

Szécsi, Noémi and Eleonóra Géra. 2015: *A budapesti úrinő magánélete, 1860-1914* ('The Private Life of a Budapest Lady, 1860-1914'). Budapest: Európa. 439 pp. Illus.

Reviewed by Erika Kapus, Eötvös Loránd University

A budapesti úrinő magánélete, 1860-1914 was published in November 2015. The direct antecedent of this bulky volume was Noémi Szécsi's *Halcsontos fűző* ['Whalebone Corset'] blog (<http://halcsontosfuzo.reblog.hu/>), which she started three years prior to the publication of her co-authored book with historian Eleonóra Géra, and whose texts and image corpus later turned into the unified narrative presented in the book by Szécsi (b. 1976) and Géra (b. 1977). Szécsi is a well-known figure in the world of contemporary fiction in Hungary, having published six novels, tales and non-fiction translated into several languages, for which she received significant literary prizes. Her debut novel, *A finnugor vámpír* ['The Finno-Ugrian Vampire'] (2002), was translated into English by Peter Sherwood and published in the United Kingdom in 2012, and in the United States and Canada in 2013. Szécsi says that since her university years she has developed an interest in the study of private life from a historical point of view.

During the writing of her novel-trilogy about the private lives of nineteenth-century people, including *Nyughatatlanok* ['The Restless'] (2011) and *Gondolatorvasó* ['Mindreader'] (2013), and also while writing her earlier *Kommunista Monte Cristo* ['Communist Monte Cristo'] (2006), Szécsi was doing meticulous research to understand the private sphere of the periods she dealt with. However, not all the minute details of the lives lived from the second half of the nineteenth-century to the middle of the twentieth-century made it into her novels, and these were therefore shared with a wider reader-public on her *Halcsontos fűző* blog. The book's co-author, historian and archivist Eleonóra Géra, is an Associate Professor at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, who as a historian is chiefly interested in the history of late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century everyday life. Her book "*Kőhalomból (fő)város*" - *Buda város hétköznapijai a 18. század elején* ["'Capital From Ruins" - Everyday Life in Buda at the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century'], published in 2013, goes way beyond traditional historiographical attitudes of writing political history and attempts to recapture the former Buda through several microhistorical case-studies.

Although *The Private Life of a Budapest Lady* focuses on the everyday life of upper- and middle-class women in the dual-monarchy era, the lower classes are also featured in it, both in the quoted and in the analytic parts; moreover, the book devotes three chapters to the everyday life of servants. The volume is organized around the two spheres of private and public life. While in Judeo-Christian culture women are traditionally limited to and linked with the private sphere, the authors of this volume consider it important to present women who acted in the public sphere as well. The first part of the book discusses the issue of love and marriage, with a whole chapter devoted to the problematization of the female body (e.g., through the processes of pregnancy and childbirth), as well as questions of parenting, household tasks, and the complicated, cobweb-like relations between mistresses and servants. The second part focuses on social life, meaning



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entertainment facilities, holidays and sports, and it gives a detailed analysis of the changing roles of women including their jobs and political rights.

The central character of the book is the new woman who received vocational education but certainly not like that of the present. This female type — contrary to the public opinion about her — was not born at the turn of the century but decades earlier and by the 1860s she had already appeared in Hungary. Vocational training at that time still meant educating soon-to-be mothers and housewives, yet financially more profitable professions were then becoming more frequent as well. The closing year for this process is 1914, the year of the outbreak of World War I, which is an important milestone in European women's history. This war was the first worldwide catastrophe affecting not only the frontline but also the hinterland and finally resulting in the untimely coming of age of women in all European countries. A great number of women were forced to take on jobs that had previously been regarded as masculine; yet later women were the ones who did not want to give up these jobs and with them their newly acquired independence. This development probably contributed to the fact that in several countries women obtained the right to vote exactly at that time.

In its theoretical framework this book is based on several microhistorical research projects that started to play an important role in Hungarian historiography after the 1989 change of regime. Besides mainstream macrohistory that concentrates on the history of politics, historians at that time started to research the marginalized parts of the history of society. This change of attitude toward researching the experiences and views of women enabled women, who were hitherto missing from the macrohistorical research, to get into the discourse. An important tenet of writing women's history is that the absolute loser of macrohistorical writing and the most underrepresented figure is that of the woman because women constitute about half of the world's population. Therefore, current researchers using the tools of microhistoriography aim to write women into our shared story; yet, if only the herstory of important and famous women is written, we still stay inside the patriarchal frame since this historiographic method belongs to the history of politics, which is essentially a patriarchal construction. Hence, the real goal of present-day "herstory" research is to discover the story of groups that are marginalized by traditional historiography as well as to discover more groups and individuals belonging to these margins. This is what this book manages to do by concentrating on the home and the everyday. At the same time, there are also several well-known Hungarian heroines of feminism making an appearance in this book, such as Pálné Veres, Vilma Hugonnai, Júlia Szendrey, Róza Laborfalvy, Mari Jászai and Lujza Blaha, who are all already familiar to the readers of the *csíkos könyvek* ('striped books') Hungarian young-adult book series. Despite being featured in the present book, these figures cannot be regarded as its main characters, since the authors contend that nameless people so far ignored by patriarchal historiography are the ones who stand at the center of their shared work.

