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As the Storm Approached. The Last Years of the Hungarian Women's Societies Before the Stalinist Takeover

Andrea Pető

The gradual leveling of the civil society commencing after 1945 had a particular effect on the organically-developed associations of Hungarian society. During the dissolution of the existing women's societies, all the documents were seized and deposited in the Ministry of Interior Affairs. These documents are only now being made available to researchers. Even the petitions for the re-activation of certain women's societies from 1945 reveal that many of the archives of the various women societies had been destroyed during the war. With few exceptions, only those materials seized by the Department of Associations in the Ministry of Interior Affairs testify the existence of women's societies.

This study will analyze these enormously rich documentary sources merely from the point of view of the local civil societies, in order to understand how a different and quite efficient network of Hungarian women's societies could disappear without a trace.

While some women's societies had histories stretching back 100 years, they entered a new chapter with the change of regime which began in 1945 and lasted until 1949. Nevertheless the final acts of the process – the distribution of the assets of the dissolved associations and the prohibition of those women's societies which for some reasons or another were missing from the list of targeted organizations lasted until 1951. The change of regime shook the ground under even the youngest women's society, the Democratic Alliance of the Hungarian Women (hereinafter: MNDSZ). Not only the structure of the organization but also the age and occupational structure of the leadership changed. Although it also changed dramatically after 1949, this was the only women's society which actually remained on the stage.

After Spring 1945, the women's societies could not escape the cul-de-sac of both their own history and that of society at large. In addition, they could not break through their political neutrality, which doomed them to become passive victims of the change of regime.

*Brief History of Women's Societies*¹

The establishment of women's societies was a crucial step in women's emancipation. As in most countries, their development began with charity institutes proceeded to professional religious organizations and led ultimately to the drive for emancipation. Two phases in the evolution of Hungarian women's societies can be clearly distinguished. (see Table 1.)

The first phase began in the mid-19th century and was most energetic between the last decade of the century and World War I. During this period, traditional women's societies were founded for the financial assistance of the wider society, providing services as nurseries and kindergartens.

Not including religious organizations, there was at least one women's society involved in charity work in all significant mid-sized towns. Ideally, in a town the size of Kaposvár there must have been charity, Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and Jewish associations, and most probably a professional one as well. Due to the increasing numbers of women-employees, the demand for setting up a professional interest group became more important among some circles of women. In addition, many such associations published their own papers, depending upon their financial capacities.²

The only political association of women which aimed at achieve full emancipation was founded in 1904. It was called the Feminist Society.

The women's societies were organized in two ways. Firstly, crèches and similar centres were established for the satisfaction of local needs. Such associations were founded first of all in bigger towns where a patriotic middle class with some degree of perception of social liability had already been represented. The double structure of Hungarian society was reflected in the structure of the

¹ Apart from a few local publications and annual books, the history of the Hungarian women's societies in the 20th century, as well as that of other associations, has not been studied at all. Nevertheless, the history of the movement of socialist women is available: Fehér Jánosné, *A nőmozgalom története Abonyban a századfordulótól 1976-ig.* (*The History of the Hungarian Women's Movement in Abony till 1976*). Abony, p. 197. Dr. Ágoston Péterné, *A magyar szocialista nőmozgalom története.* (*The History of the Hungarian Socialist Women's Movements*). 1947, Zsuzsa Fonó, *A magyarországi nőmozgalom történetéhez 1895–1918* (*On the Movement of the Hungarian Socialist Women 1895–1918*). 1977. On post-1945 period see Mária Palasik, *Nők a nőkről a koalíciós parlamentben* (*Women on Women in the Parliament during the Coalitional Period*) in *Ring* 13 (1990), pp. 4–5.

² Új Magyar Levéltár (New Hungarian Archives hereinafter: ÚMK), XIX-B–1-h, 199. d. 5639. 427., see the paper of the Catholic Working Women: *A dolgozó nő* (*The Working Woman*), ed.: Margit Schlachta. On history of Women's Societies see Kornélia Burucs, *Nők az egyesületekben* (*Women in Associations*) in *História* (2), 1993 pp. 15–18.

women's societies as well, as they had their own internal social differences. The gentry-middle class, as well as outstanding representatives of the aristocrats and members of the civil middle class had the opportunity to act for the amelioration of social tensions and problems within their own fields. Secondly the associations of the local organizations were formed in Budapest. In addition, these societies of the capital extended their activities to the countryside.

The second phase in the development of women's organizations became apparent between World War I and 1945. After World War I a change came about in the popular mentality, and various women's societies were formed which had national consciousness and cultural education as their points-of-focus.³

The proliferation of religious women's organizations between the wars clearly manifests the direction of the Hungarian development. These women's societies strived to raise national consciousness and to invigorate the lives of women within their traditional role. Additionally, these women's societies assisted the newly-formed women's religious organizations in fortifying the traditional qualities of Hungarian society after 1918. The ambiguous role of women in the 1918–1919 revolutions also strengthened this traditional context. Then came 1945.

The outcome of the war coerced women to face a new set of challenges. In 150 towns and villages, 243 women's societies were formed. All women's societies wanted to continue the activities which they had abandoned before 1945. Modernization had left these organizations untouched, and as such, they missed their opportunity to revitalize their position in society. This is clearly shown by the fact that they filed a totally unamended deed of association in their petition for re-activation after the war. Often the members of the societies could not see any reason why these outdated often 100 year-old documents should have been modified. They considered neither their goals nor their internal structure in need of alteration. They believed that their tea-parties, charity performances and lectures continued to effectively serve their aims. A comparison of the letters of Mrs. Szirmay, the leader of the Feminist Society, written before and after 1945, shows that she had no idea whatsoever about the changed circumstances of the world.⁴ She uses the same methods of

3 On feminism after 1918, see Mária M. Kovács, *The Politics of Emancipation in Hungary*, in *Women in History – Women's History*. CEU History Department Working Paper Series. No. 1. 1994. Eds Andrea Pető – Mark Pittaway, pp. 81–89.

4 Letter requesting for support to the Hungarian General Credit Bank on 28 April, 1948, Hungarian National Archives (hereafter: MOL), MOL P. 999. 1. cs. p. 545. "To make those politically unconscious women understand that the aims of feminism and real democracy are complementary and inseparable. We operate on political level in the service of the democracy but above the political parties and independent of but in harmony with any religious spirit."

fund-raising and the same expressions in her invitations to lectures. She never strayed from her views on the traditional operation of an association "that levied a tax on the noble society of Budapest for the purposes of ingenious and inventive charity reasons".⁵ At a general meeting in 1948, Mrs. Szirmay declared to the 11 present members of the 400 strong Feminist Society that she carried out her activities "according to the same principles even in these greivous circumstances".⁶

The situation was similar with the women's society in Gyula. When this society failed to receive its licence for operation from the Ministry of Interior Affairs on 23 August, 1949 because of their supposed failure to comply with certain formalities, members did not even suspect the possible reasons for their rejection. The society simply renewed their application regretting the previous "procedural failure".⁷ However, these women did not even suspect that their application had actually been rejected.

