

Remarriage and Stepfamilies in East Central Europe, 1600–1900. Edited by Gabriella Erdélyi and András Péter Szabó. (Routledge Research in Early Modern History. New York, NY: Routledge, 2023. 364 pp.

The final volume of the project of the “Integrated Families” Research Group, which was established over the course of the past five years and has resulted in the creation of an international network linked institutionally to the Institute of History in Budapest, is partly a summary of the findings so far and partly a synthesis with a macro-regional ambition. The research group analyzes two specific sub-themes of family history, remarriage, and the functioning of stepfamilies in the period between 1600 and 1900. The East Central European region (i.e., the pre-partition Kingdom of Poland, the Kingdom of Bohemia, the Kingdom of Hungary with Transylvania, and the Romanian principalities bordering the latter from the east, i.e., Moldova and the Lowlands of Havas) was chosen as the geographical framework of the investigation. The region is usually defined as a transitional space between Western Europe and the Eastern world, which is interesting for the community of historians in part because of its ethnic, linguistic, religious, social, and demographic features (especially in terms of early modern and modern immigration, emigration, and internal migration). With this in mind, the two editors, Gabriella Erdélyi and András Szabó, have made a claim for the international relevance of the volume, which consists of introductory essays and two case studies.

Gabriella Erdélyi’s introductory study provides a summary of the following chapters, highlighting the overlaps among the authors’ findings. Erdélyi also reflects on the dual nature of the volume. The first section uses the methods of historical demography and tackle broader structural questions. The second part focuses on historical anthropological issues and places much greater emphasis on the agency of individuals and small groups. Rather than expecting to find contradictions in this (p. 4), one can see a simple methodological peculiarity. The larger scale obscures subtle differences, i.e., transforms them into averages and thus “smooths” them out. Erdélyi’s introduction is obviously neither a conclusive nor an exhaustive synthesis, especially as the research team itself has also presented an array of findings and conclusions not cited in her summary. Since this volume is most likely to be read by researchers from a particular country, region, culture, ethnicity, etc., rather than offer a detailed description of each of the ten studies, I will summarize a few of the conclusions that I found

particularly fascinating, though obviously my choice of focus reflects my own interests.

The series of historical demographic studies opens with Alice Velková's "Inheritance and Stepfamilies in Bohemian Rural Society (1650–1800)." Velková draws on a database with information concerning 16,000 individuals compiled from records of parish registers. Her important findings point to both the elasticity of inheritance patterns and the higher proportion of stepchildren among landowning families. Underlying the demographic data, the family clearly functioned as an economic labor organization. It is thus no surprise that assets such as land and labor were, due to their limited nature, decisive in the family's considering cohabitation and inheritance, which were also structured by the larger economic framework in which they lived (in particular the organizational rules of manorial estates).

Marzena Liedke and Piotr Guzowski's study "Magnate and Noble Stepfamilies in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries" is a legal-historical and historical-demographic study. The data on the noble elite, compiled by genealogical processing, already places in the foreground the question (also raised in the introduction and later in the book) of the extent to which a stepparent's attitude towards a stepchild was (or was not) negative. Obviously, the functionality of the family structure, the efficiency of property management, the methods and aims of childrearing, and strategies of abandonment are not negligible issues when considering a family's approaches to defending its interests.

Árpád Tóth's study "Career Potentials of Stepchildren in the Lutheran Community of Pressburg (Bratislava, Slovakia) 1730–1850" focuses on how the limited resources available to the family were divided between stepchildren and non-stepchildren in a stepfamily. Tóth provides a tangible and measurable basis for differences in the ways in which children and stepchildren were treated, which may reflect different emotional aspects, while the different degrees of talent among the children in a family may also have been a factor, thus making it difficult to arrive at any general "rule." The study also shows that, even in the feudal world (with its many limitations on social mobility), there were families that, as ambitious, wealthy, well-educated elites, could pursue different career strategies.