The sources for *The Private Life of the Lady of Budapest* were found in both archives and private collections, as well as in fiction, memoirs, and journals of the period under examination. In addition, self-help books, household manuals, etiquette books, textbooks for girls' schools, and guidelines for correspondence also constituted relevant sources. According to the authors, during their shared writing process Szécsi studied periodicals and fiction of the era, while Géra explored scientific and archival sources. Because of the richness of sources presented in it, besides the book's main project of popularizing herstory, it should also be appreciated as a primary-source book of unquestionable scientific importance. The result of the two authors'

project is a unified, exhaustive narrative integrating several genres and thus forming a diverse intertextual field around itself. This book can also be seen as belonging to the genre of creative nonfiction based on comprehensive source materials. Its quotations are accurate and easy to find, but this does not make the book only enjoyable to literary or historic experts; it is also safe to say that one might read it as fiction because its rich source materials and discussions come together as a story unto itself. One might therefore consider it a postmodern epistolary novel, but -- contrary to postmodern fiction -- it has a reassuring authenticity in the originality of its sources, letter fragments, articles, and ads. At the same time, the book is clearly a result of a subjective selection process, and we can never know what materials were left out of it or how typical the materials that got into it are.

Women's letters from the turn-of-the-century play the most significant part among the sources of this book, which makes clear that the knowledge of correspondence was a major skill in the period it examines as well as an important part of female education and a favorite topic of etiquette books. The content of the letters did not singlehandedly constitute their most important part; rather, their style and formulas were often just as important since the letters also reflected the education and mentality of the sender. As a mediatory genre, letters were not only a means of communication between addressor and addressee; rather, somewhat like today's blogs, they were usually read aloud to members of the family, friends and occasionally even to servants. Another similarity between online content management and the written correspondence explored in this book is that the authors of the letters, similarly to today's bloggers, tried to control their target groups by using various methods. Sometimes, reading directions were incorporated into the letter itself, like, for example, that certain parts of it have to be skipped in someone's presence; at other times, more private or secret parts were specifically addressed to certain individuals or tucked into the letter's folds or slips. There were special phrases to query the comments of the letter's audience, or to gauge the reaction of a certain addressee. Consequently, the art of correspondence in the dualist era can be considered as the analogue ancestor of today's web-based Content Management System (CMS) with hypertext (small slips, little enclosures), share-buttons (marking which part is for whom), and with an apparatus for receiving comments (querying reactions in the next letter).

Like letters, contemporary fiction also contributed a notable source material to the volume. In addition to works by canonized male and female writers like Mór Jókai, Margit Kaffka, Sándor Márai, Kálmán Mikszáth, Ferenc Molnár and others, numerous novels, short stories and even poems of by-now undeservedly forgotten yet at that time popular women writers (e.g. Renée Erdős, Terka Lux, Emma Ritoók, Janka Szabóné Nogáll, Szikra and Stefánia Wohl) are also cited. For example, Lux minutely describes the dress of popular diva Emília Márkus, whereas Jókai portrays with evident erotic lines two women fencing and especially one of them, who is wearing a red dress and to whom he ascribes a "provocative defiance of her round hips" as she is "wriggling as a panther" (297). Speaking of body talk or etiquette, it turns out from the cited letters as well as from the authors' discussion of them (39) that it was more acceptable to write to a close member of the family about embarrassing illnesses, such as diarrhea, or even about the physicality of death, than about sexual life or questions of contraception. However, etiquette is always flexible in that where there is a taboo there is always also a way of transgressing or bypassing it. For example, daughters and mothers in the nineteenth-century attached small cards to their letters to discuss menstruation or contraception. Daughters wrote their troubles and doubts onto small pieces of paper, addressing them to their mothers, or to a

confidant female relative, and put them separately next to the main letter, to be answered by their addressees in the same way. Secret advice of older women to younger ones was also written on similar cards. Discretion was part of correspondence etiquette, but with this method both the mothers or other experienced advisors and their younger, less knowledgeable addressees ran the risk of their small cards falling into the wrong hands. Strangely, pregnancy and suckling were not the topic of these cards but they could be mentioned in the main letter.

Muting and devaluing female private life is to this day a regular tendency in Hungarian historical, literary, film and cultural studies. In contrast to this practice, it is quite telling and encouraging that in the list of sources of this book the works of female authors form the majority. Works such as *The Private Life of a Budapest Lady, 1860-1914* give voice to female writers, journalists and authors of popular-science books, as well as to wives, daughters and other relatives of famous male writers of the time. This is rather important in itself, because creating a sound in the void, giving voice to the voiceless and listening to them are still much needed. This book specifically has an additional unquestionable historic value because it bases its historical research on hitherto unpublished rich source materials, thus providing so-called live information about the world of homes and everyday life in Hungary of 1860-1914. It is no less important to point out the wide range of images incorporated into this volume, which together with their captions not only illustrate the life of a Budapest lady but also enrich the volume with a vital visual dimension.