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MONIKA RUDAŚ-GRODZKA, KATARZYNA NADANA-SOKOŁOWSKA, ANNA NASIŁOWSKA, KAROLINA KRASUSKA, EMILIA KOLINKO

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ADDRESS

Nowy Świat 72, room A40, 00-330 Warsaw, Poland
phone +48 22 657 28 07, phone/fax +48 22 828 32 06
e-mail: **redakcja@tekstydrugie.pl**
www.tekstydrugie.pl

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Marcin Hernas | tessera.org.pl

LANGUAGE EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Matthew Chambers, Karolina Krasuska, Rafał Pawluk

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Convention and Revolution

Zsuzsa Török

Manuscript Culture and Nineteenth-Century Women's Life Writing: The Diaries of Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi

DOI: 10.18318/td.2020.en.1.7 | ORCID: 0000-0002-3275-6342

Michelle Levy in her article titled *Jane Austen's Manuscripts and the Publicity of Print* formulated a poignant observation about the complexity of the uses of script and print media during the Romantic period:

> The assumption that the late-eighteenth century print avalanche destroyed and supplanted earlier forms of literary dissemination is considerably weakened once we look closely at the period's authors – even the most canonical, like Austen, working in the most commercial of genres, like the novel – and find them using traditional scriptural practices. Indeed, the complex economy of script and print permeated Romantic literary culture, even if, thanks to the greater publicity of print, it remains largely unexplored.[1]

Indeed, scholarship on nineteenth-century women's writing concentrates primarily on women's literary careers that emerge in an ever expanding culture of printed materials: books, magazines, and newspapers. Certainly, periodical publication played a crucial role in

1 Michelle Levy, "Austen's Manuscripts and the Publicity of Print," *ELH* 4 (2010): 1016.

Zsuzsa Török – PhD, is a Research Fellow at the Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute for Literary Studies, Budapest. Her research interests include periodical studies and women's writing in the nineteenth century. Her recently published articles in English: "Transnational Scissors-and-Paste Journalism: Victorian Women Writers in the Hungarian Szépirodalmi Figyelő" (2018); "'Notorious Beyond Any Other European Woman of Her Generation': The Case of Count(ess) Sarolta/Sándor Vay" (2018).

the development of both men's and women's literary careers during the nineteenth century. Consequently, print technology, as argued by Margaret Ezell, became a metaphor for the "professional" authorship and "advanced" market economies, while manuscript authorship had been relegated to the outdated, the primitive, and the "amateur."[2] Furthermore, Ezell also made a relevant distinction regarding the usage of notions such as "public" and "private," meaning "published" as opposed to "personal." Still, manuscripts were often not private in the sense that their readership was restricted to the author him/herself, but were permeated by "public" moments, when the texts circulated among family members, friends, close acquaintances, and were read or even copied by them.[3] As demonstrated by Michelle Levy, a number of the late eighteenth-century female writers, including Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, initially composed their novels with a specific familial audience in mind. Thus, their writings were first shared with and read for family members, and even stalled in this phase of domestic publication for many years, as happened with all of Austen's early manuscripts.[4] It appears that the practice of communal manuscript circulation persisted even during the mid-Victorian period. As shown by Rachael Scarborough King in her article on Elizabeth Grant, instead of pursuing print publication, while writing her memoirs, Grant also composed a two-volume fair copy of the account that was circulated among friends, relatives, and members of her Highland community. Ultimately, the memoirs were only published in 1898, more than a decade after her death.[5] As a consequence, Ezell argued that this circulation of texts attests to their social function, and she called their author the "social author."[6]

In addition, the theory and practice of life writing, influenced and inspired by recent findings of manuscript studies, has also seen a shift away "from an exclusive focus on the autonomous individual towards considerations of relational selfhood, communal identities, and collective and dialogic forms of self-representation."[7] Cynthia Huff and Margaret Ezell have both stressed

2 Margaret J.M. Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9.

3 Ibid., 38.

4 Levy, "Austen's Manuscripts," 1017.

5 Rachael Scarborough King, "Letters from the Highlands: Scribal Publication and Media Shift in Victorian Scotland," *Book History* 17 (2014): 298–320.