This inability to perceive the changes of environment may be explained by generational problems as well. Mrs. Szirmay was 78-years-old in 1945. Even Fáy Boris, a leading activist of the MNDSZ, charmingly but deshonestly called her "Aunty Irma" in her letters.⁸

Studying the officers of the women's societies in the immediate post-war period, it becomes obvious, that the leaders were largely from the middle- and older generation (see Table 2). This was the great generation which had been alive during the revolutionary changes in women's lives, changes such as the increase in employment and education. These members however, had become somewhat out-of-touch with political life. As Mrs. Ferenc Hirmann, the leader of Charity Women's Society of Pest, was quoted by a Secret Political Police⁹ inquiry, "she is already quite aged and cannot lead the women's societies any longer, and many leading members have passed away recently."¹⁰

The contradiction in methods between the traditionalists and those who recognized the significance of mass activism created a tension in the women's societies as well. The dynamic, radical theorist of the Feminist Society, Lilla Wagner, who quit the society for personal reasons felt, that her capacities were not fully taken advantage of and that Mrs. Szirmay monopolized the Society. As she stated, "Counter to my conviction, I came to see how the feminist soci-

⁵ Jenő Herczeg, *Jólelkű magyar asszonyok a világháború előtt. Szokolay Kornélné emlékére. (Charity of Hungarian Women Before the World War. Records of Mrs. Kornél Szokolay)*, Atheneum, 1930. p. 13.

⁶ Records of the Board meeting on 9 September, 1948, MOL P. 999. 1. cs. p. 11.

⁷ ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 297. d.

⁸ "Despite her age, Aunty Irma is acting vigorously enough for the sake of the women and the public affairs" 19 November, 1946. MOL P.999. 6. cs. p. 7.

⁹ ÁVH-Államvédelmi Hatóság, Hungarian Secret Political Police

¹⁰ 13 September, 1948, ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 378. d.

ety had gradually changed into an institute organizing lectures. I should doubt that anyone would become a feminist listening to such lectures."¹¹

After 1945 no new women's societies were formed, except for the MNDSZ.¹² But generational problems plagued the MNDSZ as well. Until 1949 it was the middle-aged generation that worked for the Society, most of whom had gained experiences in women's societies as emigres abroad (mainly in Germany, Austria, France and the Soviet Union). After 1949, a new cadre invaded the apparatus whose members were younger – mainly under 25, free from any educational experience, and came mostly from the country-side. This younger generation squeezed out from the leadership the older, mostly intellectual women of the middle class.

In the Trap of Laws

Hungarian regulations assumed that within the frame of the living law, the state observed spontaneous organizations of citizens with cautious suspicion. Act No. VIII of 1912 conferred the supervision of the new associations to the competence of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. This regulation must have been fairly effective since the Department of Associations at the Ministry collected thick documents filled with the troubles and worries of the administration regarding these associations.¹³

The situation after 1945 was regulated by the decree of the Prime Minister No. 529/1945, which dissolved all fascist military and political organizations on 26 February, 1945. In accordance with the Peace Treaty, the enforcement of this decree was reported to the Peace Commission. The freedom of association was quite a delicate problem which could have had international effects as well. This tension between the situation *de jure* and the situation *de facto* is illustrated by the government session on 11 September 1945. At this Cabinet session, the communist Ernő Gerő, Minister of Trade and Transport, became interested in the question raised by Imre Véeer on the regulation of the societies. Despite Gerő's obvious lack of competence, he had the authority to decide that the issue had to be glossed over.¹⁴

¹¹ MOL P. 999. 6. cs.

¹² The MNDSZ was founded in February, 1945, however its real network spread around the country only in 1949. Suddenly, this year somewhat miraculously, local branches were founded with same dates and reasonings in every district of the country. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 7. d. 5632. 186. 167. (February) and 168. 187 (May)

¹³ Organized mass movements in Hungary. Report No. 36. of 1933. of the Budapest Police Headquarters, Law and Order Department. This report mentions nine women's societies and parties.

¹⁴ ÚMK XIX-A-83. p. 4.

Act No. I. of 1946 recognized the freedom of association as the unalienable right of the citizens and Act No. X. of 1946 recommended 5 years imprisonment for the infringement of human rights and the right of association. In fact, the Minister of Interior Affairs gradually extended its jurisdiction to cover all aspects of the life of the associations: in addition to licencing, it supervised financing as well. The issuance of the decree of the Minister of Interior Affairs (No. 20.165/1945) on the supervision of associations provoked an internal power struggle which ended with the full victory of the Ministry of Interior Affairs; "all final decisions have to be made by the Minister of Interior Affairs and both the local National Commission and the leading officer of the local authority shall submit only recommendations taking into account the necessity of uniformity and the political interests related to the supervision of associations."¹⁵

Meanwhile, the decree of the Prime Minister (No. 7330/1946) drew the supervision of the financial activities of all associations into the sphere of the Ministry of Interior. Thus the situation before 1945 was restituted. László Rajk, the Minister of Interior Affairs, referred to the situation as it developed after the release of the decree of 20.165/1945 and argued for the competence of the Ministry: "A clear picture about the operation and the role of the associations in a democracy may only be available at the Ministry of Interior Affairs."¹⁶

Mere political interests were taken into account by various pieces of legislation: "we are not indifferent to what sort of associations are being supported by the government or by the local authorities,... it may happen that such organizations receive subsidies which ought to be dissolved after their having been approved."¹⁷ For subsidies up to HUF 3,000, approval from the Ministry was not required. As a result of long delays in processing at the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the law prescribed that in the case of 8 days of silence on the part of the administration, the licence should be considered automatically approved. As a result of the chaotic management of licensing, the organizations received a new lease on life. Only the initial approval had to be obtained, and as a result, many possibilities were offered for the evasion of the supervising regulations.

Women societies received support only in rare cases. Looking into the annual balance sheets, it is clear that external support was hardly ever granted: revenues were only derived from fees. The instruction of the Minister of Interior Affairs (No. 563.000/1949.) classified three types of revenues: membership fees, grants

¹⁵ ÚMK XIX-B-1-c, 6. d. 22. Amending proposal of the Sixth Department

¹⁶ ÚMK XIX-B-1-c, 6. d. 22. Letter of László Rajk to the Council of Ministers on 29 October, 1947

¹⁷ Ibid.

and others. The amount of the support is found in a separate class. Subsidy from the national budget was mainly granted for those associations which maintained institutes. Later on, this support became a crucial argument in the dissolution of the associations, because the associations could hardly accomplish their tasks without subsidies. The MNDSZ was an exception. It could commence its fruitful activity in 1945 with an exceptional state grant.¹⁸

Starting from the Summer of 1945, citizens could exercise their right of association as regulated by law, and offices could apply for licencing and approval. However, after a while, these laws on the day-to-day operation of the associations became incomprehensible and everchanging. The poorly-run bureaucracy, along with increasing coercion to come under state control, made the activities of the associations impossible.¹⁹ It happened fairly often that the amended deed of association, urged umpteen times by the authorities, was submitted on the same day as the resolution on the dissolution of the very same association was issued by the Ministry.²⁰ Ultimatums declaring reactivation submitted by the suprefect never arrived to the relevant department of the Ministry of Interior Affairs.²¹

The mere elimination of financial support, the declassification of members or the devastation of the estates and the loss of their assets should not have led directly to the termination of these associations.²² The changing and inconsis-

¹⁸ ÚMK XIX-A-83. Session of the Council of Ministers on 1 August, 1945

¹⁹ "the file is lost" Charity Women's Society of Mór, 29 January, 1948. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638.403.

