

Construction of the Modern Woman Thinker's Identity: Valéria Dienes (1879-1978), Philosopher and Founder of the Art of Movement school, and her contribution to Women's Emancipation

*'Let's respect and love the different opinions in each other'*¹

New spaces had opened for women as intellectuals, artists and thinkers in European societies by the first decades of the 20th century. Women became involved in social modernization. The earlier endeavours of women, both as individuals and as members of organizations, contributed to structural changes and new laws regulating their possible intervention in public life. One of the most significant changes concerned education. Women and young girls could attend secondary school and higher education. The personal history of philosopher Valéria Dienes, a multi-faceted intellectual of her time, serves as a unique example of a modern woman thinker. Her work was embodied in the activities and network of progressive thinkers of that era in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and later in Hungary after World War I. The paper focuses on two aspects of her oeuvre that were directly connected to women's emancipation, her writings – both correspondence with feminist activists and her journal entries – and the establishment of the school of orchestrics. The study is based on archival sources and her writings.

Foreword and introduction

The example of philosopher Valéria Dienes,² born in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, can serve to demonstrate how the initiatives of a multi-faceted and talented modern woman contributed to the promotion of social modernization and women's emancipation and how she could be reflexive on these matters at the

¹ “*Szeressük egymásban egymás igazát*” Excerpt from a letter by Valéria Dienes to her friend Anna Lesznai, quoted by Jakabffy 2018:28.

² Valéria Dienes was born as Valéria Geiger in Szekszárd, in southern Hungary in 1879 to an intellectual family; her father was a lawyer father and her mother a teacher. After a long and productive intellectual life, she died at the age of 99 in Budapest in 1978. See Acsády, Elekes, Sárjai 2020: 24-25 and 27. The relevant biographical details of her life will be mentioned in this paper, with references to the numerous biographical works about her.



Valéria Dienes as a young woman. Source: <https://szekszard.hu/hu/bor-turizmus-szabaddo/szekszardi-arckepcsarnok/dienes-valeria> 18.10.2023.

same time. Here, modernity may be understood as both a structural change and a change in attitudes and mentalities. Modernization processes were accompanied by not only the formulation of new political powers, economic changes in production and consumption patterns and changes in labour, but also by a shift away from traditions. New institutions were established and people had to find ways to interact with their environment through the frameworks of these newly-created institutions.³ Different geographical regions and political systems, however, directed modernisation processes in their own ways, and thus the varieties of modern mentalities and practices were constructed in relation to local constraints. The same applied to the transformation of gender relations, as well the new models and hybridities of the modern woman.⁴

Modern women thinkers represented modernity in their thinking and activities while quite often also simultaneously initiating critical thinking about the negative effects of modernity and industrialization. Such a rejection and criticism of, for example, alienating industrial mass production can be found in the outlook and everyday practices of the *Lebensreform* (life-reform) movements and the women involved in them from mid-19th century in Europe.⁵

As the structural changes that defined women's status and career paths as intellectuals were unfolding, Dienes signified a unique example of how a modern woman thinker contributed to the new constructions of women's identity. Her life

³ Sík: 97-99 referring to Giddens: 1990.

⁴ Heilmann – Beetham 2004:1-3.

⁵ On *Lebensreform* movements, see e.g. Boreczky 2018: 73-74 and Detre 2013: 185-186.

and achievements as a philosopher and as the founder of the renowned orchestrics school of dance and movement in Budapest have already been the subject of a wide range of academic works.⁶

Orchestrics is a form of dance (with elements similar to eurythmy). It is also known as the art of movement based on ancient Greek elements. Based on this tradition, Dienes developed a scientific system of movement that became known as orchestrics.⁷

Quite recently, Dienes has appeared in fiction⁸ and also in social history research.⁹ In a new novel by the contemporary Hungarian writer Kriszta Bódis, the main protagonist is a young upper class woman (actually a real, historical personality¹⁰) growing up at the beginning of the 20th century, who becomes acquainted with a new trend, the art of movement. In a letter to her friend, she describes the courses by a trainer adhering to the Duncan school of dance as follows: “In her school she does not teach the pupils dance steps but rather encourages them to find their own movements (...) as she believes that finding your own personal way is the most important thing.”¹¹ This description of the dance school refers to the liberating potential of these new trends. This paper will discuss how these schools were connected to *Lebensreform* experiences and to women’s emancipation.

The significance of Dienes’ intellectual heritage is also reflected in the fact that the school of orchestrics that she founded in Budapest was revived. In recent years it has offered courses and staged special dance performances. An association called *Orkesztika Alapítvány* at the *MOHA* (Mozdulatművészet háza – House of the Art of Movement) fosters her memory not only through orchestrics courses and performances but also archival research, data collection and publication of books and various pamphlets.

The emancipation of women may serve as the context that also provides a theoretical framework to examine Valéria Dienes as an intellectual who was involved in feminism. The social movement theory, particularly the focus on the role of social networks, provides the conceptual tools to discuss the social life of Valéria Dienes among intellectuals and progressive social thinkers and activists and in the art world. As a modern woman thinker, she was often involved and associated with contemporary movements, similarly to the examples of women intellectuals from other countries. As indicated by the papers presented¹² at the

⁶ See, e.g., the works by Arany, 2022, Jakabffy, 2018; Weibel, 2005; Töttös, 1991; Dienes-Fenyves, 2004.

⁷ For further details and an explanation of Dienes’ involvement in orchestrics, see below.

