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„My sword is science, my shield is work.”



Messages of the legacy of Vilma Hugonnai, the first Hungarian female physician in 2022

Abstract

The Hungarian National Commission for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has proposed the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the death of Vilma Hugonnai, the first Hungarian female physician, in 2021, in a joint commemoration with UNESCO. After the positive decision of the General Assembly in November 2021, the President of the Hungarian National Commission for UNESCO proposed to the Union of Hungarian Women the coordination of a joint commemoration of the “100th Anniversary of the Death of Vilma Hugonnai (1847-1922), the first Hungarian doctor”. With this commemoration, Vilma Hugonnai’s work as a healer for families, her intellectual achievements, her enduring spiritual strength, her courage, her innovative and proactive approach and her spirit of sustaining women’s role in society as a value are to be presented as examples for present and future generations. The event is co-organised by the Hungarian Association of Midwives, the Semmelweis Museum and Archives of Medical History and the Professional Association of Hungarian Health Visitors.

“She did not have an easy life, she had plenty of work besides her professional duties, she was a child minder, an advocate for children and women, and furthermore, she managed to publish a book. She translated the Anna Fischer-Dückelmann’s book from German, a family medicine book for women, and wrote the foreword to it - a copy of which I keep in the family heritage”, said András Lászlóné Radványi, great-niece of Vilma Hugonnai, at the inauguration ceremony of the Vilma Hugonnai Square in 2020 in Józsefváros (the square next to the External Clinical Block of Semmelweis University, is named after the first Hungarian female doctor).

In this article, the life of Vilma Hugonnai will be analysed based on interviews with organisers, the objective being the exploration of the message and example of Doctor Hugonnai to the organisers 100 years later.

Generations of Hungarian teenage girls learned about the life of the first Hungarian female doctor from Erzsébet Kertész’s novel (1965). Doctor Hugonnai fought for years to get women recognised in the scientific world. Vilma Hugonnai was a countess and a staunch advocate for women’s rights.

I believe in the power of being a woman, but above all, of our whole human being, so that we can face challenges with courage while doing our best. I believe that we are responsible for our own decisions. Countess Vilma Hugonnai committed herself to her decision, which was to pursue her plan with determination, over countless obstacles and interference. (Margit Batthány-Schmidt)

Ilka Laura Jozefa Vilma Hugonnai was born in Nagytétény, the fifth child of a count family (Szentgyörgyi). Her father was Count Kálmán Hugonnai, landowner of Szentgyörgy, her mother was Terézia Pánczély. She began her education at home, then became a boarding student at the Prebstel Mária Girls’ Educational Institute in Pest, where she spent 4 years. This school represented the highest level of girls’ education at the time, with no opportunity to further education. Her father, in keeping with the spirit of the age, wanted her to marry as soon as possible, but it was only after two years of maternity, at the age of 18, that Vilma married György Szilassy, a wealthy landowner from Pand, 20 years older than Vilma. Szilassy, who had an extensive library, was not too interested in science, while his young wife immersed herself in the study of natural sciences. They were poles apart. Vilma was a stay-at-home type who loved to read and play the piano, while her husband spent time with his friends. She had two children from this marriage. Her husband did not care for her or her sons, and the marriage quickly fell apart. Vilma lived her life according to the social norms expected of women until she was 25. After her first child, however, she turned to medicine and gynaecology. It was impossible to be a doctor as a woman at that time, but it was part of the tradition to heal the housewives and provide first aid. So she self-taught her studies

and used them as a means of fulfilling her profession.