6 Ezell, *Social Authorship*, 21–44.

7 Amy Culley, *British Women's Life Writing, 1760–1840: Friendship, Community, and Collaboration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 11.

the importance of understanding the specific historical moments and cultural contexts in which manuscripts were conceived.[8] Moreover, Ezell also asserted that studying life writing as part of an extant manuscript culture shifts emphasis from the writer's emotions and the events described to the situation of the creation of the texts, its formatting and physical presentation, and how this information might affect its reading.[9] In a similar manner, Amy Culley claimed that "approaching life writing as an expression of personal feeling by a single author has tended to obscure its importance as an articulation of relationships and communal identities or as a contribution to the history of a family, community, or nation."[10]

Having surveyed the dominant trends of the scholarship, this article proposes to investigate the diaries of the Hungarian Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi in the context of manuscript culture, an eligible alternative for women who wrote (but were not necessarily professional writers) during the nineteenth century. Through the examination of her journals in the context of manuscript texts, this article reveals that they were intended for circulation inside the immediate family circle, and designed specifically for entertainment and instruction of family members. Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's diaries appear to have been her legacy to her children and grandchildren, and they also attest to the ways women's writing played a crucial role in shaping the family history of the nobility during the nineteenth century.

Jozefa Wesselényi was born in 1812 in Aranyosgyéres (Câmpia Turzii, Romania), as the daughter of one of the greatest noble families of Transylvania. When her diary started in 1848, the Principality of Transylvania was an Austrian crownland, and after 1867, as a result of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Finally, after World War I, it was annexed to Romania. The baroness married Baron János Bánffy in 1834, who was the son of another prominent family of the Transylvanian nobility. The newlyweds settled down in their mansion-house in Beresztelke (Breaza), a small village near the town of Szászrégen (Reghin), and spent most of their lives there. They also lived for shorter periods of time in Budapest while the baron, a member of parliament, undertook certain political assignments. János Bánffy died in 1873, at the age of sixty-four and the widowed

8 Cynthia A. Huff, "Reading as Re-Vision: Approaches to Reading Manuscript Diaries," *Biography* 23 (2000): 506; Margaret J.M. Ezell, "Domestic Papers: Manuscript Culture and Early Modern Women's Life Writing," in *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, eds. Michelle M. Dowd and Julie A. Eckerle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 33.

9 Ezell, "Domestic Papers," 33.

10 Culley, *British Women's Life Writing*, 2.

Baroness Wesselényi moved to Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) towards the end of her life, where she died on 6 January 1899, aged eighty-six.

Aristocratic literacy and writing habits such as correspondence, diary writing, and the translation of foreign authors or even production of original pieces of literature had long been strongly interrelated before the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the Wesselényis also engaged themselves in active, regular, and various writing practices. Unfortunately, only small fragments of their presumably consistent corpus of manuscripts have been preserved to the present day. Moreover, the surviving texts, mostly unpublished items, are quite unknown even to Hungarian historians, and literary historians as well. Fortunately, there are some exceptions to this. For instance, the travelogue giving an account of her travels to Italy and Switzerland written by Polixéna Wesselényi, who was the baroness's sister, has gained more attention when published in 1842.[11] Polixéna Wesselényi embarked on her journey to Italy at the age of thirty-four with her ten-year-old daughter and her daughter's governess, her marriage with Count László Bánffy having been on the rocks. As a matter of fact, she met her second husband, the Englishman John Paget, himself on the Grand Tour of Europe at this time, during these travels. Eventually, Polixéna divorced Count Bánffy in 1836, and married Paget the following year. Paget, a diarist and writer, is best known for his book on Hungary titled *Hungary and Transylvania* and published in London in 1839.[12] After marrying the Hungarian Polixéna Wesselényi, Paget lived in Transylvania till the end of his life. He is buried in the Házsongárd Cemetery in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca). As a consequence of their romantic encounter influencing their courses of lives, the reception of their travelogues as well became inseparable in the eyes of the interpreters. Additionally, Polixéna Wesselényi also came to be regarded as the first female travelogue writer in Hungarian literary history.

