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Family and Emotions

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Family and Emotions

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Special Editor of the Thematic Issue

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Érzelmek és mostohák: Mozaikcsaládok a régi Magyarországon (1500–1850) [Emotions and stepparents: Mosaic families in old Hungary, 1500–1850]. Edited by Gabriella Erdélyi. Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities, 2019. 307 pp.

While not entirely unprecedented, it is by no means common for someone to launch her own books series when also working as an instrumental member of a research group. With the support of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Momentum “Integrating Families” Research Group, which has been active for three years now, published both study volumes and source publications in the Hungarian Family Stories series. The fourth volume, entitled *Érzelmek és mostohák. Mozaikcsaládok a régi Magyarországon (1500–1850)* [Emotions and stepparents: Mosaic families in old Hungary, 1500–1850], was published in 2019. In 2020, the fifth volume, *Özvegyek és árvák a régi Magyarországon, 1550–1940* [Widows, widowers, and orphans in old Hungary, 1550–1940] was also published. As the titles (which at first may seem surprising) indicate, these works constitute examples of scholarship on the history of emotions, a trend in the secondary literature which is relatively new in Hungary and which promises an array of important insights and conclusions.

The title is surprising not simply from a linguistic perspective. This linking of something abstract (emotions) with a specific group (stepparents) may arouse some suspicion in the reader. The title, which begs some interpretation, may seem bold or far-reaching, while the subtitle maintains a discrete distance. The image on the cover, however, which depicts the Old Testament scene when Hagar is driven away by Abraham, offers a vivid visual portrayal of the mix of sentiments involved in this relationship, which arguably remains a less familiar part of our image repertoire even today. It also reminds us that these complex relationships were a form of cohabitation in Old Testament times. Apropos of this, one may well raise the question found on the inside cover, which can be considered the basic question of the volume: did family life actually change radically in the eighteenth century, a moment in our history at which, if one is to believe the discourses which have emerged on the subject, there was a new intimacy to the relationships among people living in the same household? The lines which follow this and the chapter by Gabriella Erdélyi, who is also the editor of the volume, make very clear that the authors focus on instances in which the family unit, understood in its classical sense, broke up and new family members

(stepparents and stepsiblings) were added to it. Their discussions examine the emotional responses among family members to these changes.

The enterprise fits well into the arc of family history that has unfolded since the 1970s, following the work of Philippe Ariès and Lawrence Stone, whose contributions constitute points of departure in the field. However, as the work of Hans Medick and David Warren Sabean, whose writings are quoted several times in the volume, shows, historical demographics, which is closely intertwined with anthropology, has been able to spring to new life from its earlier seemingly dead state precisely by adopting this multifaceted approach, so the volume seems to show a sense of the existing anticipation when it sets, as one of its aims, the goal of taking the first steps in research in Hungary on stepchildren in the early modern era (p.11). After this (and thus notably at the beginning of the book and not the end, where one might otherwise expect a summary of the conclusions of the various studies), in the introduction, Erdélyi describes the individual texts and contextualizes them in relation to one another. For a reader who is less familiar with the field and the existing secondary literature, the second half of this introduction may become more difficult to read, since it is structured according to the chapters of the book and thus does not acquaint the reader with the chains of reasoning on the basis of which the final ascertainments are made. Thus, for me, once I accepted the more complex intellectual challenge inherent in postmodern propositions, the introduction was more of a revelation when I read it a second time, after having read the volume itself. Perhaps this was the one of the editor's goals.

For the most part, the authors who contributed to the volume are researchers tied to the Research Centre for the Humanities and Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), as well as one working at the University of Pécs and one at Central European University. Thus, one finds among them historians, art and literary historians, and an ethnographer.

The overviews of the secondary literature on the subject, which were done quite conscientiously by most of the contributors, are arguably important to research and scholarship in Hungary on the history of emotions. Dóra Mérai, Gabriella Erdélyi, Petra Bálint, and Mónika Mátay all draw on Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This is understandable, since the essence of the idea that emotions are social phenomena not only in their expression but also in and of themselves already increases the distance between the researcher and his or her topic. This notion forces the researcher to arrive at a premise which has been more scrupulously interrogated and also to ask about the place and validity of

each emotion. Thus, the secondary literature on which the individual authors draw is linked to this, necessitating a rethinking of the research questions. This is true whether one is thinking of Susan Broomhall (on whom Gabriella Erdélyi and Emese Gyimesi draw), who analyzes approaches in the study of the history of emotions emphatically from the perspective of family relationships, Richard van Dülmen (on who Eleonóra Géra draws), who specifically examines sexual sensuality, or Thomas Khuen and Simona Cerutti (on whom Mónika Mátay draws), who consider the historical aspects of flexible legal interpretation. Thus, this volume, which can and indeed should be read (also) as a bibliography of the secondary literature on the history of emotions constitutes a major contribution to the secondary literature on the subject in Hungary, a contribution which drastically enriches the available palette of works on the topic.

From the perspective of the questions raised in the book, three chapters help orient the reader. In the section entitled “Family Objects and Practices,” Orsolya Bubryák of the Research Centre for the Humanities Institute of Art History uses the last will and testament of Palatine Pál Esterházy (among other sources) to examine the extent to which the emotional relationships between a testator and his heirs and shifts in these relationships influenced hereditary strategies. Dóra Mérai of CEU draws conclusions about the emotional bonds among close family members on the basis of differences in scripts on gravestones. Dalma Bódai of ELTE examines the gifts given to the daughters of Erzsébet Czobor, who was the second wife of Palatine György Thurzó. The chapter concludes with the study by Gabriella Erdélyi of the Research Centre for the Humanities Institute of History. Drawing on the seventeenth-century correspondence among members of the Esterházy family, Erdélyi examines how family correspondence went beyond the simple exchange of information and became a discursive space for the expression of emotions.

