were those of Eckhardt, that the “positive” ending would fail to counteract the “moral destruction” caused by everything preceding it).

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<sup>196</sup> Belügyi Közlöny [Bulletin of Ministry of Home Affairs], 1930, No. 53, p. 949.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 950.

<sup>198</sup> “...it would be quite futile and harmful if the public of Hungarian cities and villages were preoccupied by the issue of the *garçonne*.” (Emphasis added.) See footnote 195.

What I have in mind is a letter to the *Színházi Élet* and the reply to it by Reneé Erdős, a well-known author of the age, known for her erotic works and love life to begin with, and for her religious-themed novels, later. The letter was written by Miss “Cica” [Kitty] from Pánd, the daughter of a landowner, who had read Margueritte’s novel. “It changed my whole attitude towards love and marriage,” she wrote. Influenced by the book, she rejected the proposal of her suitor, even though he was a rich aristocrat whom she even loved. She did so because she “had never spoken to him about the problems of *girls’ bachelor life*.”

Reneé Erdős was widely known to have tried “girls’ bachelor life” herself. This time, however, in accordance with her newfound, religious identity accompanied by an intense nationalistic feeling due to Trianon, she answered as follows: Pánd is not Paris. Hungary was defeated and crushed. “A Hungarian girl [...] should be as self-denying and self-sacrificing a wife and mother as possible. This is the only way for her to help her country. [...] Individual life [i.e., individualism] has no right in a country that is dying under fatal blows. Every ‘Cica’ has to be a hero and aware that they serve and raise a new generation that will have a tough life.”<sup>199</sup>

As for the film, it created a new genre: *garçonne* films started to be produced. A case in point is the Swedish *Norrtullsligan* [The Norrtull Gang] produced by Bonnierfilm and screened in Hungary with the title *Garçon-leányok élete* [Life of the Garçonne Girls]. It was about the “modern type of girl” and the “free-thinking girl leading an independent life”. Its reception in Hungary was to some extent similar to that of the novel by Margueritte. It was claimed that the film and the girl type reflected conditions in Europe after the war: “*the aimless life of humanity, out of emotional balance [...], that vents its rage in extreme acts of sexuality*”.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> „Erdős Reneé Lelki útmutatója. Levelek a ma problémáiról” [Spiritual Guide of Reneé Erdős: Letters on the Problems of the Present], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1924, No. 25, p. 17.

<sup>200</sup> “A szerelemben is a szélsőségek felé hajlik a modern társadalom. Milyen a garçon-lányok élete? Erre a kérdésre felel egy film és Újhelyi Nándor” [The Modern Society Inclines also to the Extremity in Love. What is the Life of Garçonne Girls like? A Feature Film and Nándor Újhelyi Answer to this Question], *Ibid.*, 1925, No. 8, p. 72. Újhelyi was an “expert” of this theme since he wrote a novel titled *The Androgynies: About a Man Who Became a Woman and about a Woman who Became a Man* [A kétneműek. Egy férfiről aki asszony lett és egy asszonyról aki férfi lett] Világirodalom, Budapest, 1922.

Some film critics in Hungary regarded Gloria Swanson's film, screened in Hungary with the title *Amerikai lányok* [American Girls], as the quintessential American *garçonne* movie. A journalist for *Színházi Élet* wrote that the American counterpart of the European Mademoiselle Lerbier was born on the screen. The basis of similarity was that both of them depicted the type of woman, striving for independence, which emerged as a result of the changes in emotions and attitude brought about by the world war. The difference between the European and the American cases was that society created much fewer obstacles in the way of the independent woman in the USA.<sup>201</sup>

*Wings of Youth*, an American (flapper) film exemplified the continuation and variation of the figure of the *garçonne*. The reviewer in *Színházi Élet* claimed that the film was about the indecent girl, the "half-virgin", who was halfway between a prostitute and a virtuous woman.<sup>202</sup> Another review described its subject, a 1925 film about the life of a widow and her three daughters, as "A piquant and interesting film". As the daughters can live freely, they embrace their freedom and go out and flirt frequently, in other words, they commit "indecencies". When their mother found out, she attempted to change them in a paradoxical manner: she travelled to Paris to come back "reinvigorated", pretty and attractive. The rejuvenated, elegant woman then seduced the suitors of her daughters.<sup>203</sup>

The expression "half-virgin" used by the reviewer has its origins in Marcel Prévost's novel from the end of the 19th century: its title was *Half-Virgins*. The novel had three editions in Hungary and it was adapted to stage in 1896 with the title *Századvégi leányok* [End-of-the-Century Girls].<sup>204</sup> In early 1925 a film version of *Half-Virgins* premiered in the cinemas, with the following advertisement:

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<sup>201</sup> "Az amerikai Lerbier kisasszony Pesten! Rádió, jazz és repülőgép mint főszereplők" [The American Ms Lerbier in Pest! Radio, Jazz and Airplane as Central Characters], *Ibid.*, 1925, No. 1, p. 61. The film's original title in the US: *Prodigal Daughters*.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>203</sup> "Jazz-band, charleston, pezsgő! Pikáns és érdekes film az ultramodern lányok életéről" [Jazz-Band, Charleston, Champagne! Piquant and Interesting Feature Film about the Life of Ultra-Modern Girls], *Ibid.*, 1926, No. 18, pp. 44–45.

<sup>204</sup> The French Novel „Les Demi-Vierges” written by Marcel Prévost and its adaption to stage gave rise to a big scandal in Hungary in the last decade of the 19th century. See Eszter Balázs, "Szexuális kultúra, színház, cenzúra a 19. századvégi Budapesten. Egy értelmiségi tiltakozás és a sajtó" [Sexual Culture, Theatre, Censorship in Fin-de-Siècle Budapest. Intellectual protest and the press], *Médiakutató* [Media Research], 2014, No. 2, pp. 63–86.