Her professional calling, her will to heal, pushed her to never stop acquiring new levels of knowledge. She was committed to helping the destitute and the poor, and she believed and taught that women, the mothers of families, play a key role in ensuring the physical and mental health of families, in preventing illness and in helping people to heal. (Marianna Várfalvi)

As the wife of a landowner, she visited the servants and the peasant families in the area on several occasions, and if she found someone ill, she gave them first aid. She taught herself about first aid from reading books. Although healing within households was not contrary to traditions, her husband and mother-in-law did not solicit her activities. When her father-in-law suffered from smallpox, she devoted herself to caring for him, and further to her care, the father-in-law managed to recover from his serious illness. Her work and attention to her father-in-law’s recovery from pox also transformed her standing within the family. In practical terms, she legitimised her interest in medicine by the attentive nursing of the head of the family. Her autobiography also shows that the nursing took a heavy toll on her, as her second child, born a few weeks later, fell victim to the same disease. (Jobst, 2008)

Later, as a doctor, she also considered it important to inform women about how to maintain family health. This is evidenced by the fact that she edited the Hungarian edition of Anna Fischer-Dückelmann’s book, *The Woman as Family Doctor*. In the foreword she writes: *“Our book is for the family; its aim is to help women with advice, rules and admonitions for maintaining or regaining physical and mental health, often in the midst of a thorny life. (Dr Fischer-Dückelmann – Dr Hugonnai, 1929)*

Nowadays it is regarded natural that girls in Hungary are studying, and more girls than boys are studying in higher education. But let’s not forget that this had not always been the case. The road to this has led through the failures and successes of many determined and committed

women like Vilma Hugonnai, who broke the taboos of their time. This is another way of saying thank you and reminding ourselves of the need to help and encourage girls for whom learning remains a challenge today. (Katalin Czippán)

The contemporary view of women's learning is well illustrated by the famous writer, Imre Madách's opinion: "Women develop earlier, but never reach full masculine maturity: they learn and comprehend more easily, but lack the creative genius. They remain a dilettante and never advance art and science." (Geőcze, 1904)

In 1872, her husband read her a newspaper article about the fact that women were allowed to enrol to university in Switzerland. (The University of Zurich had opened its doors to women in 1864.) She read up and learned that she could get into the University of Zurich's medical school without a school leaving exam. In Hungary, girls were not allowed to study at university level at that time, neither were they allowed to take the school leaving exams. Seeing her wife's intransigence, her husband agreed to let Vilma attend the medical school in Zurich, but he did not support her financially. Vilma sold her jewellery and worked alongside the university, supporting herself and paying for her studies, and began her medical studies in 1872.

Having graduated with excellent results in 1879, she left her career as a surgeon in Zurich and returned home to Hungary, as she missed her child terribly. In Hungary, the Swiss diploma was not valid, so she applied for its naturalisation at the Budapest Medical Faculty, where they considered the request a precedent and feared that more women would want to follow the enlightened woman. Ágoston Trefort, a very progressive Minister of Religion and Public Education, first argued that although the Countess had already had a degree, she lacked a secondary education and therefore could not practise. The 34-year-old medical graduate then was made to pass her school leaving exams, the second woman to do so in Hungary. The minister then claimed that there were no proper regulations for coeducational higher education in

Hungary. "As much as I wish to raise the level of women's education - universities for women will not be opened." (Gozdák, 2017)

When she returned home to find out that her medical degree would not be accepted and that she could not practice medicine as a woman, she turned her attention beside medicine to promoting girls' education and working for the right of girls and women to learn and graduate. Having also experienced disapproval of women acquiring diplomas and being employed, Vilma Hugonnai wrote an essay entitled *The Women's Movement in Hungary*, in which she argued for women's emancipation. Besides, she also participated in the organisation of girls' grammar schools.

