

Meal Provision in Schools and in the Street. The Historical Roots of School Catering in Budapest

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of school meals in the 20th century has its roots in several parallel but independent initiatives. The common source of these initiatives was the practice of philanthropy and charity, based on religious upbringing. Public catering for children was first institutionalized in Budapest by a charitable organization, the Children's Society (*Gyermekbarátok Egyesülete*), after which several denominational associations followed suit. In the early 20th century, the City of Budapest itself also took the initiative, setting up its first daycare centers where needy children were not only fed but also participated in educational and recreational activities. Resources for social welfare were eroded during the war, thus foreign aid organizations stepped in to help the children of Budapest immediately after the war, while childcare became the sole responsibility of the public authorities from the 1920s. From then on, the state covered the entire costs of providing meals, similar to the system of soup kitchens established specifically for supplying food to destitute adults.

KEYWORDS

public alimentation, public catering, school, Budapest, social policy

Industrialization in the decades following the founding of Budapest in 1873 (when the cities of Buda, Pest, and Óbuda were united) attracted huge numbers of people to the capital, and the population tripled in the space of three decades. Understandably, the economic boom gave rise to many difficulties that the public authorities had neither the legal nor the financial means to

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address (UMBRAI 2018:306–309), thus, in Hungary just as in Western Europe, these difficulties had to be dealt with by society.¹

The introduction of school meals in the 20th century has its roots in several parallel but independent initiatives. The common source of these initiatives was the practice of philanthropy and charity, based on religious upbringing. This gradually evolved in the last third of the 19th century into “help for the needy,” an activity organized at the level of society (by individual members of the urban middle class), which increasingly encompassed the principle of solidarity.²

The last third of the 19th century saw the emergence of philanthropic movements that remained in operation for varying lengths of time, each with a different humanitarian objective. These charitable associations were a new feature of social coexistence in Budapest, where active participation as either a collector or a donor was increasingly expected. Organized collections of this kind resulted in the setting up of the first communal kitchens (UMBRAI 2018:314–319) and enabled the Children’s Society to promote the provision of school lunches for children. The City of Budapest was subsequently able to institutionalize the latter activity by establishing a network of daycare centers, on the grounds that, as a school-related matter, it went beyond the scope of charity, which was considered a task for society.

The other pillar of the introduction of children’s catering was the dispensary system³ set up in the early 1910s to combat pneumonia, which was rife in the capital city due to the poor housing conditions. In this framework, and to complement the provision of regular health checks for impoverished pregnant women and nursing mothers, particular attention was given to ensuring a regular supply of milk for them and their infants in the form of “milk breakfasts.” The third source of school meals had its roots in the activities of foreign missions between 1919 and 1921. These missions combined all the elements mentioned above, since they revived the earlier traditions of providing meals for children in communal kitchens and daycare centers: children in need were ensured a breakfast comprising a cup of milk, as well as a hot meal at lunchtime.

¹For a more detailed discussion of the topic, see the relevant pages of the study in this volume coauthored with Anikó Báti.

²For more on this, see UMBRAI 2018:305–309.

³A network of small medical stations that primarily performed health screenings. In the first decades of the 20th century, dispensaries of this kind were established in Budapest and other large cities, following the example of other countries, primarily to halt the spread of lung disease but also to prevent alcoholism and to protect the health of pregnant women. (Mladen Magyarevics, Dr. chief medical officer, speaking at a meeting of the Finance Committee. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, June 3, 1913, 1505.)



THE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY

The Budapest Children's Society was founded by Antal Berecz⁴ in December 1887, following the Viennese model. In its very first month of operation, the society provided 100 needy children⁵ with meals from its soup kitchens.⁶ The City of Budapest supported the society's activities with funding of 3,000 forints, and one year later as many as 1,064 children were receiving a cooked lunch every day from one of the communal kitchens that were set up near the schools. The activities of the society deserve recognition, despite the fact that they were able to make only minimal increases in the number of children they helped each year,⁷ while, since their operations were linked to the soup kitchens that functioned only during the winter months, school meals could be provided only seasonally. As a result of their dedicated work, the number of children receiving school meals in Budapest had risen to 3,000 by the turn of the century,⁸ roughly the same as the number of adults who were entitled to, or accepted, food from the communal kitchens.⁹

DAYCARE CENTERS

In the first decade of the 20th century, daycare centers, which emerged as the outcome of social self-organization, also played a major role in the organization of catering. The daycare centers

⁴The director of the Royal Hungarian Girls' Upper Elementary School on Andrassy Street held this post until December 1905, when he was replaced by Count Sándor Teleki. The vice-president of the association at the time was István Bárczy, and its patron was Mrs. Kálmán Tisza. (General Assembly of the Children's Society. *Pesti Hírlap*, December 22, 1922, 9.)

⁵First, poor pupils at the Bajnok Street school in District VI were provided with lunch, after which food was regularly supplied to other needy children from Óbuda, Lipótváros, Terézváros, and Józsefváros. The society's example was followed by several school boards, which firstly provided meals for destitute children with the participation of their families, while for those who still remained without food, they collected money to pay for meals from the soup kitchen, which cost 6 *krajcárs* at the time. "The first lunch was on Monday, when 26 pale, scrawny children sat at the table with timid faces, although they soon cheered up and happily consumed the hot soup and creamed vegetables topped with a piece of meat." (*Egyesületek és társulatok* [Associations and Societies]. *Nemzet*, November 20, 1887, 6.) In its first month, the society boasted 350 members, collected HUF 1,500, and provided food for some 258 children with the help of several socially established communal kitchens (e.g., the Israelite Women's Association of Pest). (*A fővárosi gyermekbarát egyesület* [Budapest's Children's Society]. *Pesti Hírlap*, December 27, 1887, 2; *Az éhező iskolás gyermekek* [Hungry Schoolchildren]. *Fővárosi Lapok*, November 23, 1887, 2373.)