“*Half-Virgins* presents us with the type of New Woman, a peculiar product of modern society, that nowadays is known everywhere. *Half-virgins* are girls that can only physically claim to be virgins, who have lost the guilelessness and purity of their souls long ago through the artful ways of the pleasures they experienced.”<sup>205</sup>

### **The impact of the flapper and the garçonne on one another**

In connection with the aftermath of *La Garçonne* in Hungary, it is worth mentioning that the flapper was often compared to the garçonne, and sometimes the two were considered to be the same. For example, according to an article titled “Flapper” in *Színházi Élet*, the flapper is “beautiful, young, temperamental, modern and free”. The flapper is rational: she cannot be seduced, and if she loves somebody, she first enters into a trial marriage. The author of the article concludes that “*the flapper [...] is the American garçonne,*” although she, instead of reading like the more educated garçonne, does sports.<sup>206</sup> Yet, she also leads a licentious life: evening garden parties often continue in the unlit pool where love is free for all. There is also “petting”, which, according to the article, is not sexual intercourse but an encounter where two people might hope for a kiss or two. Then there is “buddy love,” a relationship lasting for a couple of days and resulting in a few dear memories.<sup>207</sup>

An earlier instance of the apparent interchangeability of flapper and garçonne is the reception of the American film, *Flaming Youth* (1923), premiering in Hungary in 1925. It was a great success, shown continuously in the cinemas of Budapest from the end of November 1925 to mid-January 1926. One of its scenes from an evening pool party is notably bold because men and women jump into the water in underwear. The topic of the film is also bold: the heroine sees many unhappy marriages and, hence, she rejects the proposal of a serious suitor. She elopes with a musician to the tropics, and after some disappointments she returns to the reliable man. The story resembles that of

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<sup>205</sup> “‘Félszüzek’. – Pénteken premier a Royal-Apollóban” [Half-Virgins: Premiere in the Royal-Apollo Cinema on Friday], *Pesti Napló* [Pest Diary], January 22, 1925, p. 17.

<sup>206</sup> Imre Pán, “Flapper” [Flapper], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1929, No. 4, p. 49.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

Mademoiselle Lerbier: the woman fleeing from the negative examples first chooses “morally dubious ways” only to arrive eventually at the right one: marriage. The advertisement of the film states:

“It is a masterpiece of American filmmaking exploring new avenues. The *Flaming Youth* is the novel of the modern girl and modern morals. Colleen Moore presents us with unparalleled artistry the liberty of the 20th century and the love-seeking young girl who is almost ruined by the voracious pursuit of pleasures. However, the deep love of a mature man (Milton Sills) saves her from her fall. The young girl struggles to find love at the orgies of American millionaires and wild parties aboard luxury yachts while she approaches the ultimate goal of *Flaming Youth*: happiness.”<sup>208</sup>

The interchangeability of the meaning of flapper and *garçonne* can be illustrated with other articles as well. An entry in *Színházi Élet* in 1931 announced that the *garçonne* was no longer in vogue in Paris, while in the USA it was still fashionable. This suggests that the author felt that the two figures were identical or at least very similar.<sup>209</sup>

Others compared the *garçonne* to the Girl. According to a report, the “Troki Girls” in the Tátra nightclub formed a true “La *Garçonne* quartet in tuxedo, but their trousers were rather short under their dinner jackets.”<sup>210</sup> The caption under a sketch of a costume for the play *A pesti lány* [The Girl From Pest] reads: “Le *Garçonne* girls of the *Pesti lány*”.

The plot of *Pesti lány* is worth summarising for several reasons. First, it shows the American influence on the Troki Girls, the *garçonne* Girls and on Budapest nightlife. Second, it reflects the intention of embedding this into

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<sup>208</sup> Népszava [People’s Voice], November 27, 1926, p. 16. – This feature film was very popular in the USA too. Sara Ross, *The Hollywood Flapper*, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>209</sup> “A ‘La *Garçonne*’ tündöklése és bukása” [The Rise and the Fall of ‘La *Garçonne*’], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1931, No. 15, p. 234. – According to the well-known writer and journalist László Lakatos the change of Parisian fashion, especially the return of long hair and long skirt signed that the romantic and sentimental girl came into vogue. László Lakatos, “A divat divatja” [The Fashion of Fashion], *Tolnai Világlapja* [Tolnai’s World Magazine], 1930, No. 48, p. 9.

<sup>210</sup> “Stop, megállni!” [Stop and Halt!], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1925, No. 36, p. 46.

Hungarian culture and the nationalist narrative as well as its blending with the popular culture of Pest.

“A female typist from a fine but impoverished family in inner Budapest wins the great beauty pageant held on Saint Stephen’s Day [a national holiday].” As an additional prize, she gets a husband, a “distinguished young man”. The fine but impoverished family and the typist who finds a husband one could only dream about were the typical *topoi* of popular culture of the time: many films, novels and plays employed them. Bringing in Saint Stephen’s Day (when the founding of the Hungarian state is celebrated) linked the play to the nationalist discourse, while the beauty pageant and the Girls were American imports.<sup>211</sup>

Despite such examples I believe that the flapper and the *garçonne* appeared as two distinct types in the press. If they were considered identical it was because, as I have already mentioned, their “initial position”, which is female independence, was characteristic of both of them. (The Girl was portrayed as the poor younger sister of the flapper.)

The question of differentiation and overlapping motifs also arose in connection with another widely read foreign novel of the era, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by American author Anita Loos. While the screening of the film based on *La Garçonne* was permitted, the movie adaptation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was banned in Hungary.<sup>212</sup> A seemingly more innocent story, it presents a phase in a flapper’s life, in which the main character has affairs with several lovers until she finds her husband. It is not sexually explicit, and the story reads more like a parody of the flapper than anything else: The heroine attends a course training typists, she gets her knowledge about the world from the press, and she indulges in fantasies about herself as a writer.<sup>213</sup> To her, a performance in Folies Bergère is art. She claims that “the show was truly artistic because the girls on stage were naked”.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> László Lakatos – Adorján Stella, „Két szerző egy darabról” [Two Authors about one Play], *Ibid.*, 1926, No. 23, p. 26, 27.

<sup>212</sup> *Belügyi Közlöny* [Bulletin of Ministry of Home Affairs], 1928, No. 32, p. 672, 1928, No. 38, p. 750.

<sup>213</sup> Anita Loos, *Szókék előnyben* [*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*], Translated by Lili Hatvany, Athenaeum, Budapest, no date [1927], pp. 9–10.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Certain feminist women appear in the novel: for example Henry's sister, who used to drive a car in France during the First World War and since then has "despised women's clothes" and has only been interested in cars and horses.<sup>215</sup> There is also the wife of an English author who used to be a leader in a women's movement and who took the initiative and proposed to her husband. "Poor weak Gerry" did not dare say no. However, as she has been surrounded by feminists since then, her lovers are silly women (among them, the protagonist flapper herself).<sup>216</sup>

Although the story reads as a parody of the flapper, it is also a parody of weak and foolish men. For example, one storyline shows how a film censorship committee cut the obscene scenes from censored films and then splice them back into an erotic movie for their own entertainment. One of the committee members then goes on to become the fiancé and then husband of the flapper, and later sponsors a morally dubious film made by the flapper's lover.