⁸ See the novel by Kriszta Bódis which will be cited hereafter. BÓDIS 2022.

⁹ See Szécsi, Gera 2015: 335.

¹⁰ The novel by Kriszta Bódis is about Klára Tüttös (1895-1980). See, Bódis, 2022.

¹¹ Bódis 2022: 426.

¹² Batinic – Feldman – Kardum -Gorenjak 2022.

international conference on “Modern Women Thinkers” at the IUC Dubrovnik in the summer of 2022, there were several common features shared by women intellectuals and artists in the history of early modernity in South-eastern Europe. Those personalities who were able to emerge as modern thinkers and became significant figures in contemporary public life quite often belonged to the first generation of university-educated women. Moreover, they may have been associated with alternative education, reform pedagogy or workshops and educational programs for workers who did not have access to such knowledge elsewhere. Based on the portraits compiled by the participants at the conference, it would appear that women thinkers, writers and artists were cognizant of the fact that their work influenced the public opinion of their time. In many cases, modern women thinkers were, like Valéria Dienes, associated with different kinds of activism or also belonged to progressive intellectual circles.

The paper will show how the oeuvre of Valéria Dienes contributed to women’s emancipation in general and more specifically the ways in which she was connected to the contemporary feminist movement in the initial decades of the 20th century. Correspondence between Dienes and the editors of the periodical *A Nő* (The Woman),¹³ published by the Association of Feminists in Budapest, and her contributions to it will be discussed.

The prerequisite for becoming an intellectual: women’s education reforms

Valéria Dienes belonged to the very first generation of women who could enrol in higher education in Hungary, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The law that allowed the admission of women in three university faculties was enacted in 1895. The bill was initiated by Minister of Religion and Public Education Gyula Wlassics. He promoted numerous political reforms aimed at making culture and education more widely available in society. The first residence hall for women university students in Budapest, founded in 1901 by the National Organization for Women’s Education, was named after him.¹⁴ The institution, the ‘Wlassics Hall’ that was also home to Valéria, was established to support women university students by providing accommodation for them during their studies, and also aided their course work with its comfort and library. Later, many of the students who resided here became significant women intellectuals in different fields of

¹³ *A Nő* [The Woman] (1914–1927). The renamed periodical of the Association of Feminists first appeared in 1908 as a fortnightly called *A Nő és a Társadalom* [The Woman and Society]. Kereszty 2013; Czeferner 2019. *A Nő* was published monthly, but came out sporadically in the 1920s due to censorship, financial issues, and paper supply problems, and ceased publication in 1927. About this periodical see, e.g. Acsády 2021:73.

¹⁴ Gréberné 2017: 98-102

that era’s arts and science, similar to the so-called ‘Elisabeth Women’s School’ (the Erzsébet Nőiskola in Budapest was established in 1877 as the Zirzen Institute and was renamed in 1898).

The media of the time widely covered the issue of women enrolling in the university as something unusual and extraordinary. The case of the first woman student, who started her studies in 1896, was featured in the press.¹⁵ Her name was Vilma Glücklich,¹⁶ who would go on to become one of the most internationally renowned activists of the first-wave Hungarian feminist movement. Before enrolling in the university, she completed teacher training and was already a practicing mathematics teacher. When she learned about the new education law, she decided to enrol in the faculty of physics and mathematics, much to the surprise of her male counterparts, who gradually accepted her presence and respected her efforts.¹⁷

The opening of new possibilities for the generation of woman like Glücklich and Dienes generation at the end of the 19th century was rooted in the over fifty years of struggles for women’s education in Hungary. The initiatives for women’s education and the establishment of the first educational institutions for children (and later girls and women) were incorporated into the so-called national “reform movement,” as the latter emphasised the importance of public education in the national language. The significance of cultivating the Hungarian language was that the use of Hungarian demonstrated opposition to the mainstream, as German was the official language in the Habsburg Monarchy. The question of women’s education thus became a vital issue not only from the standpoint of social modernization but also from the standpoint of national identity. Hungarian women’s education, emancipation and active participation in public life repeatedly gained importance after the defeated national liberation struggle (1848-49), during the period of oppression and retaliation that ended with the so-called Compromise between Austria and Hungary in 1867.

In the history of women’s education, a significant milestone was the petition for the education of women that an erudite Hungarian noblewoman, Hermin Beniczky (1818-1895),¹⁸ launched in that same year. In 1867, she also founded the National Organization for Women’s Education (NOWE)¹⁹, which campaigned for the expansion of education. Her petition was accompanied by an educational programme

¹⁵ Szécsi- Gera 2015 : 333-334.

¹⁶ Vilma Glücklich (1872-1927), teacher, education reformer, public affairs writer, pacifist and feminist activist, founder of the Association of Feminists with Rózsa Schwimmer in 1904.

¹⁷ Vámbéry, 1927: 2. quoted by Acsády-Elekes- Sára 2020: 12.

¹⁸ Hermin Beniczky is often referred to only by her married surname, after her husband’s name, as Pálné Veres (wife of Pál Veres). The highly respected Pálné Veres Secondary Grammar School in downtown Budapest is named after her.

¹⁹ Országos Nőképző Egyesület.

and a plan for a new institution; it was signed by 9,000 women and then submitted to the National Assembly, where it was formally acknowledged. In 1869, NOWE opened the first secondary grammar school for girls in Hungary. In the following decades NOWE contributed significantly to the education of Hungarian women. Beyond the secondary grammar school, the Association also maintained a primary and middle school for girls as well, and later they contributed to the foundation of a teacher training-college, too. This was the so-called Zirzen College²⁰ named after its first woman director. It was here that the future philosopher Valéria Dienes received her first qualifications before she enrolled for university study.