Thus, when Jozefa Wesselényi started her diary, she followed an extant practice that had long been familiar to the Wesselényis. When reaching the decision to start a daily account of her life, she might have been influenced by the writing practices of her sister and brother-in-law, and following a well-established family tradition of writing and keeping a journal. For the baroness also frequently alluded in her diaries to her grandparents' letters and journals that had been read out loud for the children by her mother on a regular basis. Moreover, it is not an irrelevant fact that the baroness's husband also kept

11 Paget Jánosné Wesselényi Polyxena, *Olaszhoni* és *schweizi utazás* (Travels to Italy and Switzerland), (Kolozsvár: A' kir. lyceum betűivel, 1842).

12 John Paget, *Hungary and Transylvania: With Remarks on Their Condition, Social, Political, and Economical* (London: John Murray, 1839).

a diary, according to Lajos Kelemen, the editor of her memoirs.[13] Regrettably, the manuscript of the baron's journal, though examined by Kelemen at the beginning of the twentieth century, has gone missing.

The autograph diary of Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi, commenced in 1848, was written until the end of her life in January 1899. Her journals cover a period of some fifty years. The first entry dates from 1 November 1848 and was recorded in Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureș). At that time the baroness was on the run with her children, their home in Beresztelke (Breaza) being turned upside down in the turmoil of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence. The journal starts *in medias res* with events already underway, and without introductory remarks concerning the diarist's aims and motivations for giving a daily account of her life: "Today's battle between Urbán and the Szeklers might be crucial concerning our destinies."[14] Due to this narrative that opens in the midst of action one may assume that the passages relating the events of the Revolution of 1848 are sequels to a previously commenced diary. However, as there is no evidence to support such a theory, the assumption that the baroness might have commenced her journal previous to 1848 remains largely speculative.

Besides the journal begun in 1848, after thirty-three years Jozefa Wesselényi started another diary in December 1881. The latter became a more personal account of family events and domestic matters, while the former one remained a rather "objective" narrative of social and political affairs of the time. Due to Baroness Wesselényi's extensive writing, a considerable body of unpublished manuscripts has been preserved – five bound journal volumes and an additional 1400 pages of the second, domestic diary written on separate sheets of paper.

Not only did the baroness keep different types of journals, but she also started to write her memoirs in 1857. The reminiscences were first published in 1931[15] by Lajos Kelemen, and were recently republished in 2014.[16]

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13 Kelemen Lajos Benczur Gyulánénak, Kolozsvár, 1922. szeptember 4. (Lajos Kelemen to Mrs. Benczur, Cluj-Napoca, September 4, 1922) in Kálnoki Kis Tamás, "Kelemen Lajos II," *Levéltári Szemle* 25 (1975): 417–418.

14 *Losonczi Báró Bánffy Jánosné Hadadi Báró Wesselényi Jozefa naplója, 1848–1862* (Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's Diary, 1848–1862), vol. I, Biblioteca Academiei Române, Cluj-Napoca, shelf-mark number: Mss A 86/I, 1r.

15 *Báró Bánffy Jánosné Wesselényi Jozéfa bárónő emlékirata 1848–1849-es* éleményeiről (Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's Memoirs of Her Experiences During 1848–1849), ed. Kelemen Lajos (Cluj-Kolozsvár: Minerva Irodalmi és Nyomdai Műintézet Részvénytársaság, 1931).

16 Bánffy Jánosné Wesselényi Jozefa, *Emlékirat* (Memoirs), ed. Kelemen Lajos, Utószó (Afterword) Sas Péter (Kolozsvár: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 2014).

This memoir is one of the few existing accounts of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849 from a woman's perspective. Apart from the uniqueness of the historical insight, it stands out as a most valuable source of women's writing that surely enhances our knowledge concerning the uses of writing in the nineteenth century among the nobility.

Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi might have experimented with different writing practices, for Lajos Kelemen also mentioned a thirty-two-page-long unfinished romance in his introduction to the memoir published in 1931. As reported by Kelemen, the fragment featured the same protagonists under pseudonyms, and narrated similar events to those chronicled in the memoir.[17] Unfortunately, the manuscript of this narrative extant in the 1930s has not survived.

After the diarist's death in 1899, Jozefa Wesselényi's journals and memoirs came into the possession of her eldest daughter (Baroness Polixéna Bánffy, wife of Baron Kálmán Kemény). Later, one of the baroness's grandsons, Baron János Bánffy inherited the more objective journals relating to social and political events, initially written on loose sheets of paper and subsequently bound together in five different volumes.[18] Finally, the manuscripts were acquired by the archive of the Transylvanian Museum Society in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca). After the Society had been dissolved under the communist regime in 1949, its holdings were redistributed among three institutions: the Special Collections of the Lucian Blaga University Library, the National Archives, and the Special Collections of the Romanian Academy's Library in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Today, the journals and the memoirs are kept in the latter.[19]

Jozefa Wesselényi wrote her diary entries and her memoirs on separate sheets of paper of different sizes and colors. She initially started her journal with continuous prose from margin to margin. Yet, just after a few pages, she changed the page layout of her diary to a left-hand column, and continued as such till her last entry. This page layout obviously served practical reasons as she repeatedly reread her diary entries and her memoirs, and added brief

17 Kelemen Lajos, "Br. Bánffy Jánosné, Wesselényi Józéfa bárónő élete és emlékirata" (Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's Life and Memoirs) in *Báró Bánffy Jánosné Wesselényi Jozéfa bárónő emlékirata*, 9.

18 Ibid., 10.

19 *Losonczi Báró Bánffy Jánosné Hadadi Báró Wesselényi Jozefa naplói* (Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's Diaries), *1848–1899*, vol. I–V; Báró Bánffy Jánosné Báró Wesselényi Jozefa, *Szabadságharc alatti* éleményeim (Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's Memoirs of Her Experiences During 1848–1849); Özv. *báró Bánffy Jánosné báró Wesselényi Jozefa házi naplója* (Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's Domestic Diary), *1881–1899*, Biblioteca Academiei Române, Cluj-Napoca, shelf-mark numbers: Mss A 86/I-V, Mss A 85, Mss A 87.

or even longer corrections on the margins. The right-hand blank columns permitted the rewriting of the past at any time, and displayed a characteristic typical of manuscript texts, as observed by Ezell: a layering of time, continuous self-analysis and reworking.[20] Yet, rarely did the baroness write more than two or three columns, and there were periods during which she could not put down a single entry for weeks. Consequently, her narrative appears to be spasmodic at times, with occasional reiterations.

Baroness Wesselényi's journals reflect on various social and political events of the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, in its first volume written between 1848 and 1862, the baroness is constantly preoccupied with the events of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849 and the aftermath of the Revolution, regarding the establishment of the Habsburg absolutism. She writes about house searches, imprisonments, executions, and about the loosely organized Austrian government. Her account covers those events that affected her immediate environment and her family's life, including the life of the Transylvanian and Hungarian nobility. Her second, more personal diary started in 1881, describes her everyday life as the routine of an old woman living in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca). She seems to spend her days visiting her children and relatives, attending church services, or various family events.

After having married Baron János Bánffy in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) in 1834, Jozefa Wesselényi lived a comfortable and relatively secure life in the small village of Beresztelke (Breaza) near the town of Szászrégen (Reghin). They lived quietly engaged in everyday activities, as the baron was preoccupied with the management of his estate and his political assignments, while the baroness dedicated her time to the running of the household and child-rearing. Occasionally they visited relatives or close acquaintances, and usually kept themselves up-to-date with current social and political events through reading newspapers. Nevertheless, the events of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848 brought about a radical change in their lives. The mansion they lived in for over a decade and their farmyard was completely destroyed by an unscrupulous mob from neighboring villages. The crowd chased away their herd of cattle and horses, damaged the furnishing of the house, and robbed the family off their clothes and bed linens. The couple saw a decade's worth of their life and work totally ravaged overnight. As a consequence, they had to flee their home and returned only in September 1850, after almost two years of forced displacement.