⁶*Éhező iskolás gyermekek* [Hungry Schoolchildren]. *Nemzet*, November 7, 1887, 1–2.

⁷They were able to feed 1,500 children in the winter of 1889, and 1,600 to 1,700 in the early 1890s. By 1895, the number of children receiving meals had reached 2,000, and by 1897 the figure was 2,400. The children were being fed in 27 different locations in the capital, mostly via soup kitchens. (*A gyermekbarát egyesület* [An Association for Children]. *Fővárosi Lapok*, December 3, 1888, 2457; *Gyermekbarát egyesület* [The Children's Society]. *Néptanítók Lapja*, November 13, 1889, 725–726; *A gyermekbarát egyesület* [The Children's Society]. *Pesti Napló*, December 16, 1895, 5291; *A gyermekbarát egyesület* [The Children's Society]. *Pesti Napló*, December 30, 1897, 12; *Egyesületek* [Associations]. *Budapesti Hírlap*, December 29, 1899, 10.)

⁸*Gyermekbarát Egyesület* [The Children's Society]. *Budapesti Hírlap*, December 18, 1906, 15; *Éhező iskolás gyermekek* [Hungry Schoolchildren]. *Pesti Hírlap*, December 25, 1907, 12.

⁹For more on this subject, see BÁTI – UMBRAI 2020:55–96.



were set up next to schools by school boards made up of prominent members of the local community to provide supervision, meaningful activities, and not least meals to school-age children, who, once lessons had finished at lunchtime, would otherwise have spent the rest of the day on the streets or, in the best case, alone in their unheated homes until their parents returned home late in the evening.¹⁰

The first daycare center began operating (a year before the authorities became involved) in the boys' school run by the Pest Israelite Congregation on Wesselényi Street. "November 11 was a remarkable day. Since that day, on three afternoons each week, from half-past two to half-past five on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, three classrooms are filled with children. A total of 66 elementary school pupils attend, whose homes are cold and cramped... The children... go into their classrooms. They do their homework under the supervision of a teacher. They study arithmetic, geometry, and the Bible, play games, read, and have snacks in groups.... The other innovation is breakfast. Forty-five registered young children each receive 3.3 liters of sweetened milk and rolls."¹¹

The expansion of this important and much-needed institution was supported by the City of Budapest¹² in collaboration with the school commissioner Károly Verédy, Dr. thus by the end of 1901, at the initiative of the local school boards, the first daycare centers had opened in two schools¹³ maintained by the city. The expansion of the daycare system to kindergartens would have been equally important. After all, the municipal kindergartens had been set up precisely in order to provide care for children who were unable to receive sufficient attention at home. However, the kindergartens were open from 8 o'clock to 11 o'clock in the morning, and from 2 o'clock to 5 o'clock in the afternoon, which meant that parents who worked all day were unable to take advantage of the care provided by the city.¹⁴ The daycare centers offered a solution to this very problem, as they also provided supervision and meals during the midday break for young kindergarten children who benefited from welfare assistance provided by the public authorities.¹⁵

In the winter of 1902, on the initiative of the head of the public education department, István Bárczy, work began on establishing a system of daycare centers in Budapest's educational institutions. For this purpose, the headteachers had to assess the number of children in the schools who would need to receive meals, the number that would be able to provide their own meals in the form of food brought from home, and the number that would require subsidized and/or free meals. They also assessed the number of rooms in the school that could be set up for the purposes of daycare provision, and whether there was a kitchen, or even staff able to undertake the cooking.¹⁶

¹⁰*Két fontos iskolai ügy* [Two Important School Matters]. *Budapesti Napló*, May 4, 1900, 7.

¹¹*Szociális tevékenység az iskolában* [Social Activities in School]. *Egyenlőség*, November 17, 1901, 5.

¹²*A főváros iskoláztatása* [Schooling in the Capital City]. *Magyar Nemzet*, February 13, 1901, 12.

¹³SCHULER 1937:100; *Gyermekek otthon az iskolában* [A Children's Home in the School]. *Pesti Napló*, December 3, 1901, 7.

¹⁴Proposal made by the head of the public education department István Bárczy, Dr. on the development of the public education institutes of the capital city and the position of public education supervisor. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, January 28, 1902, I, suppl. 10–11.

¹⁵Draft regulation on the poor. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, February 14, 1902, Suppl. 2.

¹⁶*Az éhezõ és fázó gyermekekért* [For Cold and Hungry Children]. *Friss Újság*, November 28, 1902, 3.



At this time, the public authorities announced that they considered the establishment of daycare centers to be the responsibility of the educational (rather than the poor relief) authorities, although in view of the current situation (i.e., the general economic stagnation and employment shortages that had been dragging the economy down for years),¹⁷ they would launch a social fundraising campaign to achieve this goal as extensively as possible. To this end, separate committees were set up for each district for the maintenance of the daycare centers,¹⁸ and a central committee for daycare centers was established in December 1902.¹⁹ This meant that the running of the daycare centers was now officially the responsibility of a formal collaboration between society and the authorities (UMBRAI 2018:307–308).