Péter Őri's study "Orphans and Stepchildren: The Impact of Parental Loss and Parental Remarriage on Children's First Marriages in Zsámbék in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" is one of the most complex analyses

of historical demographic studies in the volume, using the most curious methodological approach. Óri shows that there was a higher proportion of stepchildren among landowning families, a finding that can be linked to the fact that landowning families may have had an immediate need for stepchildren as a source of labor.

The study by Sándor Lakatos (“Marriage, Widowhood, and Remarriage in the Székely Land (1830–1939)”), which concludes the first section of the volume, is an important contribution to the previous studies but also to the previous research in that it examines the impact of divorce more closely and confirms that remarriage was motivated by both a desire to share the workload and a need to maintain socioeconomic status. Further research on the layers of family relations behind, underneath, or within these larger structures may yet shed light on attitudes towards the self and stepchildren.

In the second part of the volume, analyses on a smaller scale but with a greater density due to the use of ego-documents are presented. Gabriella Erdélyi’s “Mothering Half-Sisters: Maternal Love, Anger and Authority in Early Modern Hungary” explores the emotional games, manipulation, and love language within the family as defined in modern times through the correspondence of a noble woman with her two daughters. The analysis focuses on language, rhetoric, and prestige. The successful and failed attempts to use epistolary language to dominate another person makes this family story, which is almost four centuries old, unique and alive.

Ágnes Máté’s study “Remarriage and Stepfamilies among the Lutheran Urban Elite in Seventeenth-Century Hungary. Neo-Latin Wedding Poetry as Source” analyses the wedding poetry of German bourgeois families as one symptom of the deliberate social isolation of these communities and highlights the importance of keeping alive the memory of the former spouse after remarriage. The study, which is based on sources concerning three different urban communities in the Carpathian Basin (the cities of Lőcse, today Levoča, Brassó, today Braşov, and Sopron), examines the need to replace a lost spouse, while children from previous marriages were not mentioned. It was also a common practice that children from previous marriages did not wish their remarrying father to have children. This would presumably be perceived as an insincere gesture on their part.

András Péter Szabó’s study “Roads to Recomposed Families of the Nobility in Seventeenth-Century Transylvania” analyses widowhood and post-divorce remarriage strategies among the Transylvanian noble elite, a recurring theme in

the volume. On the one hand, the economic motive behind his conclusions is clearly evident: the wealth of someone who had been widowed was a far greater asset from the perspective of family and kinship interests than the (usually) comparatively limited wealth of a bride entering her first marriage.

Andrea Fehér's study "Stepfamily Relations in Autobiographical Writings in Eighteenth-Century Transylvania" counterbalances the more or less stereotypical image of the evil stepmother with the more aggressive, violent stepfather. Of course, the greater position of power may have given greater scope for abuse, but it may be worth considering that the narratives left by the people who wrote memoirs looked back on the whole of their own lives, since the image of the stepmother may have been influenced by self-rescue motives related to later problems in life.

In her study "Her Children to Have as Children of Ours": Stepfamilies in the Romanian Principalities in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," Constanța Vintilă builds on a varied and sizeable source material. In doing so, she introduces the reader to the world of the Romanian principalities of Moldavia and the Great Plain, administered by the Orthodox Church, in which stepfamilies of several social strata are examined. Her sources outline the greater attention paid to widows among the boyars, who had more family wealth. Her study of the normative and powerful role of the Orthodox Church in determining questions of custody of family members points to the narrow space for maneuver of widowed women, in which their modes of expression can be seen more as a survival strategy.

The micro-level studies in *Remarriage and Stepfamilies* explore the family life of culturally diverse peoples living in the Polish, Czech, Hungarian, and Romanian states of Central and Eastern Europe, largely along the lines of their social and economic stratification. The many studies provide a nuanced and rich picture of the stepfamilies of the region, while at the same time raising a number of exciting research questions. The book's inclusion in the international family history literature is to be expected, if only because it opens an under-explored region to global historiography.

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