Having pocketed a Swiss degree, but prevented from practising her profession, she was still able to put her knowledge, strength and work to good use in another profession important for women - while keeping her original goal of healing and gaining official recognition as a doctor in mind. (Dr. Ágnes Rákócziné Krämer)

In order to support herself in Zurich, the young woman worked continuously as a midwife and nurse at the university clinic while studying, becoming an assistant doctor as a student in her 6th year. She spent a year and a half under Professor Rose (E. Rose /1836-1914/, chief surgeon in Berlin and later professor in Zurich), who had unsuccessfully tried to convince her to stay. She came home because she missed her child. Vilma Hugonnai was not broken by the refusal to naturalise her degree. Twice she sought an audience with the Minister of Education to try to convince him personally, who argued that women in academia would subvert the state and disrupt academic life. Hugonnai wrote a letter rejecting this argument, citing international examples, to which minister Trefort suggested to her to graduate from midwife school and then start working as a physician without a naturalised diploma, without penalty. However, Vilma Hugonnai refused to accept the loophole in the unacceptable system, so she enrolled in the midwife school and worked as

a midwife after obtaining her diploma. (Nyári, 2015) Later, as a doctor, she mainly had female patients and also took on a broad public role, including lecturing on housing affairs and municipal health in the Association of Hungarian Midwives.

Let's not over-mystify our own era, let's just do our work with our physical, mental and spiritual gifts, talents and abilities, in full possession of our feelings and social responsibilities. (Margit Batthány-Schmidt)

Her husband was unhappy that she had started to work and was earning an independent income. The couple's conflicts aggravated, and they finally divorced in 1884. Vilma Hugonnai had also become by that time an advocate of women's equality. Despite the atmosphere of rejection surrounding her, she did not remain single for long. In 1887, she remarried, this time to Vince Wartha, a distinguished professor of chemistry at the University of Technology, who treated her as an equal intellectual partner and supported her work. At the age of 40, Vilma gave birth to their daughter, who came to be named also Vilma. In 1895, when the Hungarian government regulated the education of women in the humanities, medicine and pharmacy, Vilma applied again for recognition of her Zurich diploma. After a lengthy procedure, she was compelled to pass three examinations. Vilma Hugonnai was finally awarded a doctorate in 1897, almost two decades after her Swiss degree. From that time, she worked focusing on women and the poor as an official physician.

Recognising that the World War meant that men and women alike were needed to care for the wounded, she completed a course in military medicine in 1914, at the age of 67, and called on all her staff to do the same. Almost every female doctor who had graduated in Hungary by then followed her, setting up patient monitoring stations in several Hungarian towns. In 1915, her work as a military doctor was recognised by the Austrian Red Cross with the 'Austrian Red Cross Second Class Badge of Honour with War Medal'. Vilma Hugonnai died of heart failure on 25 March 1922. Her death was not mentioned in any medical journal. Since 1980, her ashes have been remaining

in the cemetery on Kerepesi út, where they had been transferred from the Rákoskeresztúr cemetery.

“Without Vilma Hugonnai, the transformation and modernisation of the Hungarian medical profession in the 20th century would be inconceivable. Vilma Hugonnai is one of the first Hungarian women to enter the medical profession. It is seen as a further manifestation of Hungary's deep-rooted European spirit, as she is the first Hungarian woman to do so, and after decades of struggle to obtain her degree, she played a public role in the recognition of women's equality in the profession” (Benedek Varga)

Her fight for her profession made her a role model during her whole life. In 1918, Gyula Krúdy described the female figure as "poor Vilma Hugonnai, who was a role model for all young girls, would have liked to study." Today, a square, a street, a school, a college and even a small planet have been named after her, a memorial plaque and a statue have been displayed in her honour, and numerous books and articles have set her up as an example not only for girls.

Vilma Hugonnai's strong, courageous, proactive personality paved the way for women to learn, gain social esteem and set a precedent for her time by recognising female doctors. Without her, Hungarian obstetrics and gynaecology, maternity care and public health would have been much poorer and of less important. (Gabriella Bábiné Szotzfried)

Unjustly, so little is known about our country's first female doctor. We do not know, we can only guess, what emotional anguish she had to undergo during the time spent abroad without her child; what an extra burden the broken relationship with her first husband must have been; or how disappointed she was that she had to struggle for so long to finally serve her profession as the first woman doctor in our country with her hard-earned knowledge. However, there are some things we do know for sure. We are aware of her determination, her courage, which helped her to put into practice the ideals which are now unquestionable.