The young scholar and the beginning of her career

Dienes might not have yet a properly distinguished place in Hungarian collective memory and in social history as a modern woman thinker. The focus of earlier studies about her concentrate mostly on her status as a Bergsonian philosopher. She is acknowledged as the first woman in Hungary who earned a doctorate in mathematics while simultaneously holding a degree in philosophy. Furthermore, she studied music and founded the school of orchestrics; she was involved in dance, theatre and semiotics and examined theological questions. Beyond her achievements in other fields, this paper will focus attention on the significance of her life's work in relation to women's emancipation and the details of her connection to the Association of Feminists (established in Budapest in 1904).



Portrait of Valéria Dienes in her university years. Source: <https://www.jakd.hu/index.php?p=evfordulo&id=404> 18.10.2023.

²⁰ Janka Zirzen (1824-1904) was the first woman director of the teacher trainer school. The same institution was renamed the Erzsébet Nőiskola as a tribute to 'Sisi', Empress Elisabeth (1854-1898), the assassinated wife of Franz Joseph I.

Studies about her life and work often link her personal and professional motives. She received robust support from her family both as a child and a student. Her intellectual family background (her father Gyula Geiger was both a lawyer and a journal editor) must have served as a sound starting point to her later career as a polymath. Yet, it must be noted that her father, a liberal thinker, left the family when Valéria was still a small child. Her mother, Benczelits Erzsébet, undertook the effort to educate herself after the divorce and completed teacher training college.²¹ The most renowned Hungarian poet of the time, Mihály Babits, was Valéria’s second cousin.

Her acquaintance with her future husband, and the father of her two sons, philosopher Pál Dienes²² (1882-1952) during their university years is highlighted as an example of the personal motives in her career. In fact, their anecdotal engagement at their doctoral conferment ceremony in 1905, when Mr Dienes actually presented her with a wedding ring, is a favourite episode in life stories about her.²³ The contemporary tabloid press covered the case that two university students were married.²⁴ She received her degree in both aesthetics and mathematics and a doctorate from the Philosophy Department. Prompted mostly by encouragement from her professors, who saw her talent, brilliant mental capacity and openness; Valéria Dienes began to do translation work. She translated the works of several philosophers and scholars in newly formed fields such as psychology and sociology. Often she also wrote the introductions to the translated volumes.²⁵ She continued her translation work in the following decades. Among other authors, she translated works by Lester Frank Ward, Pierre Theillard de Chardin, John Locke, Henry Franklin Giddings, Alfred Binet and George Berkeley.²⁶ Furthermore, thanks mostly to their personal acquaintance, she became the main interpreter of Henri Bergson’s works in Hungarian. Later, as an acknowledgment of her translations, she was awarded the prestigious Baumgarten Prize in 1934 “*for the development and renewal of the Hungarian language of philosophy.*”²⁷ Her own philosophical works were also based on Bergsonian thought. As a young scholar, Valéria was so greatly inspired by the new trends in social science and psychology that in 1914 she published two short works about these fields with explanations and introductions in the series of so-called Galilei Booklets.

²¹ Jakabffy 2018: 12.

²² For references to their relationship during their studies, see for example: Kardos 83, Boreczky-Fenyves 2017:122, Töttös 1991: 14.

²³ Arany 2022: 74

²⁴ Szécsi- Géra 2019: 335.

²⁵ Bergson 1913.

²⁶ Source: old card catalogue of the National Széchenyi Library (OSZK,).

²⁷ Arany 2022:75



Cover of the booklet by Valéria Dienes about the main trends in psychology in 1914.

Source: OSZK, National Széchényi Library, off-line catalogue. No. 40880.²⁸

During her university years, she delivered lectures in different circles about the new philosophical, sociological and psychological trends that she had studied and translated. Both she and her husband were members of the so-called Galilei Circle, a group of progressive and radical intellectuals created by young social scientists. Her lectures in this circle concentrated, among other subjects, on the questions of materialism.²⁹ In 1906, she met and formed strong relationships with Ervin Szabó, Anna Lesznai, Oszkár Jászi and his sister Alice Madzsar.³⁰ Valéria wrote a review about the works of American thinker William James in the monthly

²⁸ Dienes 1914.

²⁹ Dienes 1983:48

³⁰ Ervin Szabó (1877-1918) sociologist and librarian, Anna Lesznai (1885-1966), poet, writer and, designer, her husband from 1913-18, Oszkár Jászi (1875-1957) historian, social scientist, cabinet minister in the Hungarian Democratic Republic, and his sister, Alice Madzsar (1877-1935) born Alice Jászi, choreographer, dance instructor, founder of medical gymnastics – all belonged to the circle of progressive intellectuals.

journal of the Hungarian sociology, *Huszadik Század* [The Twentieth Century],³¹ whose other contributors were also connected to her intellectual circle. Besides *Huszadik Század*, she also regularly contributed to other leading progressive Hungarian periodicals of the time: *Atheneum*, *Uránia*, and *Nyugat* [The West].³²