Like the communal kitchen system, this collaboration was based on the theory that the city undertook the official (educational) task of establishing the daycare centers, but participated in their day-to-day maintenance and operation (by providing teachers and communal kitchen vouchers) only if the local social organizations were unable to do so on their own.²⁰

In February 1903, the committee for daycare centers evaluated the achievements to date. According to the report, the institution had not yet fully achieved its aims, despite the fact that the number of children being looked after was increasing steadily week by week. “The daycare center has not become what it was intended to be, a place for children left without supervision, but merely a charitable institution where children are provided with free lunches. After lunch, most of the children leave the center (...) the department has also experienced this and is therefore seeking to make it permanent (...) so as to integrate it within the school framework as a regular institution... During the winter, 43 elementary schools and 8 nursery schools organized daycare centers, and 5,234 children received free lunches (...) [I]n most districts, the cost of the food could not be met in full by society, and assistance of some extent was requested from the city.”²¹ The number of kindergarten daycare centers mentioned in the report had risen even further by 1904: by that time the city had set up such centers in 13 kindergartens, in addition to social assistance. However, a significant proportion of the 6,000 children then attending the municipal²² kindergartens still did not eat lunch in the institution.²³

From the winter of 1903, the work of the daycare centers was better coordinated than previously. It was stipulated that children could receive meals only in justified cases — in other

¹⁷A polgármester a főváros közigazgatásáról [The Mayor on the Public Administration of the Capital City]. *Budapesti Hírlap*, February 20, 1903 9; *Napközi otthonok* [Daycare Centers]. *Budapesti Napló*, December 29, 1902, 4.

¹⁸*Napközi otthonok* [Daycare Centers]. *Budapesti Napló*, December 29, 1902, 4.

¹⁹*Napközi otthonok* [Daycare Centers]. *Budapesti Hírlap*, December 13, 1902, 8.

²⁰In December 1902, for example, the industrialist József Zvarg informed the management of the Ürömvölgy school in Óbuda that he was willing to provide lunches for 200 children. According to the report, the entrepreneur delivered the necessary ingredients to the school, and the lunch was cooked on the premises. (*Kétszáz ebéd* [Lunch for 200]. *Budapesti Hírlap*, December 24, 1902, 9.)

²¹A *napközi otthon* [The Daycare Center]. *Budapesti Hírlap*, February 26, 1903, 11.

²²The municipal kindergartens were institutions established by the local authorities using taxpayers' money.

²³Meals were provided, for example, in the Mészáros and Hidegkúti kindergartens in District I; the Üröm Street and Miklós Square kindergartens in District III; the Felső Erdősor, Lőportár Street, and Lomb and Petneházy Street kindergartens in District VI; in Rózsa Street in District VII; in Mester Street and Tűzoltó Street in District IX; and in the Tisztviselő Estate in District X. To the public administration on the state of affairs in the first half of 1904. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 1904, August 12, 1071.)



words, the parents or guardians had to ask the director personally to accept their child, but even then, only the truly impoverished were given free meals, while those who could afford to do so paid half the adult communal kitchen fee of 10 *fillérs*. Under the new system, the daycare centers became an additional part of the school, and the children now stayed there from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., playing, doing their homework, and taking part in *szlőjd*²⁴ activities after classes (Table 1).²⁵

“The Erzsébetváros Daycare Center was opened this morning in the Wesselényi Street School, the basement of which has been converted into a huge kitchen through the generosity of the City of Budapest. A small ceremony was organized to mark the opening. The guests (...) took a look inside the kitchen. Here, the ladies of the district bustled around the stove where delicious food was being cooked in huge pots. All the schools in the district are supplied from this one kitchen. Three carts deliver the cooked food to the individual schools in huge milk churns. The churns are placed in lined baskets, so that the food does not get cold on the way.”²⁶ “The lunch comprised broth, creamed vegetables, and meat. Today, 1,609 children have already eaten lunch cooked in the new kitchen. Children from four schools are able to eat lunch at the school in Wesselényi Street, while food is delivered by cart to the other schools.”²⁷ Lunches were also delivered from Wesselényi Street to these schools each day for 120 children (Figs 1–2).

By the World War I, the school meals system based on daycare centers had largely been established in the capital city. In the 55 or so schools recently built as part of Mayor István Bárczy’s large-scale school construction program in the early 1910s (ERDEI 1991:54), daycare centers were already being established, and whenever possible they included a dining room and large kitchen suitable for cooking food for several schools. Where kitchens could not be set up for the children living in the area, meals continued to be provided for groups of children from the communal kitchens maintained by charitable organizations, and attempts were usually made to keep the children separate from the adults.

However, as an integral part of the education system, the daycare centers were not run by the associations but by the City of Budapest, which also maintained the schools. Affiliated with the kindergartens and schools, these daycare centers²⁸ became the first institutions of child protection in Budapest (ÁFRA-NAGY 1936:536). The City of Budapest employed the teachers who conducted afternoon activities for the children after school, as well as the school janitors who accompanied the pupils to the communal kitchens if none of the district’s charitable ladies were available. Likewise, the City of Budapest provided the equipment required for running the school kitchens, including fuel, while the authorities even supplied the necessary

²⁴Handicrafts.

²⁵*Napközi otthonok* [Daycare Centers]. *Pesti Napló*, October 28, 1903 13.