Introduction of interviewees



Margit Batthyány-Schmidt

Farmer, one of the most active women in the Hungarian civil sphere, entrepreneur. She founded the Union of Hungarian Women 8 years ago and has been the president since its foundation, she also has been running the Hungarian Batthyány Foundation for 6 years. She has been a member of the Board of Directors (*COPA-COGECA Women's Committee*) and the Board of Directors (*WUSME World Organisation of Small and Medium Enterprises*) of international organisations. As head of the agricultural enterprises regarding the Batthyány family, she is committed to and conscious of the development of rural farming, taking responsibility for the success of her children, her female colleagues and future generations.



Katalin Czippán

works as an educator, trainer and expert in education and communication for sustainability and health promotion in Hungary, as well as internationally. Between 2020-21 she was the chairperson of the Hungarian National Commission for UNESCO's Education Committee, in this position she initiated the commemoration of Vilma Hugonnai in 2022 in Hungary together with UNESCO. She is convinced that the role of education is to contribute to the creation of resilient communities and societies by shaping minds, opening hearts and uplifting souls.



Benedek Varga

Historian awarded by the Officer's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit, archivist, director of Semmelweis Museum and Library of the History of Medicine. Director general of the Hungarian National Museum between 2016 and 2021. Among other organizations he is a member of the Medical History Working Committee of the Academy of Sciences and the International Council of Museums. He has been supporting the Hugonnai 100 commemoration from the very beginning, providing a professional support and a noble venue for the conferences and events in the museum.



Marianna Várfalvi

Health Visitor, midwife, public service and health manager. She has found a lifelong profession in the development, education and research of a home-based parenting and childbirth education programme, family-centred midwifery and newborn care. Since 1991, she has been active in national and international professional organizations. She is a volunteer editor for Radio Maria. She is a professional advisor on midwifery to the National Directorate General of Hospitals and a research analyst for the Maria Kopp Institute for Demography and Families. She is a member of the Round Table for Population and Demography. Chairwoman of PAHHV on behalf of the Publishers, the funding owner.



Dr. Ágnes Krámer Rákócziné

Midwife, childbirth educator, qualified nurse, health manager, lactation and perinatal consultant. Her work focuses on baby-mom relationship and family-centered support as her primary mission in both hospital practice and private practice. She has been a board member of the National Midwifery Association to support and promote the uplifting profession of midwifery, furthermore, since 2017 she has been the vice-president of the Association of Hungarian Midwives.



Gabriella Bábiné Szotzfried

Health Visitor, child and youth protection adviser, health project manager. She has worked as a nurse for 20 years, therefore, it came evidently that as Ministerial Commissioner she initiated the renewal of the nursing service, furthermore, launched and prepared the qualification of the Hungarian nursing service as a Hungaricum. For four years, she chaired the College of Health Professionals' Section on Public Health and Prevention since 2020, she has been Deputy Director General for Public Health and Prevention at the National Directorate General of Hospitals. The Deputy Director-General of the National Hospital in charge of Public Health and Prevention has chaired the College of Health Professionals' Nursing Section for four years. Individually, as well as on behalf of the institution, she supports the honorarium of the memory of Vilma Hugonnai.



In order to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the death of Vilma Hugonnai (1847-1922), the first Hungarian female doctor, with UNESCO in the followings the implementation of the “HUGONNAI 100” event series, the Union of Hungarian Women alongside with the Hungarian National Commission for UNESCO signed a cooperation agreement with the the Semmelweis Medical History Museum, Library and Archives, the Federation of Occupational Health Nurses, the Maria Kopp Institute for Demography and Families (KINCS), the National Directorate General for Hospitals and the Hungarian Association of Midwives. If you would like to be kept informed about the events or if you would like to contribute to the series with your own event, please contact us at info@mnunio.hu.

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- The photo in this article shows dr. Vilma Hugonnai. This photo was provided by the Hungarian National Museum (HNM)-Semmelweis Museum, Library and Archive of the History of Medicine.*