Considering the novels by Victor Margueritte and Anita Loos, the difference between the two female types under examination seems clear. *Színházi Élet* wrote the following about them: "The 'flapper' is but a poor copy of the European Mademoiselle Lerbier." The "independent American girl", the flapper is "somewhat unruly but childishly naïve" and she is the "wonderful combination of an athletic man and a flirtatious woman". Calling her the "American Mademoiselle Lerbier" would be an overstatement because, in fact, she is a teenage girl.<sup>217</sup> In another piece Andor Váró, a film censor we have already quoted from, wrote that "inspired by [Margueritte] an American author wrote the novel of the American Mademoiselle Lerbier", and this author might have been Anita Loos. In Váró's discussion, the flapper resembles the Girl in German illustrated magazines: "she does not have any problems in love or life [...] She lives, laughs and does sports. She has no heart. She never suffers and she does not cry." But it also calls to mind the German *garçonne* portrayals: "She is the Miss America of the 20th century who wants to taste everything:

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 124, 127.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 15, 21.

<sup>217</sup> „A 'flapper' csak silány utánczata az európai Lerbier kisasszonynak [The 'Flapper' is Just a Low-Quality Imitation of the European Miss Lerbier], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1925, No. 23, p. 77.

women, the kiss of men, cocaine and whisky, but, then, she gets over one as easily as the other.” She does not have dreams and she is not touchy “like her European sisters,” the Mademoiselles Lerbier.<sup>218</sup>

The relationship between the two types and the two novels becomes clearer if we take a look at the articles published by *Színházi Élet* about the publication of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (the novel was first published in 1926 in a serialised form by this magazine). First, Menyhért Lengyel, an established writer declared that the flapper was the embodiment of the “lovely American ignorance” and was “close to the European cocotte” since she flirted and took advantage of everybody.<sup>219</sup> When the book appeared, it was recommended to readers as “.. a singular caricature of an intriguing female type. That of the blonde demon, the master of seduction [...] who does not resemble the *sensitive* courtesans of old in any respect.”<sup>220</sup> Thus, in this sense, the flapper and the *garçonne* were seen as similar in their sensitivity, or, rather, lack thereof.

## The impact of the flapper

The impact of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* can only be guessed from clues similar to those in the story from Pánd. In the matchmaking advertisements of *Színházi Élet* the phrase “blondes preferred” was often used or alluded to. Some advertisements since 1926 were aimed at finding a partner for carnal adventures:

“21-year-old, cheerful, intelligent boy would like to meet *for fun* a nice aristocratic young lady who would be his true *pal and dance partner*. Replies should be titled ‘Blondes preferred’ [...]”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the War*, op. cit.; Andor Váró, “Szerelem...! Yolanda élete. II. Fejezet” [Love...! Yolanda’s Life, 2nd Chapter], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1925, No. 49, pp. 50–51.

<sup>219</sup> “Hatvani Lili bárónő lefordította a legnagyobb sikerű amerikai regényt. Két new yorki lány, aki bejárja Európát. Lengyel Menyhért nyilatkozik Anita Loosról, a könyv szerzőjéről” [Baron Lili Hatvany Translated the Most Successful American Novel. Two Girls from New York tour Europe. Menyhért Lengyel Gives an Interview about Anita Loos who is the Author of the Book], *Ibid.*, 1926, No. 39, p. 15.

<sup>220</sup> “Új könyvek” [New Books], *Ibid.*, 1927, No. 10, p. 52. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 1926, No. 51, p. 114. (Emphasis added.)

There is a more temperate advertisement with a similar purpose from a year later:

“Due to lack of company, I would like to correspond with a *modern, young-minded* genteel girl. Blondes preferred.”

From many years later I found these two thinly veiled proposals:

“I am looking for the company of a 16–17-year-old Israelite genteel girl who would be my *close friend*. *Will cover possible costs*. Reply should be titled ‘Blondes preferred’.”

And:

“Well-groomed young man looking for *entertaining partner* 18–24, reply should be titled ‘Blondes preferred’.”<sup>222</sup>

The flapper as the promiscuous woman was only one of the contemporary interpretations. What we see, rather, is that the feminine beauty ideal changed, partly due to the effect of American films. This phenomenon is illustrated by matchmaking advertisements such as:

“[who wants to] marry a cheerful, Christian, 23-year-old young man with a fortune of 12,000? Replies with photos from genteel ladies are expected. Title should include ‘Blondes preferred’ [...]”

Or this:

“I would marry a very beautiful girl genteel to the core. Dowry secondary, I am a 31-year-old house owner. Reply expected by post. Include the words ‘Blondes preferred’ in title [...]”<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 1933, No. 18, p. 6; 1935, No. 2, p. 151. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 1933, No. 13, p. 2; 1933, No. 33, p. 5.

Although these references to blondes did not surface in the *Színházi Élet* until 1926, we may assume that neither a preference for blonde companions, nor the phrase “blondes preferred” were new phenomena. Matchmaking advertisements are interesting also because they show aspects of how the relationship between Hungarian men and women was changing. This process, i.e. the spread and public demonstration of relations, different from the traditional norm, had started earlier, in the last third of the 19th century. Still, the French and American influence seems to have intensified it, as I have shown by examples such as the impact of the novel and play by Prévost. To illustrate this, I would like to cite two advertisements that were published next to each other in one of the most popular dailies of the era, *Pesti Hírlap* [Pest Gazette]. The first starts with the well-known phrase:

“‘Blondes preferred’ We would like to meet two young ladies, please determine the exact time and place for the meeting. Send replies to the editor and include the phrase ‘Boat-owning company manager’.”