²⁶*Napközi otthon az Erzsébetvárosban* [The Daycare Center in Erzsébetváros]. *Az Újság*, January 6, 1904, 8.

²⁷*Kétezer iskolásgyermek ebédje* [Lunch for 2,000 Schoolchildren]. *Budapesti Napló*, January 5, 1904, 6.

²⁸The city undertook the maintenance of permanent daycare centers (i.e., centers operating throughout the school year) only from 1906; even then, the scheme was launched in just 20 schools, which mostly continued to rely on charitable sources. (Committee and council proposal on the question of making daycare centers permanent. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, November 17, 1905, 1519–1521.)



Table 1. Operation of daycare centers in the 1902–1903 academic year

District	Schools involved in 1907 ²⁹	Number of children benefiting in the 1902/1903 academic year	Average cost in the 1902/1903 academic year (fillérs/day)	Number of children receiving free meals	Sponsors	Contribution made by the City of Budapest in the absence of local charitable sources
I	Fehérsas Square, Fehérvári Road, Krisztina Square, Attila Street, Városmajor Street, Diana Road, Labanc Road, Hidegkút	352 children in 8 schools	9–16	241 children	Children's Society and local sponsors	no data
II	Szalay Street, Toldy Ferenc Street, Lövház Street, Margit Avenue	365 children in 5 schools	9.4–12	357 children	social collection	HUF 1,200 (K 2,400)
III	Ürüm Street, Miklós Square, Vörösvári Road, Szentendrei Road	605 children in 3 schools	7–10	557 children	Children's Society	K 1,500
IV	Károlyi Street	27 children in 1 school	44	17 children	social collection	no data
V	no data	80 children	12	no data	Children's Society and social collection	no data

(continued)

²⁹A napközi otthon [The Daycare Center], *Budapesti Hírlap*, December 15, 1907, 16.

Table 1. Continued

District	Schools involved in 1907 ²⁹	Number of children benefiting in the 1902/1903 academic year	Average cost in the 1902/1903 academic year (fillérs/day)	Number of children receiving free meals	Sponsors	Contribution made by the City of Budapest in the absence of local charitable sources
VI	Érsek Street, Izabella Street, Külső Váci Road, Lőportár Dűlő, Erdő-telki (boys and girls), Angyalföldi, Szent László Square, <i>Kindergartens</i> Kmetty Street, Árboc Street, Országbíró Street	1,167 children in 9 schools ³⁰	7–12	903 children	Children's Society and social collection	no data
VII	Kazinczy Street, Nyár Street, Wesselényi Street, Dohány Street, Dob Street. (boys and girls), Elemér Street, Murányi Street, Damjanich Street, Arena Road (boys and girls), Verseny Square, Hungária Road, Egressy Road, Órnagy Street, Kiszuglói	1,043 children in 12 schools	10–20	1021 children	Children's Society and social collection	K 4,500

(continued)

³⁰Three of these operated until the end of the school year; the others closed in the spring.

Table 1. Continued

District	Schools involved in 1907 ²⁹	Number of children benefiting in the 1902/1903 academic year	Average cost in the 1902/1903 academic year (fillérs/day)	Number of children receiving free meals	Sponsors	Contribution made by the City of Budapest in the absence of local charitable sources
VIII	Rökk Szilárd Street, Baross Street, Bezerédi Street, Erdélyi Street, Madách Street, Jázmin Street (boys and girls), Csobánc Street, Örömvölgy Street	998 children in 6 schools	9–20	958 children	Children's Society and social collection	K 3,000
IX	Mester Street, Tóth Kálmán Street, Tűzoltó Street	257 children in 2 schools	12–20	220 children	Children's Society and social collection	K 400
X	Maglói Road, Tisztviselő estate	No schools involved and catering in 1902				
Total		4,894 children in at least 47 schools ³¹	≈14	4,274 children	Mainly the Children's Society and social collection	K 11,800

Source: Napközi otthonok [Daycare Centers], *Pesti Napló*, October 29, 1903, 16; Napközi otthonok [Daycare Centers], *Budapesti Hírlap*, December 15, 1907, 16.

ingredients — as in the case of the communal kitchens — if the community in a given district was unable to meet the respective costs.³² It was a significant moment in the institutionalization of children's catering when, in 1908, the city authorities transformed the district public

³¹In 1904, the number of children receiving meals rose to 6,130 in 52 locations. Two-fifths of them continued to receive aid from the Children's Society. By 1911, as many as 90 schools had daycare centers. (*Napközi otthon* [The Daycare Center], *Budapesti Hírlap*, December 1, 1904, 11.)

³²The ingredients for the cooking were mostly provided by the Children's Society; the Association of Feminists contributed to the work by delegating supervisors; while in several districts independent associations were formed to provide the necessary background for the task of catering. These included the Kelenföld Children's Society, the Daycare Center Association of Districts III and VI, and the Izabella Daycare Center Association, among others (SOMOGYI 1913:784).





Fig. 1. Poor children eating lunch at the daycare center and school lunch delivery in District VII., Budapest (Source: *Tolnai Világlapja*, January 17, 1904, 68. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/Ujldok_1904_1/?pg=118&layout=s, accessed April 15, 2022)

charitable committees into public welfare and child protection committees (SCHULER 1937:101; UMBRAI 2018:308–309), thereby improving the framework of social involvement.