It is possible to assume that the traumatic experiences of 1848 might have triggered the baroness's urge to write, and motivated her in narrating

20 Ezell, "Domestic Papers," 46.

subsequent life events. Though neither her diaries nor her memoirs were meant for publication, Jozefa Wesselényi apparently wrote with a specific audience in mind. She often talked to her grandchildren in her diaries, and she also addressed them at the beginning of her memoirs. It was her greatest concern to write a personal account, a sort of *petite histoire* of the social and political events of 1848–1849 and the following decades, a narrative that would help her grandchildren better understand their own family history.[21] Therefore, she commenced her memoirs accordingly:

> I have got married in 1834. The days of my marriage were almost similar for the last 23 years spent here in Beresztelke, as I lived an uneventful family life raising several children in average conditions. He who learnt my daily routine would easily guess my hourly activities altered only by the arrival of unexpected guests or my husband's divertissement. A yearly trip that could last couple of days to my mother, as long as she lived, and later on to my brothers or mother-in-law constituted the major events of this family life including the birth of my children recurring nearly every eighteenth months. Yet, this quiet life was to be stormily disrupted by the events of the revolution. It is this story of the revolution, my dear grandchildren, I intend to give an account of.
>
> Do not expect historical writing from me, for I lack the learning, thus I do not attempt anything of the sort; I only share with you what I and my family have experienced as it could be of interest for you. Your parents, grandparents, relatives, or at least people with familiar names to you will occur in it. These minor details of the great drama will help you understand those times. For they are the minor components of the great whole, something like the secondary characters rendered to the great heroes immortalized on canvas.[22]

In a similar manner, when she decided to engage in the writing of another, more private diary in 1881, she again referred to her descendants as implied audience of her writings in its introductory lines:

> I have been writing my diary rather objectively so far. However, I remember that we used to listen to our mother with great interest while she was reading out loud from our grandparents' letters and journals. Therefore, I thought, my children and

21 Domestic memoirs often originated in a desire to pass on a personal or family history to succeeding generations. Linda H. Peterson's example for a typical pattern with its conventional features of such documents is Ann, Lady Fanshawe's *Memoirs* (1829), in Linda H. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 17.

22 *Báró Bánffy Jánosné Wesselényi Jozéfa bárónő emlékirata*, 1.

> grandchildren would also be interested in my private life, and decided to write about trivialities as well.[23]

According to these confessions, Jozefa Wesselényi's diaries and memoirs do not appear to be private documents written for the author herself in order to contemplate her own life. For these manuscripts were not private in the sense that their readership was restricted exclusively to their author. They were available to the members of the family who constituted the implied readership for her writings. The baroness's personal life entangled in the social and political events of the second half of the nineteenth century, and narrated in her first diary and her memoirs, might have been instructive for her children and grandchildren. Additionally, the trivialities narrated in her second diary might have served more entertaining purposes.

Moreover, the first diary later proved to be a reliable source of information on past events – regarding family, Transylvanian nobility, and the nation – not only for other family members, but for the diarist herself. It appears that when Jozefa Wesselényi ulteriorly decided to write another narrative, her memoirs of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849, she surely constructed her account based on her former diary entries that functioned as *avant-textes* to her reminiscences.[24] It is quite possible that when writing her memoirs, Baroness Wesselényi might have thought of their publication, as well. As mentioned above, her sister, Polixéna Wesselényi, and her brother-in-law, John Paget, had already been published authors. Still, there is no allusion to such an intention in her memoirs.

Yet, even without print publication during her life, Jozefa Wesselényi composed a narrative that apparently circulated among family members, other relatives, and friends, who constituted a semi-public audience. Furthermore, it seems that the manuscripts had continuously been read among family members. After the baroness's death, the texts even became subjects of basic editing and restructuring. Her offspring not only read her diaries and memoirs but obviously contributed to the construction of the manuscripts. As mentioned before, Baron János Bánffy, Jozefa Wesselényi's grandson, had these manuscripts bound together in six different volumes. Prior to the binding of the diary's separate sheets, he even completed the volumes with

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23 Özv. *báró Bánffy Jánosné báró Wesselényi Jozefa házi naplója,* Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), December 1, 1881, 1r.