²⁰ Association for Women with University or College Degrees. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 190.

²¹ Fejér County 15 September, 1945. XIX-B-1-h, 5638.403. d.

²² Some examples for the illustration of the most characteristic problems: Extract from the minutes of the Lutheran Women's Society of Nyíregyháza recorded on 30 July, 1947 at its dissolving meeting: "The everyday life of the members of the women's societies has been worn out because of the chase for daily bread these days. So there is obviously a lack of energy dedicated to the cause of the women's society." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 167. d. 5638. 40.

Vilmos Balla, a retired vice-lieutenant from the political department of the Secret Political Police in Miskolc, wrote the following report on the operation of the Roman Catholic Women's Society on 12 March, 1946: "Most of the leaders are unemployed or have no job" ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 81.

Extract from the minutes of Zsuzsanna Lórántffy Society in Újpest on 9 November, 1947: "Those well-meaning supporters of our charity works have become so impoverished after the war that they need aid themselves." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 75.

A report from the National Alliance of the Catholic Working Women and Girls on 30 August, 1946: "The impetus of our work was hindered by many obstacles, what is more, impossible circumstances in the last year" ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 199. 5639. 427.

tent regime often evaluated the same phenomena, people or organizations in various ways at different times, causing a high degree of uncertainty in the spontaneous organizations. Employment, meanwhile, was alleviated by the developments of the secret police. Although the social, economic and cultural environment had changed, the organizations' spontaneity did not match the centralizing policies of those days.

The Act No. XLIII. issued on 26 November, 1948, declared the emancipation of women. By the time the constitution of 1949 recognized the equal rights of association of all workers, all women's organizations – including the most significant one, the women's division of the Social Democratic Party – had already merged into the MNDSZ. This last merger occurred on 17 April, 1948. After 1949, human rights were no longer mentioned, other than those rights granted by the soviet constitution.

Supervision of Women's Societies

By Spring and Autumn of 1945, the government announced to all associations in Hungary that they were now required to submit:

1. their approved deed of association.
2. a report on their activities since 1939.
3. a list of leaders.
4. a list of officers.
5. "a report on measures taken in their own capacities so as to reconcile the association with the democratic spirit, and to expel the undesirable officers and members".²³

The most important document for an association was the deed of association. The requirement for registration was the holding of an initial general meeting and the ratification of the deed of association. The deed determined the goals, conditions of membership, membership fees and possibility for the termination of the association. A supervising body approved a deed, and a list of the members and officers with the requisite duty stamps was filed in the Archives. The association thus became an artificial person and could start its op-

The Association for Women with University or College Degrees asked for a pending resolution in their activities on 26 March, 1949 because the members "due to the increased professional occupation of its members" ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5633.190.

Ferenc Jakab, sergeant major reports on the Charity Women's Society from Budapest on 13 September, 1958: "Owing to financial problems the society may not be supported". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 378.

²³ 20.165/1945. Decree of Minister of Interior

eration lawfully. From that time on, the supervising body could monitor whether or not the activities complied with the deed of association, and could audit their financial statements. It could not however interfere with the internal-affairs of the association.²⁴

These requirements presented the associations with their first difficulties. Ideally, presuming that the genuinely registered address of the association still existed and the registered leader was still living in spite of the general turmoil of the war, one could start to seek the deed of association.²⁵ Many women's societies fell prey to the new regime. The Jewish women's societies were also dissolved, since they did not meet the requirements, and they did not file their deed of association in time.

In most cases in which the activities were approved, it first had to be demonstrated both by the leader of the association and by the clerk of state defence office that the archives of the association had been ruined during the war. Therefore, the most difficult step in the process was the search for the deed of association. Often the only document they found was a rough draft of the deed of association hiding among the personal effects of some activists of the society. It must have been easier to claim that the archives had got lost and indeed, some associations probably did so, if the original documents did not correspond politically with the ideas of the new regime.²⁶

The petition for re-activation had to be submitted at the mayor's office. The office then forwarded the petition, attached to the recommendation of the local National Commission, to the Ministry of Interior.²⁷ The opinion of the

²⁴ Zsuzsa Papp, *ibid.* p.19.

²⁵ Report of the Secret Political Police of 12 December, 1947 about the Charity Women's Society of Túrkeve: "they did not submit any report because they had no knowledge of such an obligation at all". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638.43.

²⁶ Citation from the minutes of the general meeting of the Lutheran Girls Association in Orosháza on 29 November, 1942: "The promotion of religious life perhaps never has been such so need as nowadays, when the Anti-Christ attacks us with guns in his hands". Such an object in the deed of association was not unanimously welcome in the Ministry of Interior Affairs. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5633. 321.

²⁷ Letter of Gyula Jablonszky, notary public, on 22 September, 1945 to the Ministry of Interior on the Charity Women's society in Heves and Egervidék County: "The local National Commission suggests that the activities of the society is unnecessary since the National Aid has the same task. I believe, however, that this is important since together they could achieve a better result exactly on the social problems. The two organizations competed with each other in this important matter and could ameliorate the situation. The National Commission cited the Russian military headquarters from Eger which does not give licence for more than one such association. Nevertheless the Russian commandant objected to this quotation, stating that they had never issued such instructions and allowed all organizations which have the licence from the Ministry of Interior to operate."

National Commission reflected the personal contacts of the people involved, as well as other local power games.²⁸ Most cases were decided through these personal connections, often the local branches of national organizations could receive approval while others were rejected usually on the grounds that their aims were anti-democratic.²⁹ Sometimes it even happened that the same religious activities were given several different judgements during the same year.³⁰ After having dissolved the most dubious right-wing political organizations, the next organizations targeted were the Catholic ones, as the government claimed that they had cooperated the most with the previous regime.³¹

As soon as the documents arrived to the Ministry of Interior, the Department of Association gave the data to the State Defence Department for supervision. The State Defence Department of the local police supervised the submitted files and checked the list of the officers to see whether or not they were on any censored list. If the police found no troubles, the Ministry of Interior issued the approval for re-activation and ordered the association to hold a reforming general meeting and to file a list of the elected officers. If there were any names on this list which were not considered desirable for the new demo-

²⁸ Letter of the subprefect in Tolna County to the Department of Association in the Ministry of Interior on the 12 October, 1945 concerning the Lutheran Women's Society in Bonyhád: "the National Commission in Dombóvár recommends, with no reasoning at all, to approve the operation of no other bodies but the industrial corporation. I cannot agree with it, since this would exclude the possibility of the desirable social cooperation in the main town of more than 10.000 inhabitants." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 168. d. 5638. 52.