In 1913, Mihály Somogyi compiled a summary of the situation of school catering in Budapest. In his study, Somogyi mainly examined the quality of the food being offered in the context of children's catering. He compared the full weekly menus of various school kitchens and communal kitchens that also catered for children, his most important conclusion being that as long as school catering was not under the unified management of the City of Budapest, there would be differences in school meals in terms of appropriate nutrition as well as from an



Fig. 2. Daycare center at a small school in District VII., Budapest (Source: *Új Idők*, 1904, 10(1–26): 115. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/Ujldok_1904_1/?pg=118&layout=s, accessed April 15, 2022)

economic point of view. In the examined kitchens, the same method was followed as in the soup kitchens, the aim being to provide children with soup and preferably creamed vegetables and meat on a daily basis, with pasta (semolina noodles, pasta with breadcrumbs, poppy seeds, or plum jam, or potato dumplings) in place of the creamed vegetables at least once a week. Popular varieties of soup included bean, caraway, potato, onion, rice, semolina, and barley, although goulash soup or broth was sometimes served as a main course, in the latter case the meat served on top of the creamed vegetables was the meat that had been cooked in the broth (SOMOGYI 1913:788). On Fridays, a meatless meal was served as a matter of course. This was usually the most popular day among the children, as all the kitchens uniformly served rice pudding.³³

WORLD WAR I

With the outbreak of the World War I, the number of children needing school meals rose dramatically, while the social resources that had until then ensured the provision of those meals drastically decreased. Nevertheless, there was no great change³⁴ in the system itself, which was

³³Somogyi observed that the rice pudding was very rarely made using milk; the rice was far more often cooked in water, and milk was stirred into it only if the kitchen had received some in the form of a donation (SOMOGYI 1913:789).

³⁴The only slight change occurred in the financing of the meals, when, after its creation, the National Military Aid Committee began to provide the city with funds for the children's meal scheme.



based on daycare centers, school kitchens, and the communal kitchens run by social associations with growing support from the authorities, and, as a result, 10,000 children a day were being given lunch in the capital by the last month of the war.

At the same time, the period brought with it an innovation that was eventually to become part of the history of school meals in Hungary. This period saw the triumphant launch of operation semolina, the forerunner of school milk. At the beginning of 1917, thanks partly to private donations and partly to a financial commitment on the part of the City of Budapest, 1,000 young children (aged between 1 and 4) in four schools (in poor areas of the city) were given a daily helping of 400 mL of semolina. The initiative was supported by a collection initiated in the pages of the daily newspaper *Pester Lloyd* in the spring of 1917, as a result of which the semolina pudding campaign was replaced by a breakfast scheme extending to 28 kindergartens and 25 schools. From then, right up until the end of the school year, 2,500 children were supplied with food every day. Later, due to dwindling budgets, only kindergarten children (in increasing numbers) were provided with 200 mL of milk and 70 g of bread per day, while schoolchildren were given soup thickened with flour to go with their bread, due to the growing shortage of milk. The scheme ran until the end of the war, when milk shortages prevented kindergarten children from being supplied with milk.

THE ACTIVITIES OF FOREIGN MISSIONS

Organized school lunches for children almost came to an end in the turbulent period following the World War I, and the provision of breakfast before school hours via the daycare centers resumed only in February 1919.³⁵ After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, foreign missions arrived in the capital at the invitation of the Hungarian Red Cross to help destitute, starving children.

In spring 1919 and 1920, the British Save the Children Fund organized the first “work school,” providing lunch and recreational activities for 800 to 900 children a day (CSORNA 1929:153; ÁFRA NAGY 1936:539). The biggest help, and the most significant guidance for the future of school catering, was provided by the American Child Welfare Mission. Headed by Captain Gardner Richardson, the American mission, which provided for some 3 million children throughout Europe, began its operations in Budapest in November 1919.³⁶ The mission’s activities were based on the capital city’s daycare system and the cooking facilities that had been established in most of the schools. Children were eligible for free meals if they were considered at risk by the medical officer, or by the hospital doctors who were involved in the examinations.

³⁵At the time, breakfasts for “needy proletarian children” were supported by the minister of public supply through the council. The meal comprised thickened soup (10 g flour, 20 g semolina or pearl barley, and 1 g fat) and a slice of bread. (Circular letter to the heads of daycare centers with kitchens. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, February 28, 1919, 260.)

³⁶The American mission announced its fundraising campaign specifically for Hungarian children (mostly in Budapest), in New York on September 30, 1919, and was subsequently joined by Hungarian communities in other big cities (Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Paul, Baltimore, Stamford, Youngstown, Atlantic City, etc.). The goal was to raise funds of USD 5 million, which would be used to provide for around 100,000 children by the summer of 1920. (*Az amerikai gyermeksegélyező akció története* [The History of the American Child Welfare Scheme]. *Magyarország*, January 25, 1920, 9; MÁTE 2011:95.)



For the first time, the determining factor was not the family's financial situation but the child's health, or rather malnutrition.