The Society of Social Scientists (Társadalomtudományi Társaság) that was formed in Budapest in 1901 elected Valéria Dienes as a member of its board, and she was also active as its librarian.³³ In those years they also organized a so-called Free University (Free School) series of events, wherein Dienes delivered public lectures before larger audiences.³⁴ In her memoirs, she mentioned her very first public address to feminist activists: (...) “I gave lectures for the feminist movement.”³⁵ She recalled the event had left a very positive impression and that she could feel the enthusiasm of the women, for “those who were sitting there felt that there is something extraordinary in the speaker.”³⁶ She underscored the importance of women appearing in the public, because it revealed an alternative to the patriarchal world of men in the public life. This anecdote about her first lecture indicates that she received so much encouragement from the positive and heartening response of the feminists that she lost all anxiety, put aside her notes and began to speak freely. She thereafter concluded that a public lecture is something mutually created by the lecturer and the audience.³⁷

Beyond the intellectual circles to which she belonged, Dienes also frequented the organized labour circles since her university years. She used to teach mathematics and physics at a night school called the Workers Grammar School (Munkásgimnázium) founded by Mózes Gaál. She also taught at the officer colony in the labour district in north Pest, called Istvántelek.³⁸

These activities were the forerunners of the establishment of her own individual school for the art of movement in 1912, after her return from Paris where she was inspired by Isadora and Raymond Duncan. Through her teaching and involvement in intellectual circles, she very consciously participated in the creation of a new culture and in opening of new public spaces.³⁹

³¹ Arany 2022:74

³² Szécsi, Gera 2015:335, Arany 2022:74

³³ Jakabffy 2018: 17

³⁴ Töttös 1991: 14

³⁵ Dienes 1983: 49

³⁶ Dienes 1983: 49

³⁷ Éva Jakabffy describes the event based on statements by Dienes. See Jakabffy 2018:12.

³⁸ DIENES 1983:48

³⁹ Boreczky 2018: 73

The young scholar in Paris

In 1908 Valéria and Pál Dienes travelled to Paris, where the both of them attended the Sorbonne on mathematics scholarships. For the next two years there,⁴⁰ Valéria also attended lectures by philosopher Henri Bergson, who impressed her both as a scholar and both as a marvellous personality. She became enthusiastic about the professor, whose lectures “were attended by so many people that the police had to be called to maintain order.”⁴¹ She began to read his works and decided to pay him a visit. Thus, she wrote him a letter expressing her interest in and respect for his philosophy, which was followed by Bergson’s invitation for a personal meeting in his office at the College de France. This would become the beginning of a rich intellectual acquaintance between the two of them. Valéria wrote several papers inspired by Bergson’s views and later published a study about his approach to psychology. She also obtained from Bergson the exclusive right to be the translator of his works into Hungarian.

While in Paris, Valéria also discovered a spot on the Rue des Urselines that she liked to frequent after spending long hours sitting in the Bibliotheque National. This was the site of an afternoon workshop by Isadora and Raymond Duncan. It included artworks, handicrafts and dance. Valéria attended performances by Isadora Duncan and courses on Greek classical eurhythmy given by Raymond Duncan. She would later recall this period in Paris: “During three years of philosophising, free-floating thought, the intuitive magic of a free-moving mind, the three evening dance performances, the aesthetic enchantment of a free-flowing body, coalesced inside me to create something I wanted to deny, but then acknowledged, first referring to it by the Greek gymnastics, but then orchestrics, a system of movement which later became the raw material of dance.”⁴²

Engaged in the art of motion

Boreczky and Fenyves argue in their study that a dilemma emerged for Valéria to either develop her scientific career or rather turn completely to orchestrics in 1917, when she was asked to replace Vera Bertalan as the head of the art of movement dance school in Budapest.⁴³ I offer an alternative view that describes her engagement in the art of movement, orchestrics, as a specialized field of scientific activity. She examined human movement, in fact every movement possibility of

⁴⁰ Arany 2022: 75; Kardos 2003: 84; Töttös 1991:18; Jakabffy 2018 : 27.

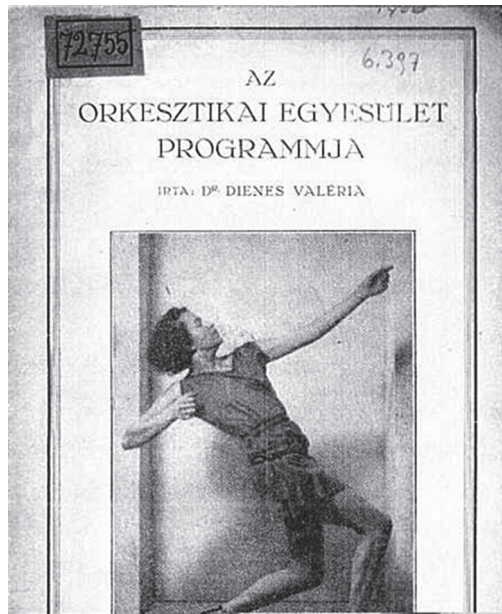
⁴¹ Dienes 1983: 55.

⁴² Dienes quoted by Boreczky - Fenyves 2017: 122-123.

⁴³ Boreczky, Fenyves 2017: 122.

the human body with the purpose of exploring, scientifically scrutinising and using it for artistic purposes. Even though Valéria departed from the field of mathematics, she never abandoned philosophy and logical thought, even when she shifted to different worldviews and beliefs, including theosophy, Christianity and then mysticism at a more elderly age. Another event demonstrated her life-long engagement with scholarship, and that is a presentation she gave with a huge success at a semiotics conference in Tihany (a resort in Hungary on Lake Balaton) in 1969 at the age of 90.