The second suggests a less lewd relationship which, however, is still different from the one deemed traditional and decent. The advertiser writes:

“Companionship with pretty young lady sought by independent young man who will cover the expenses of modest amusements. Letters are to be sent to the editor, title your reply ‘Pleasant’.”<sup>224</sup>

We can see that the novels we discussed previously became part of the cultural stock of the readership of *Színházi Élet* and other publications. These readers came from a variety of social backgrounds. In Hungary, according to certain social history narratives, the modern, middle-class part of society was clearly distinct from the traditional, feudal part. Nevertheless, the daughter of a landowner from rural Pánd, a young man from the city looking for a dance partner, a house owner and the man looking for a young Israelite girl all used

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<sup>224</sup> *Pesti Hírlap* [Pest Gazette], September 13, 1929, p. 20.

the same symbols. Therefore we can consider them uniform in at least one respect: as a subcultural group, since, despite their different social backgrounds, they were the consumers of the same popular, urban culture that was partly “of foreign (Western) origin”. The size of this subcultural group cannot be established, but we can assume that it was comprised of members with above-the-average incomes, because of the relatively high subscription fees to publications such as *Színházi Élet*.<sup>225</sup> Of course, this group was not confined to the readership of one single weekly. But readers of *Színházi Élet*, that sold approximately 40,000 copies, were surely part of this subculture.

Through the example of the landowner’s daughter from Pánd, we have seen the impact of the *garçonne* on one young woman of the provinces.<sup>226</sup> I will end this chapter with two other examples that illustrate the impact of the *garçonne*. The first shows that in 1927, in a poorer and less developed Hungarian small town, there were some who considered the figure of the *garçonne* highly objectionable but accepted female emancipation. In an article published in *Békésmegyei Közlöny* [Bulletin of Békés County], the author portrayed women’s participation in higher education, paid employment and independent life as perfectly normal. The fact that the author depicted masculine girls as positive is truly surprising, and it suggests that it was not considered outrageous in Hungary at that time, although sexual transgressions still were.

The starting point of the article is that, while girls were previously not supposed to ride bicycles, by 1927 it was no longer regarded as indecent. The girl on a bicycle symbolised that “today even girls need to be raised almost as boys so that they can succeed in the competition of life.” The author contended further that

“Today’s life is unlike [...] life ten years ago.

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<sup>225</sup> For example, the annual subscription fee of *Színházi Élet* was 40 pengős, while a middle-class lifestyle required at least 450 pengős a month. The price of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was 3 pengős, i.e. it was part of the midcult since it was much more expensive than the cheap book series containing popular novels, but it was cheaper than “high” literature (which cost at least twice as much per book).

<sup>226</sup> Although *Színházi Élet* belonged in the sphere of popular culture, it did not endorse, on behalf of Hungarian women and from a nationalist platform, the norms and values of the lifestyle of modern women. This rejection is surprising for two reasons. First, because *La Garçonne* was part of the popular culture, and second because *Színházi Élet* advertised the film based on *La Garçonne* several times.

[...] The outlines of a new life are appearing in front of our eyes. We can lay women's silky hair onto the tombstone of romantics, their curls make a rustle while falling as the scissors of the hairdresser cut them. This was the first paintbrush on the portrait of women that brought them closer to the looks of men. One may lament this but we need to accept it. Later, women put on pyjamas and took another leap toward looking like men. Recently "having a *garde de dame*" was widespread. Women could and would not take a step unescorted without putting themselves in danger of being approached. Nowadays when we travel and go to foreign spas, we see women everywhere without a *garde de dame*, having fun and moving carelessly among people.

The world changed much in ten years. Ten or fifteen years ago the education of a girl usually culminated in the four years at middle school. Today the minimum intellectual level expected of both boys and girls is a secondary school diploma. Most [women] attend college. They are everywhere where there are men, they work together. It is thus natural that [...] a new type is emerging. The farther we go to the West, the more likely we are to see women riding bicycles. And these women usually wear sports trousers.

[...] Time never stops. Even if we reject Marguerite's *La Garçonne*, we have to come to terms with the fact that what was true ten years ago is now a thing of the past. Nowadays girls ride bicycles, do sports, attend secondary school and university, and rarely sit around in their white-walled girls' rooms eagerly awaiting the arrival of the prince of their dreams in a golden carriage. This is the result of the new female emancipation that appeared in our lives unobserved and triumphantly shapes the type of the New Woman. The New Woman, who will be less into romantics but much more into life."<sup>227</sup>

Our last example from 1937 shows that 10 years later even the *garçonne* itself became widespread and somewhat commonplace. (Incidentally it also illustrates

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<sup>227</sup> Sz., "A bicikli" [The Bicycle], Békésmegyei Közlöny [Bulletin of Békés County], August 10, 1927, p. 5.

that the Hungarian film censorship had become more experienced in dealing with erotic films by the end of the 1930s.) Hungarian cinemas screened the second, 1936 version, of *La Garçonne* in this year. This time, the screening was not preceded by a scandal as in 1924. The censored film, called *A garszonylány* [The Garçonne Girl] was reviewed in *Magyar Kultúra* [Hungarian Culture], an ardently Catholic magazine. The critic was surprised that such an uninteresting film was produced at all. According to the critic, the film did not tell much about women leading a bachelor's life either in terms of story or in terms of psychology.<sup>228</sup>

Similarly, Lili Hatvany, the translator of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* who worked for *Színházi Élet*, wrote that the film was boring and childish; compared to the film even Mickey Mouse might count as erotic. “We almost thought that this was how an apothecary's wife living in a small country town in the middle of the past century may have imagined the life of independent girls. Champagne, opium, free love...,” wrote Hatvany contemptuously, suggesting that Paris in the 1920s was much wilder than that.<sup>229</sup> Thus, a story that caused great uproar 13 years earlier was far from scandalous in 1937.

## Summary

While the Horthy era may have been conservative and the mainstream media may have popularised traditional gender relations, it seems that female emancipation became accepted in the urban environment. This was, in part, facilitated by images of the scandalous modern woman. Although the garçonne was too much for most, the modern, independent and boyish girl seems to have been accepted, even in small towns. Hence, while the life of the modern woman was considered shocking in the 1920s, her practices became common by the end of the 1930s. Finally, the above mentioned distinction and similarity between the interpretations of the flapper, the garçonne and the girl shows the transnational nature of these female types: one was mostly interpreted as an alternative to, or mutation of, the other and not as a separate, specifically French

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<sup>228</sup> Lajos Máthé (Molnár), “Filmszemle: A garszonlány” [Film Review: The Garçonne Girl], *Magyar Kultúra* [Hungarian Culture], 1937, No. 1, p. 92.

<sup>229</sup> “Hatvany Lili mozi levele” [Lili Hatvany's Cinema Letter], *Színházi Élet* [Theatrical Life], 1937, No. 7, p. 14.

or American role-model. In the process of appropriating these transnational female types, some Hungarian versions emerged too (see photo 10).