"Today, children are getting a free lunch for the first time (...). They are armed with little blue enamel bowls and tin spoons (...). When I go inside, schoolchildren from Tóth Kálmán Street are busy eating, 86 of them, at eight long tables. The menu is thickened soup, bean stew, and a slice of white bread. The soup is provided by the Children's Society, the rest by the American mission. The portions are quite big (...) and cannot be less than 350 g (...). They start serving the meal as early as 11 o'clock. In this school, meals are cooked for six schools and four kindergartens, for a total of 400 children of various ages."³⁷

In December 1919, the mission provided lunch to 60,000 children every day in 213 kitchens (most of them newly established).³⁸ "[O]ver 300 children are given meals in the school in Marczibányi Square (...). On Mondays they are given rice pudding and cocoa, on Tuesdays thickened soup and bean stew with white bread, on Wednesdays noodles with breadcrumbs and cocoa, on Thursdays grated pasta in milk and white bread, on Fridays rice pudding and cocoa, and on Saturdays bean soup and bread rolls. A good portion of everything. Three hundred grams of rice pudding and 150 mL of cocoa. There is 55 or 75 g of bread (...) we receive everything from the American mission: sugar, flour, fat, rice, and cocoa — only the salt, paprika, and onions are provided by the Children's Society. The American mission always issues the amount of food required from the first of the month to the first of the next month, and they monitor the supplies in our pantry from time to time. The American aid mission began at the end of August, and the children were initially given breakfast only. At that time, breakfast was provided by the mission and lunch by the Children's Society. The breakfasts were stopped two months ago, however — now it is the Americans who provide the lunches (...). The Daycare Center, a small classroom, is the only room that is heated. Twenty or so boys sit on one side, and around the same number of girls on the other. There are even kindergarten children in the front rows..."³⁹

The number of children in Budapest who were given meals as part of this scheme quickly reached 120,000, and from February 1920 the mission also provided lunches for 150 refugee children then living in railway wagons.⁴⁰ By May 1920, the mission's supplies were severely depleted and the only way the Americans could continue the scheme, which was planned to run until August, was by halving the number of children supplied with meals.⁴¹ Even so, the

³⁷ *Ebédelnek a gyerekek* [The Children Are Having Lunch]. *Az Újság*, November 12, 1919, 2.

³⁸ *Az amerikai misszió karácsonyi ajándéka a pesti gyermekeknek* [Christmas Present from the American Mission to the Children of Pest]. *Új Nemzedék*, December 25, 1919, 6.

³⁹ *Gyermekek csajkával. Az amerikai segítő akció kis kosztosai* [Children with Bowls. The Little Schoolchildren Benefiting from the American Assistance Scheme]. *Friss Újság*, January 13, 1920, 2.

⁴⁰ The *vasonlakók*, or "railcar dwellers," were refugees who had fled by train to Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon, who arrived along with their furniture and other belongings at the railway stations of Budapest or other major cities. Lacking acquaintances or any other options they lived for many months in the railcar towns formed by the stranded wagons, before being settled in schools or small housing estates (UMBRAI 2008:166–167). There is a vast literature on this subject; see, for example, the relevant studies by István Gergely Szűts (SZÜTS 2012), Csaba Csóti (CSÓTI 2002), and Balázs Pálvolgyi (PÁLVOLGYI 2018), or István Dékány's documentary *Csonka vágányon* [On the Sidings] (2014).

⁴¹ *Washington-ünnepély* [Washington Ceremony]. *Nemzeti Újság*, February 24, 1920, 6; *Az amerikai gyermeksegítő akció működése* [The Operation of the American Child Assistance Scheme]. *Új Nemzedék*, May 7, 1920, 3.



American scheme came to a premature end in June 1920.⁴² Although negotiations were held in fall 1920 with a view to resuming the scheme, no agreement was reached due to the shortage of food and the impossible conditions⁴³ imposed on the Hungarian authorities.

From September 1920, the Swedish mission⁴⁴ and the English undertook to feed approximately 2,000 children, the former at the Damjanich Street Home Economics School, the Aréna Street School, and the Attila Boulevard School, and the latter at the Váci Street School; then, in 1921, another larger-scale initiative was launched in the form of American-English cooperation, now involving only 25,000 in each case.⁴⁵ The presence of the missions was still a requirement. Hungarian Red Cross commissioner Júlia Vajkay published a report on the results of a hunger test carried out in an elementary school in Budapest's District VI. Of the 540 pupils surveyed, 10 had eaten only one meal the previous day, 200 had eaten two meals, although both meals consisted of bread and a coffee substitute, while only 18 had eaten meat and 41 had been given milky coffee.⁴⁶

In October 1921, most of the missions discontinued their welfare operations in Budapest. The Swiss, for example, officially justified their departure on the grounds that Budapest, together with the other large European cities that had already received aid, had become stronger, and as a result they wished to concentrate all their efforts on their child welfare missions in Russia, Warsaw, and Constantinople. In the winter of 1921, only 10,000 deprived children were able

⁴²One article bitterly observed that 1,000,000 children in Berlin “and 300,000 children in Vienna are still being given lunch daily, while in our country, lunch distribution has been halted completely.” (*Oszták aknamunka a nyomorgó beteg magyar gyermekek ellen* [Austrian Machinations against Poverty-stricken, Sick Hungarian Children]. *Az Est*, October 27, 1920, 3; *Miért éheznek ötvenezer pesti gyermek, az amerikaiak elmaradt akciója* [Why are 50,000 Children in Pest Going Hungry: the Americans' Failing Scheme]. *8 órai Újság*, January 9, 1921, 4.)

⁴³The state was requested to provide all the flour (at least 300 tons) and beans, while the City of Budapest was asked to provide the premises and staff, as well as the fuel for cooking and catering, which in itself made it impossible to relaunch the scheme. “Although the Americans' charity last year cost the capital some 4.5 million crowns — the provision of fuel this year, despite our best intentions, is out of the question.” (*Holtpontra jutott az amerikai gyermekmentés* [American Children's Welfare Scheme Comes to a Standstill]. *Kis Újság*, November 25, 1920, 1.)