Going back to time of the establishment of her school, she was active in developing her own theoretical system of body movement after returning from Paris to Budapest. By the 1917-1918 academic year, the school’s organisation was also formed. The orchestrics curriculum was ready and the school was a complex system for fostering talent and training both artists and teachers. Dienes also established the Orchestrics Association connected to the school, where trainers led special dance and eurhythmym courses for pupils.



Cover of Programme of the Association of Orchestrics. Source: Dr. Dienes, Valéria. 1928. Az Orkestika Egyesület programja. : OSZK, National Széchényi Library, off-line catalogue. No 72755⁴⁴

In the theory of the art of movement, Dienes developed a formal descriptive system as a language of movement and identified four determinants of body movements:

⁴⁴ Dienes 1928.

1. space
2. rhythm
3. strength (dynamics)
4. meaning/symbolism of body movements themselves.

In her view, “movement is a bridge between the body and the soul.” It connects (carries) the past and the future. The origin of the movement is from within, and is rooted in spirituality (in elevated, conscious movements).⁴⁵ She also stated that the practice of orchestrics helps to form and elaborate the personality and self-awareness.

Dienes later theorised: “Movement does not copy but rather expresses the soul by giving form to our consciousness. The soul is pure temporality, matter, the body is pure spatiality, movement as a spatio-temporal form shares the contours of space and time.” In her theoretical work, she also stressed the bodily movements of which we should be more aware, more conscious of the significance of bodily movements that are otherwise not reflected in everyday life. She also defined the joy of the individual over the conscious movements of the body. “It constructs/reconstructs the body and the beauty of the body.”⁴⁶

One of the major conceptual problems of modernity with regard to the philosophical notions of time, space and motion (motion – a change in time and space) was reflected in performative experiments in the new arts. Lifestyle reform movements encompassed the themes of body/nature/the search for the quality of the natural, the spiritual, free self-expression, the search for meaning, freedom/life/art, and *Gesamkunstwerk* (total artwork). Women’s emancipation was necessarily connected to these experiments, to the art of motion as such, in the sense that the female body understood in this free space was not hidden in the private but rather became active in the common public space of other people and artists. The formalisation of orchestrics (the establishment of the school, association and course, lectures, and publications were strongly connected the women’s emancipation movements).⁴⁷

Another episode in the history of Valéria Dienes’ involvement with the art of movement occurred after the First World War, when Raymond Duncan invited her to his community of alternative life in Nice (southern France), where they were engaged in arts and crafts, such as weaving, pottery and painting. Children were raised together in a community spirit. She spent two years there and returned to Hungary in 1923.

⁴⁵ Dienes 1983: 219.

⁴⁶ Dienes 1915: 227.

⁴⁷ Boreczky 76.



Orchestics, the art of movements practised in nature
Source: <https://wmmm.hu/dienes-valeria-emlekszoba/> 18.10.2023.

The theory and practice of the art of movement dealt with the fundamental questions of the era, and that is how the school of orchestrics was connected to contemporary life reform movements. Lifestyle reform movements emerged in several places throughout Europe and often created alternative communities of artists and reform thinkers, established at remote sites far from the urban settings of modernity. These life reform initiatives had a reflexive relationship to modernity and industrialism, questioning and rejecting many aspects of it, such as the alienating nature of the mass production of goods and the loss of spirituality. Therefore, their concerns included the theme of body/nature/the search for the quality of the natural, the spiritual, free self-expression, the search for meaning, freedom/life/art, and *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork).

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⁴⁸ Boreczky, 71.

Tagtársaink figyelmébe :
a dr. DIENES VALÉRIA vezetése alatt álló
ORCHESZTIKAI ISKOLA
f. é. április 15-én, vasárnap délelőtt 11 órakor
:-: az URÁNIA-SZINHÁZBAN :-:
tartja második előadását.
Jegyek (1—4 K) előre válthatók az Uránia pénztáránál.
A pompásan sikerült előadás műsorát megismétlik.

Advertisement of a performance by the School of Orchestics, directed by Valéria Dienes, at the Urania Theatre in Budapest. Source: the journal of the Feminist Association, A Nő / The Woman / in 1917.

The feminism of Valéria Dienes

As a scholar, founder of the art of movement (orchestrics education) and a modern thinker, Valéria Dienes had already contributed to women's emancipation and the establishment of a new female identity in many ways. She was connected to the contemporary feminist movement as well other progressive circles in Hungary. She attended meetings, delivered lectures at feminist public events and contributed to the journal of the Association of Feminists, established in Budapest in 1904 by Vilma Glücklich and Rózsa Schwimmer. The Association became the Hungarian affiliate to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Some of the founding members of the feminist organisation in Budapest had already been active in other women's organizations, i.e., community, local or national associations promoting emancipation in various fields, such as the expansion of women's education, the protection of women's labour interests and the improvement of their working conditions, or the development of social services. The social background of the organisation's members and supporters (there were men among them, even sitting on the association's executive board) was rather diverse, ranging from middle and lower middle class women to aristocrats, members of parliament, heads of institutions, teachers, lawyers, journalists, artists, unskilled labourers, peasant women and housewives.