Photo 10: one of the most popular weeklies shows a modern girl in a “typically Hungarian” context (after all, the Hungarian was an “equestrian nation”)



## Chapter VII

### New Women and modern girls in Hungarian films

In the 1930s, due to the appearance of the talkies on the one hand, and the protectionist film policy of the Hungarian government on the other, Hungarian films became prominent in cinemas. These films were censored twice. An authorisation was required for production and another for screening. As a result, the films making it to the screen were actually “co-produced”, on the one hand, by the private companies seeking popularity (increased market-shares) and higher profits, and, on the other, by the government appointed censors who sought to promote the norms and values of the traditional (patriarchal) gender order. The tension thus created is obvious: unlike the excitement evoked by the popular media following Western patterns, the public’s interest for the ideal movie from the point of view of the censors was, at best, lukewarm. In a context like this, one might wonder whether the twice-censored films showed and popularised the traditional female roles or whether the opposite was true: did filmmakers manage eventually to accommodate the viewers’ taste? Were the films concerned with the change in the relationship between men and women, and with the new types of female roles and identities?

I will address these questions briefly based on certain categories of Hungarian films.

#### **Weak man, strong woman**

In general we can say that many Hungarian films did thematise the modern woman and the change in the relationship between men and women. Either the plot itself revolved around these issues or one or another of the “subplots” were. Györgyi Balogh and Jenő Király, two Hungarian film historians, claim that people in the 1930s did not know what to make of the “complicated female types” that emerged in society between the early 1890s and the 1920s. The film historians believe that certain Hungarian films from the ‘30s demonstrate this uncertainty as well as the perceived fears that it caused in men. One example is *Pókháló* [Spider’s Web] from 1936, which was directed by the first female

director in Hungary, Mária Balázs, and in which, according to the historians, “the man is the fly and the woman is the spider”.<sup>230</sup>

In the film, we are presented with two examples of untraditional relationships between men and women: a romance between a poor secondary school teacher and his pupil, the daughter of a university professor, and the relationship between a young actor with feminine gestures and a spinster teacher, who keeps him. The actor also courts the professor’s daughter, but eventually he marries the teacher. The professor’s daughter, portrayed as spinning her spider’s web, also succeeds in marrying her “prey”, the timid teacher (who, incidentally, is a biology professor specializing in the study of spiders ...).

Another film focusing on relationships between “weak” men and strong women, is *Régi nyár* [The Summer of Old] from 1941, directed by Félix Podmaniczky. The protagonists are Ria, a prima donna; Péter Tamássy, landowner and Ria’s former lover; Ria’s daughter, Éva, who wears trousers and wants to become an actress; and Tamássy’s son, the shy Miklós who becomes infatuated with both the mother and the daughter, and marries Éva in the end because the mother (Ria) breaks up with him. The film resembles the *Wings of Youth*, the previously discussed flapper film from 1925 in that here too the mother seduces the lover of her own daughter.

*Szerelem nem szégyen* [Don’t Be Ashamed of Love] from 1940, directed by Ákos Ráthonyi, illustrates the change in the relationship between men and women, how traditional social relations are turned upside down. One of the characters is a completely impoverished count, Kázmér Kátay, who (together with a poor French governess) gets through the hardest days of his life on a pontoon. Kátay becomes a butler and marries the French governess who is a librarian in the same castle. Then the former lover of the count appears and declares: “I am financially independent, and I would like to marry you,” offering, as it were, to provide for the impoverished count. The offer comes too late, but shows that the whole world has turned upside down.

The change in the relationship between men and women is also presented

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<sup>230</sup> Gyöngyi Balogh – Jenő Király, ‘Csak egy nap a világ...’ A magyar film műfaj- és stílustörténete 1926–1936 [The World is Just a Day: The History of Hungarian Film in Terms of Genre and Style 1929–1936], Magyar Filmintézet, Budapest, 2000, p. 474.

in *Hotel Kikelet* [Spring Hotel] from 1937. In this film, directed by Béla Gaál, the wife runs a family's hotel while the husband acts as her secretary. This is because the wife – the dominant party in the relationship – believes that the hotel will be more successful if it is managed by a single woman who attracts men “in search of prey”. According to the interpretation of László Kelecsényi:

“As if screenwriter László Vadnai made up this dramatic situation to prove that women are just as good leaders as men. But, of course, not even he took this – at that time – daring notion seriously. By the end of the film, he tones down his provocative viewpoint. The story shows that after all it is better if the husband runs the institution. And the wife must stay, if not by the stove, then certainly in the second line.”<sup>231</sup>

One of the most popular films of the era, the melodrama *Halálos tavasz* [Deadly Spring] from 1939, is also about the relationship between strong women and weak men. A man living with two strong women could choose between the vamp and the modern girl.<sup>232</sup> In the prevailing situation the modern girl would mean refuge for the man, she could be the right woman as she would be willing to subjugate herself to him – and yet their relationship (for the brief time it lasts) is very modern.

### **The modern woman as the enemy**

In other films the modern woman, “the new woman of the times” is contrasted with the “woman resembling the saintly grandmothers”.<sup>233</sup> This is the kind of tension that carries the movie directed by Béla Galánthai Balogh with the suggestive title of *Mindenki mást szeret* [Everybody Loves Someone Else] from 1940. The male protagonist is a self-sacrificing doctor in the countryside who does not put up with the fact that there are unhealthy living quarters for maids in his area. His wife lives in the city and she only visits Dr Horváth

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<sup>231</sup> László Kelecsényi, *Vászon szerelem. A magyar hangosfilm krónikája 1931-től napjainkig* [Screen Love: The Chronicle of the Hungarian Sound Film from 1931 to To Our Day], Noran, Budapest, 2003, p. 25.

<sup>232</sup> István Juhász, *Kincses magyar filmtár 1931–1944* [Treasure of Hungarian Film 1931–1944], Kráter, Pomáz, 2007, pp. 100–101. (The director of this feature film was László Kalmár.)