24 The term is used by Philippe Lejeune in his genetic study on autobiographies: Philippe Lejeune, "Auto-Genesis: Genetic Studies of Autobiographical Texts," in Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak (Honolulu: The University Of Hawai's Press, 2009), 213–235.

additional title pages including the author's name, a title, volume number, and the time period covered in the respective tome. He also intended to add indexes at the end of each volume, but he eventually did not manage to finish the task, and the pages following the title of the index remained blank.

The baroness's diary entry from 1 December 1881 quoted above also situates her writings in the context of an existing family tradition. Her extensive life writing and her disparate writing practices appear to hold to the conventions of the milieu she was raised in. For families of high nobility, from which many women diarists originated during the nineteenth century, had not only sufficient wealth, stability, and social standing to preserve these texts and later to give them to public archives,[25] but above all they had the necessary education to produce these texts, and later transform them into literary heritage. Jozefa Wesselényi's texts were also conceived to reinforce the idea that the mandate of the Hungarian nobility is to contribute to the construction of the nation. This is a conviction equally shared by the baroness in her oeuvre and by her offspring. A relevant example illustrating this attitude is János Bánffy's preoccupation to paste the *ex libris* of the Bánffy family inside the volumes of the diaries, a custom typically followed by the noble families of the time.

All in all, Jozefa Wesselényi's various writing practices remind us of the complexities of women's affiliations when confronted with gendered identifications that may interact with other forms of belonging, such as family, class, and nation. Her oeuvre offers a valuable site for reconsidering the persistent status of manuscript as an alternative and attractive form of audience-oriented publication for many women who wrote during the nineteenth century. For women not only wrote for print publication at that time. Keeping an extensive correspondence or a diary for private and familial use appears to be a persistent and frequently employed set of writing practices throughout the century. Consequently, these sources also reveal an unexpectedly large scale of communicative options available in particular historical periods. In the light of this conclusion one can establish that the study of manuscript cultures constitutes a historically valid alternative to the simplified perception of the nineteenth-century literacy envisaged as a progressive march toward print culture.

25 As stressed by Cynthia A. Huff, class played a major role in the survival and archiving of these manuscripts: Huff, "Reading as Re-Vision," 509.

Abstract

Zsuzsa Török
RESEARCH CENTRE FOR THE HUMANITIES, INSTITUTE FOR LITERARY STUDIES, BUDAPEST
Manuscript Culture and Nineteenth-Century Women's Life Writing: The Diaries of Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi

The paper focuses on writing as cultural practice relying on the study of the diaries of the Hungarian Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi. By examining her journals, it attempts to clarify the process by which manuscript culture shaped and influenced the Baroness's writing habits. For despite the fact that print lost most of its "stigma" and women entered the literary marketplace, manuscript cultures continued to thrive in the form of diary and letter writing during the nineteenth century. Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi wrote extensively throughout her life. She commenced her diary in 1848, and continued to write it until the end of her life in 1899. In addition to the journal begun in 1848, she started another diary in December 1881. The latter became a more personal account of family events and domestic matters, while the former remained a rather objective narrative of social and political affairs of the time. In addition to her diaries, Jozefa Wesselényi also wrote her memoirs of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849 in 1857. Her manuscripts, mostly unpublished items, were preserved by her family, and later donated to public archives. By examining her diaries in the context of a thriving manuscript culture, the paper reveals that they were intended for circulation inside the immediate family circle, and designed specifically for entertainment and instruction of family members. Baroness Jozefa Wesselényi's diaries appear to have been her legacy to her children and grandchildren, and also attest that women's writing played a crucial role in shaping the family history of the nobility during the nineteenth century.

Keywords

nineteenth-century manuscript culture, journal writing, memoir writing, nobility, family history