

Születés és anyaság a régi Magyarországon: 16. század – 20. század [Birth and motherhood in old Hungary: From the sixteenth to the twentieth century]. Written and edited by Lilla Krász. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Kutatási Hálózat Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2023. 445 pp.

At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, drawing inspiration from his contemporaries, Thomas Malthus introduced the notion of impending population catastrophe, a notion that would not only seem to become a reality over the course of the next century but would also be seen as an ominous threat by the leading powers of his time. Indeed, it was seen as such a threat that a country's potential and power were generally understood as depending first and foremost on the growth of the population within its borders, and deliberate policies were introduced to further population growth. In the eighteenth century, Habsburg leaders began to feel that they were gradually losing their place as a world power. Instead of attempting to expand their territories, they turned their focus inwards, to questions of domestic policy. They began to see the peoples of their empire more and more as quantifiable subjects. How many did they number? What was their status? How much did they pay in taxes? How many of them were women, children, or Jews? How could their numbers be increased? The volume under review, which was written and edited by Lilla Krász and prepared with the active cooperative work of ethnographer Zita Deáky, examines this exciting transformation, focusing broadly on the period between the mid-sixteenth century and the mid-twentieth century and more narrowly on the time span between the last half of the eighteenth century and the first third of the twentieth. The book weaves an intricate web by exploring the relevance to this transformation of questions of memory and forgetting, money, and knowledge. It offers penetrating analysis of a rich array of sources in a vibrant, highly readable tone.

The book reminds us, perhaps first and foremost, that while the past may sometimes seem distant, it is nonetheless only a few generations removed from today. This “visible” past, which is still largely within the perimeters of family memory, primarily conjures the memory of a community in which, in accordance with inherited social roles (and also tradition and custom), the rituals, practices, and beliefs surrounding childbirth, which was understood as the guarantee of survival, were cultivated and preserved. In seven chapters divided into 23 sub-chapters, the book offers vivid descriptions of the agonies and joys of mothers

of the past centuries, both those whose names have survived and those who remain anonymous, and also of the fates of women who were unable to conceive and babies who were born prematurely, late, or stillborn. It also touches on the roles of men and the fears and accusations surrounding healthy births and births that ended in tragedy. Importantly, the book also pays tribute to Ignác Semmelweis (1818–1865), who unquestionably merits international fame, and Vilmos Tauffer (1851–1934), who was a doctor and surgeon of international renown, as well as to the many doctors and surgeons who actively fought for the development of health care in Hungary and Central Europe, especially in obstetrics and gynecology, and to the many trained or untrained midwives who did their work outstandingly well or, in many cases, devastatingly badly.

But this book undertakes to do far more than that. It also presents customs, practices, beliefs, and ideas which have since been forgotten or which our society today might well find strange. It goes beyond a simple presentation of these beliefs from the perspective of Max Weber's notion of disenchantment and shows how the price of the leaps forward that have been made in the world of health care has been almost incalculable. How could one possibly calculate, after all, the precise costs and benefits in situations in which, because of high mortality rates, people decided simply not to have children at all? The world of people who lived alongside and indeed even felt a close attachment to the holy images on Gothic panels, in wooden churches, or in the stone churches built out of communal resolve is arguably gone, much as the humble fear of cosmic forces that was embodied in the idea of humoral pathology is also gone. The book conjures this world with its vivid descriptions and in-depth analyses of familiar, even famous and also less familiar or entirely unfamiliar images. The numerous illustrations (almost 170) include, alongside those mentioned above, an impressive array of family photographs, photographs of works of art, engravings from books on specialized subjects, and documents that are valuable as primary sources. The reader also finds 27 tables which offer clear illustrations of the many ideas and also serve as source information. It might have been useful to have included a map with table 25 (which gives information concerning institutions where midwives were trained in the Kingdom of Hungary and Transylvania in 1770–1918), and some of the tables should perhaps have included (or been replaced by) diagrams (table 16, for instance, which presents data gathered by István Hatvani on infant mortality in Debrecen, or table 27, which provides information concerning surgeons and midwives who obtained their degrees in Hungary), but tables are unquestionably the most appropriate solution for a comparison of the textbook

texts or documents which fall under other designations. Various excerpts from the book, such as the interpolated explanations, textbook excerpts, and case studies, can be integrated into university and, under special circumstances, secondary school education to further a nuanced understanding of the relevant demographic, social, and even economic chapters. They also help further a grasp of the darker side of the subject, which includes rampant infanticide, ill will that led to the death of a child, or the death of a child as a consequence of unprofessionalism, ignorance, carelessness, or indifference (vivid historical examples of this include the cruelty of midwives who rushed births, infants being prematurely pulled from their mothers' wombs, etc.). Another practice which has only rarely been submitted to serious scholarly study was the use of wetnurses to provide breast milk for infants. This practice led to literally innumerable deaths, as the alleged causes of these deaths provided in the record books were conditions such as "congenital infirmity," "convulsions," "inflation of the intestines," etc.