Report of the National Commission of 30 August, 1945 concerning the Protestant Women's Society in Aszód: "Its operation is superfluous since both the MNDSZ and the Women's Committee of the Social Democratic Party operate in the area and they replace entirely the cultural and charity activities of these civil societies." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 388.

²⁹ Report of Gyula Eberwein, police major, dated of 18 February, 1946 relating to the Association of Women of St. Vincent in Gyöngyös: "this is a local branch of a nationwide organization, it has never been involved in the politics, its by-laws-wise operation may well be harmonized with the democratic order." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 164. d. 5638. 5.

³⁰ Report of Dr. Pesthy, police captain, concerning the Lutheran Girls Society in Veszprém, on 1 December, 1945: "seemingly there is no reason for the termination of its operation". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639.269., whereas the report of the mayor states on the case of the Reformed Girls Circle of Solt on 1st of July 1949: that "operation of the associations of believers are undesirable from the aspect of democracy". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5646. 76

³¹ On putting a ban on the 'KALÁSZ' see Margit Balogh, *The History of 'KALÁSZ'*. in *Történelmi Szemle* (3-4)1994, pp. 283-299.

cratic values, the authorities ordered a suspension of approval unless the suspect names were crossed out.

A person could be in the police records for two reasons. One reason was financial abuse which often happened with the treasurers of the associations.³² The other reason was political. There were hardly any names on the reactivation petitions which could be found in the history books.³³ The history of women's societies is the history of anonymous citizens. Even if there were some women in the leadership whose political tendencies drew the attention of the police and were arrested, these women were generally released after a while and never appeared in court. After 1948, however, it was enough for the supervising body if the leader had had a non-desirable party membership or if the spouse of the individual had had such membership. If this were the case, the report of the Secret Political Police labelled the woman an extremely dangerous individual who jeopardized democracy. From that point, on no one urged the associations to expel its leaders under the requirements of the licensing laws as, by that time, the real aim was the termination of the associations. The only exceptions were those women's societies whose scope-of-activities were well defined.³⁴

The submittance of a list of members and officers was required also in 1946 and 1947 in compliance with the Peace Treaty. In November 1947, all registered associations received instructions from the Ministry of Interior, ordering them to amend their deed of association according to the new regime and also ordering that the minutes of the extraordinary general meeting approving the new amendments should be submitted to the Ministry of Interior. This modification brought only formal changes in most cases: the words which had been used in the Monarchy (i.e. royal, Crown, etc) were simply replaced with republican ones. This newly-launched supervision by the Secret Political Police seldom led to a prolongation of the life of the association. From March 1948, the Secret Political Police suggested the dissolution of all women's societies on a standardized form without any formal reasoning or supervision. In response

³² Mrs. Béla Gonda was removed from her cashier position in Jewish Women's Society in Kispest because of an identity mistake. Although the General Meeting acknowledged its mistake, the association was dissolved. The letter of Mrs. Béla Gonda to the Mayor on 24 November, 1949: "it was me who was the victim in the fascist era, it was me who was dragged by fascists to Auschwitz, from where I escaped accidentally". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 303.

³³ Except for László Endre subprefect, perhaps, who took part in the leadership of the St. Stephen's Boys National Shelter for the Poor Hungarian Mothers in Big Families till 1942. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 286.

³⁴ See the case of Association of the House of Birth: despite of the recommendation of Gyula Décsi on 24 December, 1948 that the association be reorganized, later it became nationalized. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638.305.

to objections, the Secret Political Police stated that the MNDSZ was sufficient for the political needs of women, and that other women's societies can not maintain their activity because of lack of funding of their own.³⁵ Total dissolution of non-state women's groups was finally carried out in 1951, after which only the MNDSZ and the trade union of women association remained in operation.³⁶

The later the petition for licence was submitted, the more favourable the treatment applied by the supervising body. If registration process was stretched until 1947, due to the refileing of missing documents or the omission of some forms or other or the negligence of the authorities, the associations would receive a re-activation licence even if their views, values, and expressions were those of 1946.³⁷ In some towns, the mayor even recommended the operation of those associations which had been long-dissolved in other localities.³⁸ In cases where the procedure had to be prolonged because a certain leader needed to be expelled and the procedure slowed down, it often remained on the track defined in 1945. Some associations which were licensed in 1948 should have been dissolved instead.³⁹

In general, if there was some degree of loyalty to the association among its members, the association could evade the pitfalls of the legal maze somehow.⁴⁰ The leaders of the Association of the Reformed Christian Girls re-named its society to "The Girls Club", so they could survive until 1950 without any difficulty, and by the time it received its order of prohibition, the order no longer applied to the club.⁴¹ The religious women's societies were in the most favourable situation, for as soon as the general meeting had dissolved itself, the women joined the church and the remaining assets could be assigned

³⁵ Note of Dr. Gyula Decsi, vice-colonnel at the Secret Political Police, dated from 9 August, 1948 concerning the dissolution of women societies and associations

³⁶ The 'NÉPFRONT' (Peoples Front) is not endowed with the required facilities, it has no relevant activities, therefore its operation is not indispensable, 21 April, 1950.

³⁷ The Feminist Society, which realized only in 1946 that it had forgotten to ask for the reactivation approval, received the licence on 2 April, 1947. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5632. 732.

³⁸ Licence of the Jewish Women's Society in Székesfehérvár, was from 6 January, 1948. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h. 168. d. 5638. 68.

³⁹ Licence of the Society for Educated Women is from 10 March, 1948. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5633. 190.

⁴⁰ Report of Károly Novotny retired police lieutenant at the State Defence Office in Pécs about the Lutheran Women's Society of Szentlőrinc: "it is the influence of the preacher which is felt in the society and which is accepted by the majority of the members"

⁴¹ ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 262.

to the church as well.⁴² Certainly, the churches could enjoy this increase in wealth, for only a limited period of time till the expropriation of the clerical assets. Also, church associations of women's associations had to develop within an organization which was not always receptive to their ideas.⁴³ These women's divisions mostly initiated the establishment of parishes and finally merged into the traditional clerical structure.⁴⁴ The reasoning of the dissolution state resolutions were almost always the same, almost always using the same expressions despite the variety of the religions. The values and arguments became inflated and the same association with the same members became anti-democratic.⁴⁵

⁴² Letter of the Jewish Women's Society in the 9th district to the Department of Associations of the Ministry of Interior on 16 February, 1946: "this is the part of the reunification process among the Hungarian Jewry". UMK XIX-B-1-h, 164.5638.10.

⁴³ The Association of Zsuzsanna Lórántffy in Újpest chose dissolution rather than to be absorbed in the clerical association. 15 October, 1946. Records of the Bishop's Office from the parish of Dunamellék on the situation of Association of Zsuzsanna Lórántffy in Újpest realized that the only the association endowed with some assets "could not be absorbed into the Church since there were sharp personal conflicts between the preacher of the church and the leader of the branches, thus not even the assets of the association could be seized." UMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 75.