<sup>233</sup> Gyöngyi Balogh – Jenő Király, ‘Csak egy nap a világ...’, op.cit., p. 164, 165, 167. (Emphasis added.)

when she needs money. She is a woman of loose morals who does nothing but listen to the radio, smoke and sing; she flirts a lot, and even cheats on her husband. The female protagonist is Jolán, the nurse, who tries to build a home for sick children. The problem is the wife, and the solution could be either the transformation of the wife, or divorce and the union of Dr Horváth and Sister Jolán. In the end the latter happens: the wife falls in love with an American actor (!) who shoots a film in the village and she leaves her husband. Jolán agrees that the village needs a “new and better life,” and joins the doctor. The woman here is the helper of the man but – presumably – she will perform this role in the public sphere (we cannot know for sure because it is not shown in the film), while the character of the modern woman is portrayed as being very unpleasant. Her “wickedness” is underlined by the fact that she is the antagonist of the male hero who helps the poor and destitute.

The problem in this film is actually the bad marriage rooted in the conflict of an egoistic wife and her altruistic husband. The same is manifest between Sister Jolán, the embodiment of traditional womanly virtues and the egoistic and immoral modern woman, the doctor’s wife.

### **Marriage as the aim of the woman**

Marriage as an objective in women’s life as well as good and bad marriages were themes in numerous films. Many popular films showed the main purpose of women was to get married, but not on the basis of economic or social considerations, as in the case of conventional marriage, but out of love. Contrary to the usual portrayal of modern woman, these films suggested that the aim of such women was not work, education or self-fulfilment but the traditional roles of wife and mother.

In one of the scenes of *Budai cukrászda* [Confectionery in Buda] from 1935 somebody tries to complete a crossword puzzle and asks what could “Happy woman, four letters” be, and the answer he receives is unequivocal: “Wife!”<sup>234</sup> According to the protagonists of *Férjet keresek* [Looking for a Husband] from

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<sup>234</sup> In the original conversation the Hungarian word “ara” was mentioned. (This feature film is also known as “Budapest Pastry Shop”.)

1939, there is nothing more distressing to a woman than not being married. The heroine of *Cserebere* [Exchange] from 1940 is sceptical. She believes that “marriage is like coffee. Black, sour and there is always some residue.” The unemployed man in love speaks in a “woman’s voice” when he replies: “But there is also some sugar in it. The child for whom it is worth going through anything.” (This dialogue takes place in a spa in Budapest with children playing in the background, which reinforces the message.)<sup>235</sup>

Certain films portrayed modern girls in the manner feminists were depicted some decades earlier, when they were looked down on. These films suggested that modern girls only led a modern life until they found love, until fortune smiled on them. This resonates well with the old anti-feminist discourse in the prewar era, claiming feminists were castaways who only remained feminists until they found a husband.<sup>236</sup> One of these films is *Édes ellenfél* [Sweet opponent] from 1941, directed by Emil Martonffy. Towards the end of the film the man in love has second thoughts: he had believed for a long time that women needed the kitchen and children for happiness but now he realised that this was not the case. One of his friends assures him that in general he is right but there is one exception: the woman in love who does not wish for anything but to be in the kitchen and have children.

The same view was propounded by three other films: In *Az én lányom nem olyan* [My Daughter is Not Like That] from 1937, we see modern girls who frequent nightclubs and send their chaperoning parents home. They are chain-smokers, their clothes are provocative, yet their goal in life is to get married. *Mai lányok* [Today’s Girls], also from 1937, is about enterprising girls who are working modern women and modern girls at the same time, but financially they also find (or would like to find) refuge in marriage. In *A harmincadik* [The Thirtieth] from 1941, the woman character is a university student who devotes her time to helping and supporting the man, a teacher working to help poor children.

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<sup>235</sup> The directors of the feature films mentioned in this paragraph were Béla Gaál, Emil Martonffy and László Cserépi.

<sup>236</sup> Géza Csáth, *Rejtelmek labirintusában. Összegyűjtött esszék, tanulmányok, cikkek* [In the Labyrinth of Mysteries: Collected Essays, Studies, and News Articles], ed. Mihály Szajbély, Magvető, Budapest, 1995, p. 461.

By the time the man succeeds in his struggles, the woman no longer dreams of graduation, only about marrying the teacher and serving him as a housewife at home.<sup>237</sup>

## The modern woman

There are countless examples of the type of woman seeking independence in work and education in Hungarian films. Among the young girls and women there are also sporadic cases where the aim is to enter the world of professions and higher learning.

In *Pókháló*, the heroine, who prepares for her final exam in the high school (gymnasium), is told by her professor father "... the university is inundated with women whose place at best would be in dance school". In *A harmincadik*, a man, playing cards, exclaims: "Why go to university if she can marry?" This, of course, suggests that women should "act modern" or, indeed, do anything in the public sphere only if they have no chance of marrying. The question whether or not to pursue university studies could also present itself as a choice between marriage or independence, as in *Varjú a toronyórán* [Crow on the Clock Tower] from 1938.<sup>238</sup> Two characters disagree: the woman does not want to give up studying because she wants to "live from what she learns," but the man believes that this does not make sense, since she is getting married anyway.

*Barátságos arcot kérek* [Keep Smiling] from 1935 is about the conflict between the working "New Woman" and the modern girl. The fiancée of the inventor of the television who, characteristically, is called "Mary" (instead of *Mária* which is the Hungarian version of the name), plays tennis all the time and is a flirt, while the woman who in the end becomes the inventor's wife is the daughter of a photographer and works alongside her father.<sup>239</sup> The moral of

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<sup>237</sup> The directors of the mentioned feature films were László Vajda (*My Daughter is Not Like That*), László Cserépy and Imre Apáthi (*The Thirtieth*). *Today's Girls* was directed by Béla Gaál and based on the novel a very popular female writer, Jolán Földes "who won first prize at an international novel contest in 1936, sold million of copies in a dozen languages, emigrated to Britain in 1941, and switched to writing in English under the penname Yolanda Clarent". Sándor Hites, "Losing Touch, Keeping in Touch, Out of Touch: The Reintegration of Hungarian Literary Exile after 1989", in: *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe: A Compendium*, ed. John Neubauer – Borbála Zsuzsanna Török, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin – New York, 2009, p. 534. (Földes's award-winning novel was *The Street of the Fishing Cat*.)

<sup>238</sup> This feature film was directed by Endre Rodriguez.

<sup>239</sup> Director was László Kardos.

the story is to marry the hard-working woman, not the flirtatious modern girl because the former is the better wife for a working man.