The gradual transformation of the practice of providing health care into a specialized profession also led to the expansion of an emerging market. This meant both the invention and dissemination of new tools and the addition of new customers to the market network, as well as an increasingly strong demand for health care and a marketplace attitude which has shaped the profession and practice of health care for the past two centuries. The book offers a detailed presentation of the most important implements used during various moments of this history, including, for instance, the belts and cinctures that were used in the early modern period to facilitate the birth process. The so-called belt of Saint Margaret, the use of which only the upper classes could afford, and the belt-cord used by peasant women and worn by their husbands offer extreme examples of the tools used to facilitate childbirth (which, after all, put women less than an arm's reach from death, as it were). The evolution of these tools is made easy to understand by the book, however, if we consider the example of the changes which took place in the contents of the midwife's bag. The four columns of Table 10 summarize the stages of development over a century, in the course of which the birth stool, for example, fell out of use, while by 1882, soap, which certainly had not been in use in 1823, was also found alongside the metal tools. The periodical *Bába-Kalauz* (The Midwives' Guide) kept midwives informed of the newer implements available for use in obstetrics equipment, which was part of overall developments in the pharmaceutical industry (as exemplified by the improvement in the quality of the pharmacy containers presented on pages

24–25 of the book). While the book provides nothing in the way of specific calculations, it offers a thorough and circumspect look at the training and educational opportunities midwives had (and the related costs), which became increasingly important from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, as midwives found themselves more and more compelled to acquire documents which certified their abilities. This strikes me as just as essential to any understanding of the process of professionalization as the repeated emphasis on the fact that a midwife, who was put under more and more expectations by the state and the professional world, was first and foremost an employee of the community in which she worked and, given the intimate nature of her work, was also often a very influential member of this community with an array of responsibilities and was sometimes even one of its informal leaders.

Finally, the book presents the process of medicalization through a series of emphatic contrasts over 350 pages (concluding with a bibliography, a list of illustrations, an index of personal names, and acknowledgements). These contrasts include, for instance, the stark difference between the narrow medical and surgical community on the one hand, which consisted entirely of men, and midwives on the other, who were all women and who were found all over the country. One could also mention the issue of birth control, which, although as ancient as humankind itself, cannot be said to have been part of conscious family planning before modernization, apart from the practice widespread in some parts of Hungary of having only one child (specifically the so-called Ormánság and Sárköz regions). Similarly, one finds the opposition between the largely academic theoretical knowledge concerning childbirth and predominantly empirical, practical knowledge. One could also mention the contrast between the fear of doctors and surgeons on the one hand and the trust and confidence in midwives (often due to their vulnerability), as well as the narrow social world of doctor and surgeon in contrast with the broad social circles of midwives, and so on. The book (which is a hefty tome and therefore is perhaps not ideal as something one would browse in bed) is a particularly engaging read in part because it raises a fascinating general question: how did the customs, rituals, and practices surrounding birth, which was fundamentally a family affair, move from this intimate, narrow sphere to the more public, regulated world of the hospital? Or rather, how did birth move *for the most part* to the hospital, since it is worth noting that, since the publication of the first version of the book, laws in Hungary have changed and home births are now permitted, if under strict restrictions. This alone would not have justified the republication of the book

after almost two decades, but the constantly expanding national and international specialized literature on the subject does. The book has grown, and changes have been made to the illustrations and design to ensure that the work as a whole better meets expectations today. The publication of the new volume in the “Family – Histories” series was funded by the research project *Hungarian Family History before Modernity: Childhood and Mosaic Families in the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries*, led by Gabriella Erdélyi, and published by the Research Centre for the Humanities Institute of History. The book continues to capture the interests of readers, as is most eloquently proven, perhaps, by a comment posted in May 2023 (four months before the launch of the new edition) to *Moly.hu*: “I would like to note, this book is well-nigh impossible to get. I myself, after having pre-ordered it two years ago on Bookline (where it is still unavailable), finally bought it on Vatera. So... make no mistake about it: anyone who gets a copy will not give it away easily.” I am sure this reader will not be disappointed to get a copy of the new edition.

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