⁴⁴The Budapest-based Swedish Relief Action in Hungary, which operated on behalf of the Swedish Red Cross, fed 1,600 children a month in the winter of 1920. In the summer, they ran three holiday camps in Budapest for the care of 700 children with learning difficulties. (*Bizottsági és tanácsi előterjesztés a Magyarországi Svéd Segélyező Akciónak adandó emlékalbum költségeinek fedezete ügyében* [Committee and Council Proposal on Covering the Costs of a Commemorative Album to Be Presented to Swedish Relief Action in Hungary]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, January 14, 1921, 42.)

⁴⁵A *gyermekétkeztetést Amerika és a genfi gyermekvédelmi szövetség közösen vállalja* [America and the Children's Protection League of Geneva Jointly Undertake to Provide Meals for Children]. *Az Est*, December 17, 1920, 3. In addition to feeding 25,000 children, the Geneva-based International Red Cross regularly provided layettes for babies and organized two summer camps in Balatonalmádi, each for 600 children. (*Ezen a télen még gondoskodnak a nyomorgó gyerekekről* [Destitute Children Are Still Being Looked after this Winter]. *Friss Újság*, November 9, 1921, 1.)

⁴⁶*Szomorú statisztika egy éhségpróbáról* [Disheartening Statistics from a Hunger Test]. *Új Nemzedék*, March 12, 1921, 4. Between January 1 and August 31, 1921, Hungarian children received food worth 150 million crowns from the American mission. Some 64,200 children received daily lunches, and on top of this 7,207 mothers and 6,500 infants were given breakfast, as well as clothing worth 43 million crowns and 1.5 million baby layettes. (*Bársony Elemér hozzászólása a közgyűlésen szociálpolitikai ügyekben* [Elemér Bársony's Contribution to the Assembly on Matters of Social Policy]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, March 31, 1922, 918–919.)



to benefit from the school meals campaign, still with food provided by the Americans. Finally, in 1922, all foreign missions left the country.⁴⁷

WHAT NEXT? SCHOOL MEALS FOLLOWING THE DEPARTURE OF THE MISSIONS

In 1921–1922, when mission activities in Budapest came to an end, children’s catering was once again left to the City of Budapest’s daycare centers. At that time, 74 school daycare centers and 52 kindergarten daycare centers either began or resumed their operations. By the early 1920s, the number of school daycare centers had risen to 107, while the number of kindergarten daycare centers had reached 52, and, as a result of their activities, 12,000 children a day were served with meals in the earlier framework (based on communal kitchens).⁴⁸ However, with social finances entirely depleted, everything was now down to the authorities.

In September 1922, at the start of the school year, when 35 fully equipped kitchens were still standing unused after the Americans’ meals for children scheme, the city appealed to the minister of public welfare to provide 120 million crowns to support the launch of the school meals campaign that had been suspended at the beginning of the previous summer and that was waiting to be relaunched, with the primary aim of alleviating the poverty of the adult population.⁴⁹ In the framework of this initiative, it also became possible to provide meals for children. The need to relaunch children’s catering as quickly as possible was reinforced by data from the League for Child Protection: According to the League’s director, while in 1919 “200 of the 1,000 applicants were malnourished and 800 were well fed, today 800 of those applying for child protection are malnourished. Moreover, these 800 are now in a worse situation than the 200 whom we were able to entrust to the care of foreign (American, Swiss, and Dutch) welfare operations. Today, a 3- or 4-year-old child is 2 kg below the expected weight; a 6- to 7-year-old is 2.5 kg below; a 9- to 10-year-old is 3 kg below; and an 11- to 13-year-old is 4 kg below, and 4–8 cm shorter, than children in the past... Of the 100 children who died of stomach and bowel disease, 60% were destitute, 34% poor, 5.5% middle class, and 0.5% well-off.”⁵⁰

Finally, in December 1922, the minister of welfare József Vass launched a comprehensive welfare program (UMBRAI 2020:137–138) that attempted to coordinate previously separate social

⁴⁷*Pedlow kapitány visszatér Amerikába* [Captain Pedlow Returns to America]. *Magyarország*, May 7, 1921, 4.

⁴⁸School daycare centers were organized only in lower elementary schools. Only one upper elementary school operated a short-lived daycare center in 1919; daycare centers in 40 upper elementary schools in Budapest opened only in 1928, with the figure reaching 65 by 1930 (ÁFRA-NAGY 1936:537).

⁴⁹*Százhuszmillió koronát kér a főváros az államtól a téli nyomor enyhítésére* [The City of Budapest Asks the State for 120 million Crowns to Alleviate Distress During the Winter]. *Friss Újság*, September 13, 1922, 2.