A modern girl is the heroine of *Márciusi mese* [Tale from March, from 1934] too. Bank manager Kende calls her daughter “a girl of today”. The man who is in love with her, believes that she is “a high-stepping lady,” “a real, athletic panther” and “a Greta Garbo” who “bites my mouth” while kissing.<sup>240</sup>

Smoking was often used as a marker of modern girls in films: it was a means to express women’s equality with men. (In some Hungarian films, however, smoking was used not to identify the modern girl but the vamp, like in *Halálos tavasz*.) In *Az új rokon* [The New Relative] from 1934, a supporting character (Málcsi) dreams about an independent life and therefore cuts her hair short, puts on lipstick and lights up a cigarette. In *Maga lesz a férjem* [You Will Be My Husband] from 1937, a helper and friend of the heroine, Vera, asks a man for a cigarette in an artless manner while the band plays the Charleston.<sup>241</sup>

## The portrayal of divorce

We have already seen an example where the plot ended in a divorce and the promise of a new and successful marriage. In this respect, *Karosszék* [Armchair] from 1939 is even more daring than *Mindenki mást szeret*. In *Karosszék*, directed by Béla Balogh, the lawyer husband is blamed instead of the wife. He keeps her completely subjugated and tells her what she, the daughter of a retired colonel, can do and what she can spend her money on. The wife, however, “commits a grave mistake” one day and purchases an armchair from the money she received from her father. Upset about the investment made without his endorsement, the husband sells the chair and declares that its price will be deducted from the wife’s allowance in monthly instalments. The woman moves back to her father in whose eyes the son-in-law has proven unworthy of marriage. The colonel supports the daughter’s decision to move away from her husband and, when another man, an engineer, starts to woo her, he befriends him. The engineer decides to enlarge the house of his future father-in-law so

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<sup>240</sup> This feature film directed by Emil Martonffy is also known as “Ironman”.

<sup>241</sup> The director of both “The New Relative” and “You Will Be My Husband” was Béla Gaál.

that the three of them (and the children) should have enough space. The woman, of course, argues that the divorce may take months, to which the engineer says that there is nothing immoral in enlarging the house. In this case the source of the conflict is not modernity or the “modern ways” of either party. Rather it is the usurpation of the traditional role and power of the husband.<sup>242</sup> The wife becomes a modern woman in response this, refusing to accept the humiliation and claiming equality. Her revolt does not logically entail the appearance of the new man, and this twist in the story can be interpreted in two ways: first, that a woman’s aim is love and marriage under all circumstances or, second, that she first breaks a ceiling by leaving the marriage and, then, breaks another one by entering a new relationship. In any case, the divorce does not constitute a transgression of the prevailing gender order.

## Summary

On average 30–40 Hungarian films were made each year in the 1930s and during the Second World War. These, almost without exception, belonged to the sphere of popular culture. Probably because of the constant pressure to respond to the market’s needs, the majority of films reflected the emergence of the new cultural models of the modern woman. The film industry catered to all kinds of needs, proven by the fact that we can find numerous examples of modern women being portrayed as positive characters. Even in films where one of the modern women is a negative character, it is often counteracted by some positive (and modern) characters. In contrast to French, American and Swedish films, however, the modern women with positive characters in the Hungarian filmic imagery did not experience the kind of amorous or erotic adventures that would have turned them into a *garçonne*, or a flapper on the screen. This moderation is no doubt the result of the more conservative censorship of films in Hungary. As I have already mentioned, censorship in Hungary controlled the whole production process and deleted erotic scenes as soon as they appeared in the script.

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<sup>242</sup> Women represented the social and economic status of the middle-class family by way of consumption. In this respect, wives played a major role since, to some extent, they determined how to spend their husbands’ earnings. See the chapter “Two phenomena: the onset of emancipation and the first wave of feminism”.

## Conclusion

Recurring metaphors in women's history, such as "wave" or "low ebb" of feminism, suggest that each "wave" represented a new, progressive "stage of development" interspersed with setbacks. This is a teleological approach premised on the assumption of a development towards some kind of final 'fulfilment'. It also disregards important events. Maureen Moynagh and Nancy Forestell argue that:

"It is always problematic to establish a 'beginning' and an 'endpoint' for women's movements. While feminist historians once conceived of 'waves' in these terms, more recent scholars have recognized the extent to which it makes more sense to trace patterns of continuity and transformation, and have argued that in fact the more established chronologies neglect the ongoing activism of some groups of women."<sup>243</sup>

In our case, disregarding important activism and phenomena, as a result of the use of the "waves" metaphor, means ignoring conservative, nationalist, Christian women's rights movements. As I have shown, certain conservative, nationalist and Christian women's organisations strove to change the patriarchal social order to some extent, albeit in response to and inspired by the efforts of the feminist movement. These organisations were also motivated in their efforts by economic and social pressures, such as the diminishing living standards of the middle class and the skewed demographic balance between the male and female populations in the wake of the war.

The heavy institutional focus of the conventional periodisation and the conventional feminist narrative often led to ignoring organisations that were not expressly feminist, to disregarding individual and collective agency outside institutions and women's movements as well as the public, non-political spheres.

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<sup>243</sup> Maureen Moynagh – Nancy Forestell, "General Introduction: Documenting First Wave Feminism", op. cit. p. XXIII.

1. As regards the issue of agency, in the case of interwar Hungary, the traditional approach considers the state as a homogenic and successful oppressor that was able to marginalise women's movements' and their initiatives. It also argues that the state controlled and determined women's engagement through the political and cultural structures developed by it, and did not allow individual or collective initiatives.<sup>244</sup> However, the state was not a monolith, it consisted in a number of agencies with relative autonomies and their rivalry created opportunities for reshaping gender relations possible. As Georgina Waylen asserts:

“The state is [...] ‘an uneven and fractured terrain with dangers as well as resources for women’s movements’ [...]. Consequently, while the state has for the most part acted to reinforce female subordination, the space can exist within the state to act to change gender relations [...]. At different times and within different regimes, opportunity space can be used to alter the existing pattern of gender relations.”<sup>245</sup>

This “fractured” nature of the state is attested by the different approaches of two major education ministers of the interwar period. Kunó Klebelsberg expanded women's (both students' and instructors') rights at universities, while Bálint Hóman curbed them. In a similar fashion, the universities (all state institutions) and the faculties had different attitudes towards women. Such “fractures” or differences were sought out and used by MANSZ (the National Federation of Hungarian Women), the rather conservative Association of Hungarian Female Graduates, as well as female MPs, university students, and professors.<sup>246</sup>

2. In connection with the various spheres of public life, the significance of women's associations needs to be highlighted. These organisations interacted, to varying degrees of intensity, with each other and with other political and cultural organisations. The network comprised, among others, the Feminist Association,

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<sup>244</sup> For the theoretical background, see Barry Barnes, *Understanding Agency: Social Theory and Responsible Action*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 88–89.