⁴⁴ "The Women's Society had been formed before the parish became independent. This was why it had certain clerical activities to be made as well. It was the Women's Society that made the establishment of an independent parish and the erection of a church possible." Report of Gyula Molnár archdeacon, about the Lutheran Women's Society of Esztergom, on 30 June, 1950, UMK XIX-B-1-h, 165. d. 5638. 22.

⁴⁵ Memorandum of the Mayor, on 12 August, 1945, about the St. Vincent Charity Society of the St. Theresa Institute of Sisters of Mercy (6th District): "There have been no measures taken for the new era. It was not needed since both the members and the leaders had operated in the spirit of democracy. They knew no discrimination, they helped anyone in need."

Report of Ottó Bárczi, retired police lieutenant of the Secret Political Police, on 21 December, 1947: "The leading officers of the Society are clerical minded citizens, they take no role in the promotion of democracy"

Report of Péter Fehér police lieutenant, on 1 December, 1948: "Summarizing the activity of the Society one may conclude that it must have been the collection of food and petty money carried out by about 30-40 elderly women led by the priest, and under the pretext of the distribution of these things, they visited the sick people of the districts and took time to incite against the democratic regime. Thus the decision that the St Vincent Society waives its right to operate as a society would imply the resignation of the legal form of fights as well." UMK XIX-B-1-h, 164. d. 5638. 11.

Report of the Secretary of the Peoples Front about the Lutheran Women's Society of Békéscsaba, on 30 March, 1950: "the mentioned Society is the meeting point of the kulaks and alikes. They carry out anti-peoples-democratic activities. Thus the operation of the Society is not clerical oriented, therefore the maintenance of such association is to the detriment of our peoples democracy".

The supervision used many kinds of information sources. The competent local authorities were generally satisfied with papers submitted by the associations themselves, whereas the Department of Associations in the Ministry of Interior applied all the information filed in without any doubts about its origin. The Secret Political Police was in a key position, for it was authorized to obtain the necessary information about the women's societies to which no one else had access.⁴⁶ The study of this information, however, reveals the perspective from which these data were evaluated during investigation.⁴⁷ In the first investigation, the leaders of the associations were screened and their papers were collected and checked. In the second or third investigation—after the dissolution of the association—there were only on-the-spot inquiries. These inquiries were carried out by Secret Police clerks, who interrogated the leading members of the association.⁴⁸ In some cases, they did not fail to discover the opinion of the local democratic parties or that of the local representatives of the MNDSZ. These local representatives gave statements according to the politics of their own parties so there were no differences between the different region.⁴⁹ These reports were decisive factor in the destiny of the associations as

⁴⁶ Report of the Secret Political Police on 6 March, 1946, on the Budapest Society of Catholic Women Clerks: "I have carried out a confidential investigation as well". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 200. d. 5639.452.

⁴⁷ Report of Ferenc Schliffblatt, retired prison warden, dated from 20 December, 1948 on the Association of Hungarian Unitarian Women: "The leadership is non-party members, some of the husbands of the leaders are the members of the Communist Party (MDP). Almost all of them originate from Transylvania, they have a petty-bourgeois attitude with a partly chauvinistic feature. There are no positive evidences about proper policy making of the Society, but the way it delays the merge and co-operation with the MNDSZ and also the fact that it had organized only one language course, an English language course and the interviews with the leaders all show that the Society is not in line with the democratic development". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 195. d. 5639.336.

⁴⁸ Report of Imre Homályos, police major about the Lutheran Girls Circle on 6 March, 1949: "I have asked for the opinion of the local democratic parties as well, who also took the stand that the dissolution of the association is well grounded, especially because the association does isolate itself from the politics." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639.324.

⁴⁹ Report of Sándor Sin retired police vice lieutenant about the Girls Circle of Lutheran Confession of Orosháza, on 18 September, 1947: "in order to have the opinion of the Smallholders' Party too, I asked Antal Soós, Secretary, who thought the mission of the association was needed. Iván Bors, secretary of the CP, declared that the activity is not necessary. There are organizations for women in all parties beside the Democratic Allies of Women and the MNDSZ. These bodies and societies are sufficient to satisfy both the cultural and financial need of women. István Plenter said on behalf of the Social Democratic Party that although the clerical women so-

the Departments of Associations in the Ministry of Interior quoted these reports word-for-word in their resolutions on dissolution. Obviously, the investigators used informers as well.⁵⁰ The commissioner of all investigations was the Ministry of Interior Affairs which most certainly lead all investigations to represent the opinions of the ministry.⁵¹

The third investigation was much less important if a women's society was to be dissolved, for it was merely an attempt to account for the assets of the organization after its dissolution. An investigator was sent from the Secret Political Police, only if the assets were presumed to be valuable, otherwise only police constables or clerks from the criminal department were sent.⁵² However, even the Secret Political Police was not extraordinarily effective. Often a long time elapsed – 3–4 months – between the order of investigation and the fulfillment of this order. The inquiry itself took only one day as is clear from the police reports. The investigation of the associations meant quite a burden on the otherwise fairly busy office. In many cases, no investigator was sent to the place of investigation, not even after the third notice to the Department of Associations in the Ministry, and so most cases were not closed officially.

cieties do not carry out anti-democratic activities, they may jeopardize the development of a democratic society, thus all not needed. József Szabó member of the leading officers of the Peasants Party declared that there is no need whatsoever to have this society since there are other women organizations, MNDSZ, MADISZ (Association of Hungarian Democratic Youth) who would assist the building the democracy of the country". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5633. 321.

⁵⁰ Gyula S. Bökönyi retired police vice-lieutenant of the Secret Political Police, reports from the Orosháza district about the leaders of the society in 1947 "when the new government was formed he declared that there is no need to have schools, since those who govern had no school at all. He repeated this sentence in front of the priest and the bell-man as well. The head of the Gestapo used to live and be a guest for dinner at his home. Once at such a dinner he asked the Gestapo officer to take him with them in case the Russians would invade Orosháza, otherwise he would be executed by the Russians. Due to the quick invasions however this could not be accomplished." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 341.

⁵¹ Whether the safety measures and other measures occurring in relation to the state defence and security requirements had been taken concerning the conduct of the leaders, whether they comply with the by-laws of the societies, whether the sources of the society were used properly, whether the members of the societies act properly, whether the requirements for the achievements of the societies goals are relevant and proper, Ministry of Interior, Memo issued in 1949. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h.

⁵² Report of the Criminal Division about the Allies of Reformed Women in Kiskunhalas, on 12 May, 1948. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 105.

Probably this was a decisive factor in the 1948 decision of the Secret Political Police, which ordered the dissolution of all women's societies without investigation.⁵³

Dissolution of Women's Societies

The first wave in the dissolution of women's societies was caused by the implementation of the Peace Treaty. Immediate dissolution orders were issued to the most significant women's societies of the previous regime, for example the National Alliance of Hungarian Women (NAHW).⁵⁴ Enforcement of this order took place quite slowly in the local branches. Local NAHW societies submitted applications for re-activation even in 1946. Although the dissolving order was published in the Official Gazette, it could hardly have reached everyone in the turmoil after the war.