The activities of feminists gave rise to a movement with broad social support, framed by the objective of a just society based on the principle of equality

between women and men as set forth in the Association’s founding declaration. Their effectiveness in attracting many supporters and their successful initiatives may be attributed to several factors. On the one hand, they were consistent in their view on the need for women’s emancipation in order to contribute to the well-being of all and to the foundations of a just society. On the other, a very conscious networking strategy by feminists resulted in a wide web of social contacts both with individuals, organizations in Hungary and other parts of the Monarchy and several other countries in Europe and overseas. The Association also established sound working relations with the authorities, for example in the capital, Budapest. This all helped the organisation set up institutions of great importance, such as Women’s Career Counselling and other social work initiatives. One of the Association’s greatest successes was the organisation of the 7th Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, which took place in Budapest in June 1913.

The Association published its own periodical since 1907, initially called *A Nő és a Társadalom* [The Woman and Society], while later, in 1914, its name and format were changed and it appeared under the title *A Nő* [The Woman].⁴⁹ This feminist publication first appeared as a biweekly and later as a monthly, and there were times after the war when its publication became sporadic. As the bulletin of a social movement,⁵⁰ its main objectives were primarily to link the movement’s activists and supporters and keep them apprised of the relevant activities and news pertaining to international women’s movements. In addition to increasing support for the women’s emancipation movement, the publication reinforced links between the organisation’s members and helped forge a common identity based on female solidarity. It was also aimed at propagating feminist ideas to the broader public. In this capacity, the periodical published essays, studies, sociographies, reports, literary works and book reviews. The content of its articles contributed to the enhancement and encouragement of the construction of the modern women’s identity. Thus, beyond the description and analyses of the changing status of women in society,⁵¹ the publication also carried philosophical articles, including translations of foreign authors. During World War I, starting in the autumn of 1914, the characteristic pacifism of the Hungarian feminists was also represented by a number of anti-war essays, proclamations, debates and even poems.⁵²

⁴⁹ The publication changed its title to *A Nő* in 1914 and was published until 1927. It was banned by the Communist Dictatorship under Béla Kun in 1919 and after this regime’s fall it continued to be released in the 1920s, although it only appeared sporadically in its final years.

⁵⁰ For the main features of a social movement periodical, see Dicenzo, Delap, Ryan 2011: 13, 57.

⁵¹ Acsády 2021: 9.

⁵² Acsády 2021:11.

The essays contributed by Valéria Dienes fit into the context of contemporary feminist discourse on the status of women in society and questions of femininity and masculinity, yet they were also peculiar in and of themselves.

The question of the modern woman, *The Woman of the Twentieth Century* (Mársits, 1901), was posed among other works in a booklet published in 1901 by Rozina Mársits, a contemporary author who was the head of a girls' school and also a person who frequently travelled. Based on her experiences in England, she discussed the qualities of the 'New Woman' that she had observed. She argued that after the first generation of highly-educated women in Hungary, who had difficulties finding their proper place in society, the model and type of the Western, emancipated woman should also find their place in the Hungarian social milieu, adapted to suit local traditions. The significance of this essay is that it underscores the process of socialization that creates 'feminine' traits.⁵³ The feminist approach adopted by Valéria Dienes in her writings about women is related to the analytical approach of contemporary feminist authors in Hungary who were critical of the patriarchal social structure and its values. Yet, these essays by Dienes may have sounded unconventional even in feminist circles. Her biographer, Éva Jakabffy, sees a significant feminine trait in Dienes' approach, as she understood the various human cognitive objects and methods as a predetermined unity. In this way, she tended to see new and fruitful connections and interrelations in the world.⁵⁴

In her contributions to the feminist press, Dienes provided a philosophical framework for arguments that supported the necessity of women's presence in social and public life. As she described it later in her memoirs, her own feminist demand for women's rights was based not on the idea that women are equal to men, but on the view that women are different: "(...) women should be formally included among the forces that govern society not because they 'are like men' but because they are not like men."⁵⁵ My feminism meant that women should be given the vote not because they are the same as men, but because they are not. (...) women in social life will do precisely what men will not do. If they do the same thing, why should we need women to contribute?"⁵⁶

Valéria Dienes had her articles published in the feminist periodical *A Nő* with a special motivation. She intended to support the movement through within the framework of her own profession. In a letter written in response to an invitation

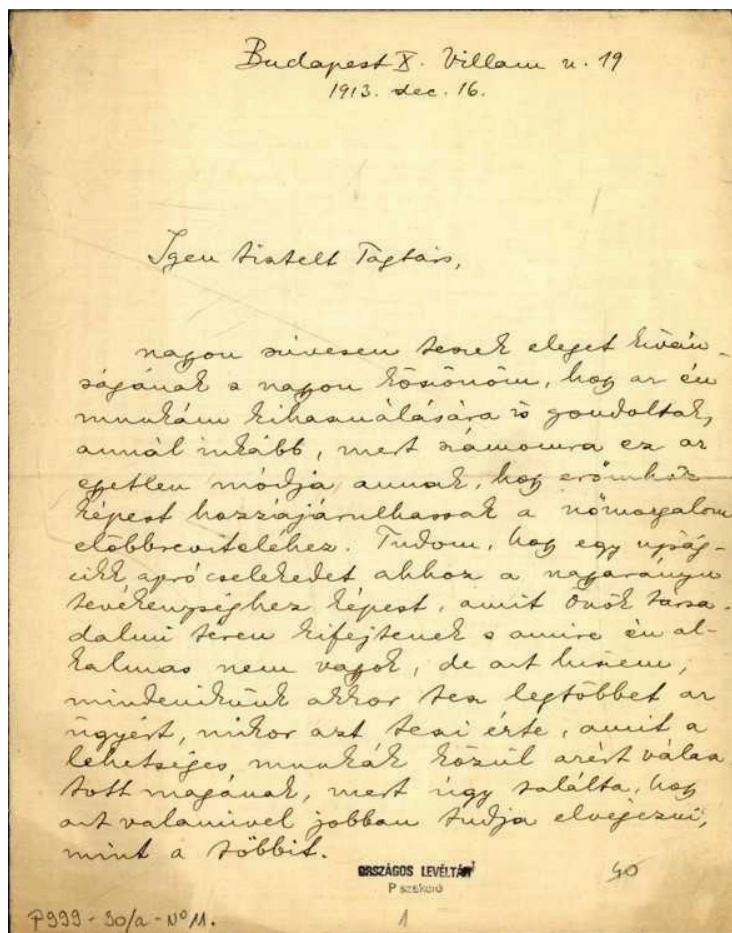
⁵³ Acsády 2004: 195.