<sup>245</sup> Georgina Waylen, “Gender, feminism and the state: An overview”, in: *Gender, Politics and the State*, ed. Vicky Randall – Georgina Waylen, Routledge, London, New York, 1998, p. 8.

<sup>246</sup> The issue of female agency is discussed in more detail in: Barbara Papp – Balázs Sipos, *Modern, diplomás nők a Horthy-korban*, op. cit., pp. 27–32., 302–305.

MANSZ, the Federation of Women's Associations in Hungary, the National Federation of Hungarian University and College Students, the Association of Hungarian Female Graduates and the Federation Against Capital Punishment. Some women's organisations were also part of international networks: the Feminist Association became a member of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1905, while the Association of Hungarian Female Graduates was founded in 1925 as the Hungarian division of the International Federation of University Women. The Federation of Women's Associations in Hungary was founded as the Hungarian section of the International Council of Women. International ties were important even to the nationalist MANSZ: after the world war, it wished to participate in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, of which the Feminist Association had already been a member.<sup>247</sup> There were other types of international ties as well. For example, in 1928 the Budapest Soroptimist Club was established as part of the movement that started in the US in 1921. This shows that Hungary was to a significant extent an open society, and many women's organisations of various world views and types understood the importance of international ties.

From the perspective of female emancipation, universities represented another, similarly important public sphere. On account of the steady 13% share of female students in the student body, "the image of the educated, independent, professional woman was finally accepted".<sup>248</sup> Therefore female university students and graduates were successful in shaping the new (modern) meaning of femininity (female skills). Just like those women who were active in women's organisations, the public sphere (outside their homes), and who interpreted femininity in the maternal and national frame.

The third sphere was cultural. Within that, I have emphasised the role of popular culture since that reached the most recipients and could have had a substantial impact on how gender roles and norms developed. Possibly, popular culture played a greater role in constructing and shaping the meaning of femininity than did women's organisations or female graduates.

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<sup>247</sup> "Bonyodalmak a genfi nőkongresszus körül" [Complications around the Women's Congress in Geneva], *A Nő: Feminista Folyóirat* [The Woman: Feminist Journal], 1920, No. 1–4, (July) p. 1.

<sup>248</sup> Mária Kovács M., "Ambiguities of emancipation: women and the ethnic question in Hungary", *op. cit.*, p. 494.



*Photo 11.: "This is America!" Photomontage from the yearbook of the most popular newspaper  
Az Est*

As various products of foreign popular media (like American movies, American and French novels – see photo 11) exerted a major influence over the sphere of Hungarian popular culture, their analysis shows us the models women could and did choose from in Hungary. We can see that as a result of globality, examples and models from afar shaped and transformed local social relations.<sup>249</sup> As Ulrich Beck stated, in in general terms:

“Globality means that we have been living for a long time in a world society, in the sense that the notion of closed spaces has become illusory. No country or group can shut itself off from others. Various economic, cultural and political forms therefore collide with one another, and things that used to be taken for granted (including in the Western model) will have to be justified anew. ‘World society’, then, denotes the totality of social relationships which are not integrated into or determined (or determinable) by national-state politics. [...] ‘World’ in the combination ‘world society’ thus means difference or multiplicity, and ‘society’ means non-integration, so that we may [...] conceive world society as multiplicity without unity.”

And later he added: “local ways of life were uprooted and filled with ‘examples’ coming from somewhere else entirely regarding both social and spatial origins.”<sup>250</sup> This means that we can gain a better understanding of the development of femininity’s meaning and thus Hungarian women’s history through the entangled history of media.

In a nutshell, official Hungary in the interwar years was an authoritarian state that censored domestic as well as foreign media products (books, newspapers, movies, plays) and marginalised and merely tolerated the feminist movement. However, this was offset by a number of tendencies:

- the spread of the female emancipation idea before the war, and the fact that conservative women’s organisations accepted it,

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<sup>249</sup> See footnote 136.

<sup>250</sup> Ulrich Beck, *What Is Globalization?* op. cit. p. 47.

transforming their gender norm system accordingly (which was the result of the Feminist Association's activities);

- the strengthening of the influence of conservative women's organisations representing national and maternal feminism in interwar Hungary;
- the "fractured" nature of the state;
- women's organisations' new international ties and those that were preserved from the prewar era;
- the fact that the effects of women's social mobilisation during the world war persisted as a social experience even after the war;
- the rise in the number of middle-class women in salaried employment due to the economic crisis and poverty following the war, and their acceptance;
- the rise in the number of independent woman type due to the postwar imbalance between male and female populations (the "female surplus");
- the rise in the number of active modern women (like female MPs, university students and graduates) and the example they set for the rest of society;
- finally, foreign and Hungarian popular culture propagating modern female role models.

I use the word 'offset' to underline the fact that due to the aforementioned reasons, there was no setback that would have meant a return to the pre-1914 period in Hungary after the first "wave" of feminism. In the post-war context, gender norms changed irreversibly, and these new norms (e.g. modern female types) became increasingly widespread and accepted, often contrary to the intention of state actors. This was an ambivalent, transitory situation which is shown by the various hybrid Hungarian organisations and the media. The latter were shaped by the ambivalent political, social and cultural situation on the one

hand, and the foreign, transnational contents (like the imagery of modern girls) on the other.<sup>251</sup>

The social impact of popular media is indicated by the fact that the new gender norms became increasingly widespread and accepted in Budapest, a metropolis, and also in other cities and even in smaller villages. This impact prompted state agencies to intervene from time to time, as we have seen in connection with the censoring of the “garçonne” film.

Social constructs of the ‘modern woman’ as well as the ideas of female emancipation were co-produced and shaped by such seemingly impossible bed-fellows as the feminist movement, joined later by conservative, nationalist and Christian women’s organisations as well as the popular media (such as magazines, books, films, etc.) addressing issues of family and women’s life. Often times, the national actors conveyed transnational political and socio-cultural influences giving rise to a process of hybridisation in which traditional, nationalist and modern globalistic elements combined to define the meaning of femininity in interwar Hungary.

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<sup>251</sup> Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World*, op. cit.



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