The other group of associations targeted were those women's societies which did not comply with the obligation to re-register. For example, out of the total of 152 societies under the umbrella of the Alliance of the Jewish Women's Societies, only 16 exercised their right of appeal, and thus only these 16 could have had good chances during the re-activation period of 1946–47.⁵⁵

⁵³ "The activities of the mentioned association is not grounded at all, its aims are being fulfilled by the MND SZ" wrote Gyula Décsi, police colonel on 15 September, 1949 about the St. Elizabeth of Women's Society of the Iron Factory in Diósgyőr, Miskolc. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 164. d. 5638. 20.

⁵⁴ Petition of Mrs. Sándor Török manager of MANSZ for the reactivation licence on 24 August, 1945: "The Society had nothing to do with politics, whatsoever. Our main goal was to assist the children of the people. Certainly, we would work hard to accomodate ourselves with the new circumstances. The MANSZ itself has ever been democratic, because its membership was recruited not only from the middle class but from any other parts of the society." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 18.d.5632.784.

⁵⁴ See the case of the St. Vincent Women's Society in outer Ferencváros, in which the head of the 9th district confirmed on 24 February, 1950: "the report on the investigation of the police have not yet been filed, therefore I took the necessary measures. Beside I have to report that the minutes on the dissolution procedure may not be submitted, because we still fail some data". The dissolution order was issued on 4 November, 1949, but it was accomplished not earlier than Summer 1950. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 186.

⁵⁵ Letter of the National Committee of the Hungarian Jewry to the Department of the Association of the Ministry of Interior, 5 November, 1947. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 299.

From 1945, the associations began a period of heavy mailing. Both the Department of Associations of the Ministry of Interior and the competent department of the local authorities bombarded them ceaselessly with requirements for different reports and standardized forms. Despite the legal hierarchy between the Ministry of Interior and the local authorities, memos from the Ministry were sent directly to the associations and to the local authorities at the same time. The local authorities usually filled in these forms unsuspectingly, with no doubts about the lawful operation of an association, although the organization in question might have been dissolved by the Ministry long before.⁵⁶

Motion for dissolution could be suggested by the local National Commission, the competent local authorities, the Department of Associations of the Ministry of the Interior and the Secret Political Police. All these authorities employed clerks who requested dissolution no matter which association was mentioned.⁵⁷ The most significant opinion was that of the Secret Political Police. Should the Secret Political Police call for dissolution, not even the Department of Associations of the Ministry of Interior could object however exclusive its jurisdiction over the dissolution process might have been. They would only delay the service of the dissolution order until all documents had come to the Ministry. The changed political environment could well be felt in the second wave of dissolution.⁵⁸ No one doubted or challenged the dissolution of the associations, the premise on which these dissolutions were based,

⁵⁶ The topic of the general meeting of the Jewish Women's Society in Székesfehérvár, on 30 December, 1949, was still the setting up of a cultural section, while Gyula Décsi dissolved the society on 9 December. The formal merger was declared on 3 February, 1950. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 168. d. 5638. 68.

⁵⁷ Report of Simai, the secretary of the National Committee Charity Women's Society in Heves County and Egervidék, on 15 September, 1945: "we do not take the distribution of labour advantageous. Should the leaders be willing to be working in cooperation concerning the social spheres, they would get the opportunity within the frames of the National Aid. Beside we refer to the order of the local commandant, in which it is written that apart from the political parties, the trade union, the MADISZ (Association of Hungarian Democratic Youth), the Democratic Allies of Women and the National Aids no other association is desirable in the region." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 168.5632.

Especially see councillor András Széchy in the Mayors Office of Budapest

⁵⁸ The decree of the Minister of Interior, László Rajk, on dissolution of various associations had a scandalous introduction on 23 July, 1946 in the National Assembly. Rajk was attacked because the dissolution was discriminative against the clerical societies, nevertheless the 'KALÁSZ' (Catholic Association of Girls) was not simply a clerical women's society, see Sándor Balogh, *Parlamentí és pártharcok Magyarországon, (Struggles in the Parliament and among the Parties)* Kossuth, 1975. pp. 249–251.

or why the associations' assets were seized. The illusion of the rule of law faded away.

According to the prescribed procedure, the dissolving resolution was read aloud either in the office of the local authorities or in the office of the associations in the presence of a clerk and the representative of the association. The acknowledgement of the representative of the association was recorded in the minutes. The associations' assets, documents, seals and stamps were seized.

A typical example of how these associations were dissolved is as follows: "After 10 pm on 27 January, 1947, a man appeared at the site of the National Alliance of Catholic Working Women and Girls, in Budapest at 4 Rákóczi Street. He presented no identity card. He had an allegedly official document in his hands which he neither read out loud nor handed over. Then he asked why the association was still working despite having been dissolved...The man was interested in the whereabouts of the cash and the balance sheets of the association. As soon as he understood that no money had left the building, he said he would take the necessary measures and telephone the Minister to seal the office of the Alliance." Indeed, on 29 January, a representative of the authorities appeared and sealed the office. Paradoxically enough, the Alliance really had been dissolved before on 19 July 1946. Due to the lack of substantial reason for the dissolution, the association appealed but still had received no answer and thus continued to function.⁵⁹ Now, the leaders of the Alliance acknowledged the inevitable.⁶⁰

Formal argument for dissolution was often that the aim of the associations had already been fulfilled by other associations, often by the MNDSZ. "I believe that an association of whose object is to give aid to the poor is not needed. The major aim of our peoples' democracy is to give such assistance to the all working people. For this exact reason, it has established such social institutes to provide these tasks."⁶¹ The dissolution order of 19 October, 1949 of the Feminist Association included the following ruling: "its purpose as de-

⁵⁹ The study of the symbolic iconography of the women's societies would worth another paper. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 199. d. 5639. 427.

⁶⁰ "We duly notify our dear fellow members on this general meeting of ours, that we have received a notice from the Ministry of Interior forbidding our present general meeting referring to its order as of 20 October, 1949, in which it prescribed the merger of our Society" Minutes of the general meeting of the Feminist Society on 22 November, 1949, 578. p.: On the other hand Mrs. Oszkár Szirmai, the president of the Society wrote the following letter to Noémi Kóbor: "Well, such is our life, we have to give up, there is nothing to do, I have spoken to Baló's (the lawyer of the Society - P. A.) rather thoroughlyfully ...my dear sister, we did expect this to happen, but still it is a sad surprise". MOL P 999 1.cs. p. 580.