⁵⁴ Jakabffy 2018: 14.

⁵⁵ Dienes 1983:49; see also the same sentence quoted by Jakabffy 2018: 14.

⁵⁶ "Az én feminizmusom lényege az volt, hogy a nőknek nem azért kell megadni a szavazati jogot, mert ugyanolyanok, mint a férfiak, hanem mert éppen nem olyanok. Mert éppen azt fogják megcsinálni, amit a férfiak nem csinálnak meg. Ha ugyanazt csinálnák, akkor minek kellenének ők is?" Dienes : 1983: 14.

to contribute the paper, she addressed its editor as ‘My Dearest Colleague’ and continued: “I am very happy to comply with your request and thank you very much for thinking of using my work, all the more so because it is the only way for me to contribute to the advancement of the women’s movement (...) and I will be happy to write for the January issue.”⁵⁷



Letter by Valéria Dienes to the editor of the feminist journal *A Nő és a Társadalom* in 1913. Source: Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltár P999 30/a No.11

⁵⁷ (...) nagyon szívesen teszek eleget kívánságának és nagyon köszönöm, hogy az én munkám felhasználására is gondoltak, annál inkább, mert számomra ez az egyetlen módja annak, hogy erőmhöz képest hozzájárulhassak a nőmozgalom előbbreviteléhez (...) és örömezt írok a januári számba.” Excerpt from a letter by Valéria Dienes to the editor of *A Nő és a Társadalom*. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltár P999 30/a No.11. This is the first mention of the letter.

In this letter written in December 1913, she advised the editors about the possible date of publication of her essay in the following year's issue.⁵⁸ The text of the letter is in fact an indication of the mutual esteem for each other's work and endeavours that characterised Valerie Dienes throughout her career.

The articles by Dienes published in *A Nő* belong to the genre of philosophical essays. These were published as a series of philosophical treatises, beginning with an extensive essay under the title "Philosophical dialogue."⁵⁹ As an introduction to her personal philosophical views, she described the position of evolutionism both in the sense of the universe and in the sense of human culture. This description with visionary elements did not exclude the notion of creation. Yet the universal context was provided to turn attention to the essence of being human and the intellectual development of humankind. She made the point that the main thing is to understand the interconnections between creatures and sympathy with our fellow humans. Without this momentum of empathy, human development leads to a disaster. She argued that human culture badly needs the contribution of women to be able to develop and maintain an understanding of the necessity for affectionate emotions at a large scale.

This first piece in a series of essays published *A Nő* served as an ontological and epistemological framework and an introduction to the pieces that followed. Dienes argued that humans have the potential for perfection of their capacity to be free beings, and the key motive therein is the capacity of humans to overcome earlier habits or, as she called them, 'automatisms.' The way women are educated and the characteristics they develop in the socialisation of patriarchal values are such an automatism that prevents women from achieving their full capacity.⁶⁰ Dienes argued that in the process of emancipation and liberation, women will need to overcome those burdens, meaning certain internalized 'female qualities' that result in women's behaviour and temper. They also need to change themselves.

The subsequent articles in this series by Dienes published in *A Nő*, articulated a radical point of view, a radical rejection of patriarchal values. She contemplated the nature and function of notions, common views and stereotypes about women in the public mind. In an article under the title "The faults of women,"⁶¹ she shed light on the functioning of the 'male gaze', the patriarchal norms that influence and formulate popular visions of women. (In fact, her argument in 1914 is an early example of the views that Simone de Beauvoir would later express in the *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949.)

⁵⁸ Another letter by Dienes to the editors dated in 1912 (?) was documented by Czeferner 2019: 31-32.

⁵⁹ Dienes 1914a:11-12.

⁶⁰ Dienes 1914a:11-12.

⁶¹ See Dr. Dienes, Valéria. 1914b. Asszonyhibák, *A Nő* 1: 76- 77.

Dienes argued in the same article that women in a patriarchal society share patriarchal values and views while at the same time embodying the traits that the system imposes upon them. The way out of these incorrect notions would be genuine self-reflection motivated by feminism that could lead women to independent self-awareness and liberation from the internalized stereotypes. She saw the elements of this process as the fault of women and according to her it is shameful to accept the patriarchal world without reflection. Women make a mistake if they do not follow the mental process of self-awareness and remain in a vulnerable position by only seeking male attention and wishing to attract them even in situations when this is completely irrelevant. Women need to discard the double bind of being either servants of men or their idealised objects.⁶²

Finally, in a three-part treatise, “About women’s value” (A nő értékéről),⁶³ she continued these arguments and summarized that the essential moment of feminist morals would be to pose the question of whether women are created only to please men. Her answer was an obvious no. Women should find their own essence, which had thus far been concealed and distorted by the socialization dictated by the patriarchal vision of roles and traits attributed to men and women.