Although the first chapter contains discussions of some arguably acute situations, the second chapter, “Discussions of Family Conflicts,” dwells even more on family relationships that were rife with tension. A micro-historical study by Eleonóra Géra’s of ELTE recounts the story of a woman who married three times. Géra situates the narrative within the interpretative framework of the history of emotions, putting emphasis on the considerations which played a role in the decisions of this woman, who married first because she was compelled to do so, but who later remarried a second and third time as a consequence of her own wishes. The study by Petra Bálint, also of ELTE, begins with a question which may appear shocking at first: “Were girls and women who committed

infanticide and child murder really evil and heartless? [...] What did they feel, or did they feel anything when they did what they did?” (p.172) Bálint’s study is interesting in part because the protagonists belonged to the lower and peripheral strata of the feudal world. Research which draws on court documents and investigates the fates of women who committed infanticide or who poisoned their husbands is a new element in the scholarship on family history in Hungary. The third author of the chapter, Mónika Mátay, also of ELTE, pursues research on middle-class families in the city of Debrecen. She draws on an array of sources in her discussion of the implications, from the perspective of family history, of the last will and testament of a pig slaughterer who, as a denizen of one of the market towns in Hungary, enjoyed essentially the same rights as a citizen of a free royal city. Mátay makes subtle and sophisticated use of the tools of legal anthropology and offers an analysis of an intricate network of relationships.

The third chapter, entitled “Family Spaces, Identities, and Roles,” offers another exciting installment in Emese Gyimesi’s research on the life of Júlia Szendrey. Gyimesi acquaints her reader with the correspondence of the widowed Szendrey’s children born from her marriage to Árpád Horvát. She strives to arrive at some impression of the image that Szendrey’s children by her second husband had of their closest family members, for instance of their half-brother Zoltán Petőfi and their aunt Mária Szendrey (the complete correspondence among the children has since been published in a volume edited by Gyimesi). Zsófia Kucserka of the University of Pécs examines the diaries and correspondence of Etelka Slachta, sources which have already been published and which have been familiar for a long time to social scientists. Kucserka considers the impacts of the texts which Slachta wrote in various genres on her private life and the roles she played in the public sphere.

Some of the authors make use of an array of different types of sources, while others use a narrower range of source types. Naturally, when available, letters constitute an excellent source for the kinds of inquiries one finds here, and not surprisingly, many of the authors draw heavily on family correspondence (Erdélyi, Gyimesi, and Kucserka, for instance). In the absence of these kinds of sources, however, researchers are sometimes refreshingly innovative. Orsolya Bubryák, Eleonóra Géra, and Mónika Mátay make seasoned use of last wills and testaments, documents from litigation, and lists pertaining to bequests, among other things. Dóra Mérai tears her reader from the world of two-dimensional sources (i.e. the written word) and bases her conclusions on a database containing

information pertaining to 314 tombstones from Transylvania. The sheer quantity of sources used by the authors and the impressive variety of sources compel the reader to be creative and open, as if reminding us that even sources which have been familiar to people in the field for a long time can show a very new face if one asks a few well-aimed questions.

I do not intend, in this review, to offer a detailed presentation of the results of the various endeavors. Rather, in conclusion, I would prefer simply to share a few thoughts. Orsolya Bubryák's article provides a very revealing example of how a nobleman from the so-called highlands (or Upper Hungary, what today is Slovakia) could treat his children very differently in his will even though he loved them equally. Mérai does a masterful job acquainting us with the tombstones on which she bases her conclusions concerning emotional bonds in the family and the community. Dalma Bódai guides her reader through the intimate exchange of information among Erzsébet Czobor and her daughters, and Gabriella Erdélyi calls attention to descriptions of body language in the letters written by members of the Esterházy family (and others), descriptions which serve as expressions of emotion and complement textual communication. Géra Eleonóra offers an enjoyable narrative of Eva Elisabetha Wittmann's three marriages, full of twists and turns, and she points out Wittmann's character flaws. Petra Bálint makes a penetrating statement when she notes that what may appear to the historian who draws on court and litigation documents as the witnesses' lack of sensitivity is more a feature of the source itself, as a type, than of the people involved. Emese Gyimesi's focused and dense text presents and analyzes the Horvát family home in Hársfa Street and, thus, the private spaces used by the family and the rooms they used as spaces in which to welcome guests and members of the public. She also presents the practices used by the children in their correspondence and the roles of family celebrations. In Kucserka's discussion of *Slachta*, writing again is given an important role both as tool and as act in the Biedermeier notion of the family and the ideal of the patriotic Hungarian woman.

In varying and arguably mutually reinforcing ways, the articles all proffer answers of a sort to the basic question. Ariès's contention concerning the process which began in the eighteenth century and which saw emotional bonds come to enjoy an increasingly prominent place in family life has now found corroboration not only in the international secondary literature, but also in the secondary literature, more narrowly, in Hungary, thus prodding further research into the history of emotions. This is not simply some closing flourish, as clearly

shown by the fact that, in 2019, a similarly monumental work was published on the subject in Hungary, *Az érzelmek története* [The history of emotions], a collection of conference papers compiled by the István Hajnal Circle and edited by Anikó Lukács and Árpád Tóth. Thus, this impressive volume edited by Gabriella Erdélyi both fills a lacuna in the secondary literature and will serve to nurture further research.

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