⁶¹ Dezső Tóth, Mayor's, report on 27 March, 1950 about the St. Elisabeth Society of the Iron Factory in Diósgyőr. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 164. d. 5638. 20.

scribed in the deed of association, i.e. to emancipate the women in all fields of society and to safeguard women's employment, has already been guaranteed to all women in the Constitution. It has no lawful balance-sheet and budget. Its goals are being achieved by the MNDSZ."⁶² These were the arguments and slogans of high politics and certainly did not have much to do with reality.⁶³ As a result, religious associations were absorbed by the churches, institutes were taken over by the state,⁶⁴ the interest groups merged into the trade unions, while other associations disappeared with no trace at all.

Assets of Associations

After dissolution, the search for the assets of the dissolved associations was the most important step taken by the Secret Political Police. Nevertheless, it also investigated whether or not the association abandoned its activities.⁶⁵ The race for the assets of associations started, in fact, after dissolution. It was clear to the dissolving authorities that the only immediate inheritor of these assets could be the MNDSZ.⁶⁶ As such, the assets of HUNA were transferred to the newly formed women's society in February, 1945. Should the MNDSZ fail or neglect the maintenance of the newly formed institutes, creches, kindergartens, schools, hospitals, shelters or colleges, the assets were to be assigned to the

⁶² ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5632. 732.

⁶³ Report of Emil Kollasics police captain on 21 March, 1950 about the Handcrafts Women's Society in Túrkeve: "They have given no more than one mutton-dinner for the Charity House in the past year. Beside they did not struggle for the solution of the hardest problems in the democracy, i.e. the production, and did not exert any cultural work at all either... Concerning that they also hinder the activity of the local MNDSZ, the municipal committee recommends the dissolution of the Society". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 167.d.5639.49.

⁶⁴ "The nursery should be taken under the supervision of the city because all nurseries are supervised by the city." ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 167. d. 5639. 49.

⁶⁵ "Should the society carry out activity despite the dissolution order of the Ministry of Interior, the society is to be regarded illegal" quoted from a letter to the Mayor's Office of the 4th district on 22 August, 1949 regarding the National Alliance of the Catholic Girls. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 70.

⁶⁶ Report from Mrs. Albert Szegedi on 3 December, 1949, before the dissolution of the Lutheran Women's Society in Békéscsaba: "We think that the local MNDSZ, which was formed district by district and also in all factories, would serve the interest of the the democracy as well as would work for the tasks of the democracy with the same enthusiasm as the Lutheran Women's Society does. Those ten women who are being taken care of the Lutheran Women's Society till now, could be looked after in the social shelter in Békéscsaba". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 166.d.5638.30.

competent Ministry or local authorities.⁶⁷ The MNDSZ considered it important to maintain creches and kindergartens in order to support women's employment. Although there had been some financial problems in the MNDSZ early on, it ultimately was able to avoid losing these institutes to the municipal authorities. "The real estate (of the dissolved association – P. A.) belongs to local community in the relevant region" as it was described by the official regulation.⁶⁸ The only exceptions were extremely valuable property or the assets of those associations whose activities spread over various regions which were handled separately.

The inventories of the associations prepared during the dissolution give quite an exact picture of their financial situations. Liquid assets hardly ever exceeded HUF 1,000.00, apart from those of insurance societies.⁶⁹ On the other hand, for the associations whose main object was to hold tea-parties or charity performances, the inventories usually consisted of glasses, brandy bottles, chairs, props and decorations. After the dissolution everything – from the coffee cups to cloud decorations – was inherited by the MNDSZ.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, in some cases the MNDSZ itself did not even wait for the dissolution order and simply walked into the offices of other women's societies, confiscating their possessions. As they paid no rent to begin with, these poor women's societies were deprived of their most important revenues and resources.⁷¹

There were only three women societies which were endowed with libraries. The Lutheran Women's Societies of Esztergom had 102 volumes in its library, mostly of religious fiction. The Alliance of Catholic Girls Clubs owned a collection of 68 books, among which there were some classics such as Dickens, Jókai or Kosáryné Réz Lola. In the opulent library of the Allies of the Hungarian Unitarian Women, *The Communist Manifesto* could be found alongside the works of Puskin and Cicero. The societies did not subscribe to newspapers

⁶⁷ See the case of the Catholic Clerks in Budapest, in which the MNDSZ noticed the Ministry of Interior on 28 January 1949, that: "we could not maintain the shelter". The Shelter was in operation till 1952 providing accommodation for six elderly women.

⁶⁸ Pro domo memo as of 21 July, 1949. ÚMK XIX-B-1-c, 6.d.22.

⁶⁹ Lajos Kossuth Women's Society for Sick-fund and Funerals from Újpest. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5655. 262. 8. 5.

⁷⁰ Among other things, there were pictures of Rákosi, Szakasits, Lenin and Stalin with children in the inventory of the Society for St. Vincent's Sisters of Mercy from Gyöngyös, prepared for the dissolution process. 29 December, 1949. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 164. d. 563.

⁷¹ Charity Women's Society from Pécs, ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 188.

or to magazines or periodicals.⁷² These assets of women's societies which had been seized could be returned only by order of the Ministry of Interior.⁷³ Not even the personal effects of the people living there could be saved if they failed to prove their ownership of the property. There was no exception made whatsoever, not even when the later-nationalized property turned out to be the lifelong work of some individual, such as in the case of the Sancta Maria Women's Home Society; here a lonely woman sacrificed all of her wealth and life's work for the operation of the Women's Home. Even Father Balogh⁷⁴ attempted to intervene personally by contacting János Kádár. This was in vain, as the Ministry of Interior awarded the personal belongings only to the applicant.⁷⁵ Valuable property easily found new owners in this process.

The precious holiday house of the Association of Catholic Clerkeses in Budapest in Balatonlelle was assigned, not later than four days after its dissolution, to the Charity Association of the Employees of the Ministry of Interior.⁷⁶ Other valuable estates were distributed such as that of the National Boys Home of Poor Mothers of Big Families. Although even a soviet educational delegation was amazed by this famous educational institute in 1947, due to a fight over its ownership, the whole estate fell into disrepair and was used later to store crop.⁷⁷ Many associations were dissolved because of the value of their property: either because this value sped up the procedure, or because the land registry revealed the fact that a certain association remained accidentally undissolved such as in the case of the National Association of Christian Socialist Nurses.⁷⁸

⁷² Lutheran Women's Society of Esztergom, ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 22. d., Alliance of Catholic Girls Circle XIX-B-1-h. 5639. 134. d., Hungarian Unitarian Women's Society ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 195. d. 5639. 336. d.

⁷³ The facilities of the orphanage of the Women's Society of Kiskunhalas were confiscated under the pretext of criminal activity, thus the refund of those things was even more difficult. 23 March, 1950. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639. 109.

⁷⁴ István Balogh (1894-1976) catholic priest, influential politician' from the Smallholder's Party, later a founder of Independent Hungarian Democratic Party, and in 1949 he joined the People's Front.

⁷⁵ Sancta Maria Women's Shelter Society in Pécs: the favoured measures taken by János Kádár was that he inserted with his handwriting that only "certified personal belongings" may be taken into consideration on 30 March, 1950. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 165. d. 5638. 21.