Her notion of femininity was based on the assumption that women and men are genuinely different, yet women have to find their own essence. Dienes contended that the liberation of women is necessary, because this is the only way to integrate women into the processes of society and ensure that the female quality is incorporated into the creation of human culture.

In her memoirs, published late in her life, Valéria Dienes referred to feminism as a relevant and vital trend that she could identify with her own version. She recalled when she was addressing feminist audiences in a lecture series organized by the Society of Social Scientists⁶⁴ and she also put forth arguments for the necessity of supporting the presence of women in public life.

The general attitude of accepting, understanding and loving⁶⁵ that characterized Valéria Dienes can also be linked to her personal interpretation of feminism and to a conscious stance regarding the role of philosophy and science. Her position on women’s suffrage can be linked to the contemporary visions of Hungarian feminists that were rooted in the benevolence and caring, maternal features of women, so that they would be the responsible actors in social life when after receiving equal rights. Yet in the approach suggested by Dienes, there was a distinction between the biological and cultural traits attached to women and she argued that those traits which maintained women’s subordination had to be overcome.

⁶² Dienes 1914b: 76.

⁶³ See Dienes 1914c, 1914d, 1914e

⁶⁴ Dienes 1983:48

⁶⁵ Jakabffy 2018: 14

Conclusion

The history of modern women thinkers reveals the contributions of the first generation of university-educated women to the formulation of a new alternative identity. Several of these women and their ground-breaking achievements pointed to a new vision of women in society and paved the way for emancipation, understood such that it included extrication of female thought from the patriarchal mentality.

The works of Valéria Dienes, a multi-faceted scholar, definitely enforced such tendencies. As a philosopher, she was connected to the most distinguished thinkers of her age, both as an author and translator. Later she developed her own system that combined philosophy and theology. Dienes also sought social alternatives, participated in intellectual and progressive circles and herself became a transformative force of change in social relationships. For a time she lived in the life reform settlement of Raymond Duncan. Using the model of Isadora Duncan's dance school, she established her own system of the art of movement and opened a school in Budapest for which she called orchestrics. Her activities contributed to progress. Dienes developed connections to the contemporary feminist movement, delivered lectures in their circles and contributed a series of philosophical essays to the feminist periodical *A Nő* [The Woman], the social movement periodical of the Association of Feminists (founded in Budapest, 1904). She argued that women should be a part of public life as agents who create human culture and science. Yet, she added that the previous patriarchal expectations of women made them unsuited for such active contributions to social life. Thus, she concluded that women must educate themselves and reflect on earlier value systems. In this way, women would be able to alter their own submissive behaviour and renew their relationships. As an author, a lecturer and as the founder of the art of movement school of orchestrics, Valéria Dienes promoted women's emancipation by creating a way of liberating the body, the mind and the soul and thus contributed to the formation of the modern woman's identity.

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Konstrukcija identiteta moderne misleće žene: Valéria Dienes (1879-1987), filozofkinja i utemeljiteljica škole umjetnosti pokreta i njezin doprinos emancipaciji žena

Rad predstavlja Valériju Dienes, višestranu znanstvenicu u kontekstu suvremenih društvenih krugova kojima je pripadala. Rođena je 1879. u Szekszárdu kao Valéria Geiger, kći oca pravnika i majke učiteljice. Prvu kvalifikaciju stekla je kao učiteljica na Institutu za izobrazbu učitelja Erzsébet. Valéria je pripadala prvoj generaciji žena koje su mogle upisati sveučilište pa je odlučila iskoristiti priliku i upisala studij matematike. Studirala je i estetiku, filozofiju i glazbu. Prevodila je filozofska djela i objavljivala radove iz suvremenih društvenih znanosti i psihologije. Valéria je pripadala Društvu društvenih znanstvenika i Galilejevom krugu. Udala se za kolegu, studenta matematike Pála Dienes, i oboje su završili doktorski studij. Godine 1908. par je otišao u Pariz gdje je Valéria uz studij matematike na Sorboni pohađala predavanja filozofa Henrija Bergsona na École Normal Supérieure te se s njim upoznala. Pariz je također bio mjesto gdje je pratila tečaj Isadore i Raymonda Duncana o plesu i umjetnosti pokreta, temeljen na starogrčkim elementima. To je bila osnova na kojoj je razvila svoj znanstveni sustav pokreta, orkestiku.

Cilj je rada pridonijeti ranijim studijama o životu Valérije Dienes, o njezinoj osobnosti i opusu moderne misleće žene. Istaknut će se načini na koje je Valéria Dienes pridonijela oslobađanju žena, poput oslobađajućeg učinka orkestričkog plesa koji je mogao imati ključnu ulogu u formuliranju alternativnog identiteta. Njezin doprinos artikulaciji feminističkih ideja još nije detaljnije istražen. O argumentima njezinih eseja objavljenih u feminističkom časopisu pod nazivom *A Nő (Žena)* raspravlja se u kontekstu suvremene feminističke literature u Mađarskoj ukazujući na njezino značenje u povijesti emancipacije žena i povijesti moderne ženske svijesti.

Ključne riječi: Valéria Dienes, orkestika, emancipacija žena, feminizam u Mađarskoj

Keywords: Valéria Dienes, orchestrics, women's emancipation, feminism in Hungary

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