⁵⁰The question of child protection and child hunger at the General Assembly. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, October 27, 1922, 2460.



actions, including children's catering. One of the most important aspects of this program was the provision of free meals for the needy, including provision for breastfeeding mothers and infants aged between 1 and 3 years (up to 10,000 infants),⁵¹ meals for schoolchildren, and lunches for adults who were unable to work (10,000 portions in each case). All this was to be achieved by reactivating Budapest's communal kitchen system. The call for this scheme was jointly issued by the minister of public welfare József Vass and the mayor Jenő Sipőcz on November 11, 1922: "All children between the ages of 4 and 14, whose parents are unable to provide for them and who have proof of their circumstances, may apply via their school to participate in the lunch scheme. Children who do not attend school should apply to the head-teacher of the local school nearest to where they live."⁵²

Children's eligibility was determined by the school teaching staff during a registration procedure. Priority was given to orphans (especially war orphans) and children from large families where the parents were unable to work or were unemployed through no fault of their own. On payment of 10 crowns a week, children whose eligibility for the scheme had been confirmed were given a weekly stamp, which they had to affix to their food vouchers and present in order to receive their meals. All children had to provide their own cutlery for the meals. The ministry provided the basic ingredients required for the school meals, while the City of Budapest was responsible for the cooking facilities and staff and the respective costs. The system behind this scheme was thus initially identical to the system that had been in place at the time of the American mission's child welfare campaign.⁵³

"It is proposed that they be given milk or semolina for breakfast. Lunch on weekdays will comprise soup, creamed vegetables with no meat, and one piece of bread; the creamed vegetables may be made alternately from beans, peas, lentils, potatoes, and cabbage. On Sundays and holiday days, a three-course meal would be served: broth, creamed cabbage with beef, and dumplings with plum jam."⁵⁴ The meals were thus not entirely free, even for the most destitute, as the provision of free meals went against the ministry's policy. In Budapest and the surrounding area, the scheme continued to be organized by the district councils and their welfare

⁵¹The scheme was managed by the Central Office of Nutrition under the supervision of Department IX. (For more details of the scheme, see *Fővárosi Közlöny*, November 30, 1923, 2586–2587; Figyelmeztetés a tejakcióban résztvevők részére [A Warning for those Participating in the Milk Campaign]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, January 18, 1924, 52; *Liber Endre a gyermekétkeztetéséről* [Endre Liber on Children's Catering]. *FK*, May 26, 1922, 1454; Budapest Székesfőváros Tejakkciója [The Milk Scheme run by the City of Budapest]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, January 11, 1924, 17; *Szociálpolitikai és közjótékonyági bizottság ülése* [Meeting of the Social Policy and Public Welfare Committees]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, August 4, 1925, 834.)

⁵²*Felhívás az óvodás és iskolaköteles korban lévő gyermekek ebédeltetése ügyében* [Official Notice on the Matter of the Provision of Lunches to Kindergarten Children and Children of School Age]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, December 1, 1922, 2682.

⁵³The scheme was launched by the minister of public welfare on December 7, 1922. (*Gyermekvédelem és gyermekékezés kérdése a közgyűlésen* [The Question of Child Protection and Child Hunger at the General Assembly]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, October 27, 1922, 2460; *Ebéd heti 20, és reggel heti 10 koronáért* [Lunch for 20 Crowns a Week and Breakfast for 10 Crowns a Week]. *Friss Újság*, November 29, 1922, 2; *Felhívás az óvodás és iskolaköteles korban lévő gyermekek ebédeltetése ügyében* [Official Notice on the Matter of the Provision of Lunches to Kindergarten Children and Children of School Age]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, November 24, 1922, 2639.)

⁵⁴*A népjóléti miniszter beszámolója a nemzetgyűlésnek az elmúlt tél inségakciójáról* [The Minister of Public Welfare Reports to the National Assembly on Last Winter's Poverty Alleviation Campaign]. *Az Est*, August 29, 1923, 3.



committees, which determined the level of need following an assessment of the family's living conditions.⁵⁵

The scheme was relaunched in 1923, and the system was stabilized from fall 1924 and continued to operate in roughly the same way until the 1927/28 academic year. Every day during term time (thus including Sundays, if necessary), between 5,000 and 6,000 children and the same number of adults were given lunch at a reduced price or (in the case of up to half the total applicants) free of charge.⁵⁶ This relatively stable and balanced system changed in 1928. From then until the outbreak of the World War II, the number of recipients was gradually and substantially raised, with the vast majority receiving entirely free lunches.⁵⁷ Among them, the number of children receiving meals remained steadily close to 10,000 (CSORNA 1929:168), thus school meals were not the general source of alimentation up to and including the years leading up to the World War II. Meals continued to be provided by the authorities only to the needy, and although the number of schoolchildren benefiting from them increased, the vast majority of children continued to eat at home, in a family setting (Figs 3–5).



Fig. 3. Children's Christmas at the American mission. (Source: *Tolnai Világlapja*, January 10, 1920, 5. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/TolnaiVilaglapja_1920_01/?pg=36&layout=s, accessed April 30, 2022)

⁵⁵*Hirdetés a 14 éven felüli egyének ebédjének ügyében* [Announcement on the Matter of Lunches for Individuals over the Age of 14]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, November 24, 1922, 2639.

⁵⁶The number of adults was 6,000 in both 1925 and 1926, while from October 1927 it was 4,800; the number of children receiving meals remained at between 6,000 and 6,500 throughout the entire period. An average of 3,000 children received free meals.

⁵⁷Demands to introduce a completely free soup kitchen system had been made a year earlier, in the spring of 1927, justified by rising unemployment and the increasing number of suicides.





Fig. 4. Lunch at the American Children's Mission, drawing (Source: *Új Idők*, 1920, 26(1-29):6. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/Ujldok_1920/?pg=9&layout=s, accessed April 30, 2022)



Fig. 5. Visit by Miklós Horthy during an American Mission lunch at the Tatai Street school (Source: *Ország-Világ*, May 8, 1921, 210-211. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/OrszagVilag_1921/?pg=205&layout=s, accessed April 30, 2022)

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