⁷⁶ ÚMK XIX-B-1-h. 200. d. 5639. 452.

⁷⁷ St. Stephen's Boys National Shelter of Poor Hungarian Mothers with Big Families. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5638. 286.

⁷⁸ ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5635. 209.

Men in the Women's Societies

The aims of the women's societies faithfully followed traditional social expectations and were organized according to what society held as honourable for women's occupation. The traditional public and private sphere was divided in the religious associations, since there were ancient ideas on how the so-called womanly virtues should be exercised; "The women's society is the eye, ear, leg and vital part of the body of our church."⁷⁹

The traditional womanly virtues included charity, support for the weak, education, the maintenance of children's institutes, religious activities, and interest groups in the sphere of work, but never politics. Exceptional cases were produced merely by those exceptional historical moments when women could take the place of men. The minutes of the general meeting of the Jewish Women's Society of the 8-9th district contains a statement by Dr. Géza Seifert on 6 May, 1947 about women "who stood up for their being Jews when and where men could not act any longer". There are also the words of Dr. Ferenc Ripper who referred "to that generous and unselfish work performed by the Jewish mothers when the laws restricted the work available to Jewish men and when Jewish youth were suffering in work camps".⁸⁰ Women had gained the respect of men by their brave behaviour, but now they were expected to return to their previous status. The same arguments could be found in the any other religious group: when men are incapable because of historical circumstances, women should and could act. However during grave crises, women still tend to rely on the strength of men. For example, the Budapest Christian Girls Association formed a commission exclusively of men for the arrangement of estate affairs.⁸¹ These were the men who kept contacts with the outer world and represented the women's societies, provided that there were men in the association. Lawyers and notary publics are a politically educated force, and men usually act in a political capacity. The more valuable the estate, the more likely it was that men were on the board of the society.

⁷⁹ Dr. Gyula Schlett archdeacon, praises women on the general meeting of the Women's Society for Lutheran Confession in Bonyhád. He even cites historical samples on female virtue and sacrifice.

⁸⁰ Jewish Women's Society in 8-9th district. ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 164.5638.10.

⁸¹ Minutes on the general meeting of the Christian Girls Society of Budapest on 16 December, 1946: "the president suggests that the society should ask a male committee to look after the problems of real estate". ÚMK XIX-B-1-h, 5639.93.

Conclusion

The Hungarian women's societies did not assist at all in the breaking out of women out from their private domain into the public sphere. What is more, they actually preserved this dichotomy of public and private by clearly defining what the scope of women's activities.

This trap could have been abandoned in two possible ways. Either by joining an already-existing political party or by creating a new movement. The latter course had been pursued by the Feminist Society since 1904, with some limited success. The leaders of the newly founded MNDSZ after 1945, however did not have too favourable an idea about their women peers. Mrs. Révai often declared on the sessions of the Women Secretariat: "Women lag far behind, not only from a political but also from a mentalcapacity point of view".⁸²

The MNDSZ however, tried to show that they cared about women's role in society, and also that they brought a new feature into the political picture. This was probably true in the case of their attitude towards women's work. Nevertheless, in reality, their view of the role of women in the society remained as traditional as that of any other political party. After the shock of the elections in 1945, Rákosi stated: "these are women who have become used to the fastidious, slow and unrewarding work, and we can rely on this."⁸³

The period after 1945 was a time when state involvement in social life increased all over the world, and there were tendencies towards centralization everywhere. The tragedy of the Hungarian women's societies was that this centralization was carried out by a Stalinist regime which could not accept any dissent.

⁸² Archives of the Institute for Political History (further AIPH) 276. f. 19. cs. 1. öe. p. 81. Minutes of the Women Secretariat of the MKP. 10 October, 1945.

⁸³ Speech of Mátyás Rákosi on the general meeting of women from Budapest on 21 October, 1945. He protected the women who were accused of being obsolete so that the Smallholders' Party could easily win the elections of 1945. AIPH 276. f. 19. cs. 1. öe. p. 100.

Table 1.

Chronology of Hungarian Women's Societies⁺

Name of Society	Base	Year of Founda- tion	Year of Disso- lution	Mem- ber- ship
"Collegium Josephinum" Society Dormitory for Female Students of Colleges and Universities	Budapest	1927	1949	
"Collegium Marianum" Catholic Women and Female Students Society	Budapest	1914	1949	123
Alliance of National Hungarian Christian Girls's Society (Washington)	Budapest	1904	1950	45
Alliance of Reformed Women's Society	Kiskunhalas		1949	168
Association for House of Birth	Újpest	1935	1949	368
Association for Women with University Degree (London)	Budapest	1922	1949	156
Association of Hungarian Democratic Women	Budapest	1945		
Association of Women's of St. Vincent	Budapest	1918	1950	97
	Gyöngyös	1918	1949	154
	Külső Ferencváros	1918	1948	70
Budapest Association of Catholic Clerks	Budapest	1909	1948	120
Catholic Girls' Society	Budapest	1920	1950	100
Catholic Women's Society	Miskolc	1890	1949	187
Charity Women's Association in Heves County	Eger	1892		222
Charity Women's Society	Budapest	1817	1948	58
	Pécs	1871	1949	260
	Sellye		1950	
	Mór	1878	1949	150
	Túrkeve	1904	1950	260
Christian Catholic Socialist Nurses National Society	Budapest		1949	
Educated Women's Home Charity Society	Budapest	1897	1949	
Feminist Association	Budapest	1904	1949	400
Hungarian Unitarian Women's Society	Budapest	1922	1949	142
Hungarian Women's National Association	Szeged	1918	1947	
Hungarian Women's Society in Cooperatives	Budapest	1951		
Jewish Women's Society	Debrecen	1886	1951	505
	Kaposvár		1950	43
	Jászberény	1888	1950	165
	Rákospalota	1894	1949	50
	Székes- fehérvár		1950	

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Base	Year of Foundation	Year of Disso- lution	Mem- ber- ship
Jewish Women's Society Kispest	Budapest	1933	1950	76
Jewish Women's Society, 8-9th district	Budapest	1936	1949	72
Kossuth Lajos Women's Society for Sick Fund and Funerals	Újpest	1895	1950	200
Lórántffy Zsuzsanna Society	Újpest	1921	1950	120
Lórántffy Zsuzsanna Girl's Society	Nagyecsed		1950	
Lutheran Women's Society	Miskolc	1858	1950	218
	Orosháza	1917	1949	80
	Bonyhád	1900	1950	112
	Békéscsaba	1920		133
	Debrecen	1886	1950	150
	Sárszent- lőrinc		1950	78
	Veszprém	1907	1950	46
	Esztergom	1927	1949	
	Békéscsaba	1920	1949	485
	Nyiregy- háza	1928	1950	
National Association of Abstinent Women	Budapest		1949	
National Association of Catholic Girls	Budapest	1911	1949	
National Association of Catholic Working Girls and Women	Budapest	1934	1946	50
National Association of Hungarian Jewish Women's Societies	Budapest	1927	1950	1947
National Reformed Women's Society	Szarvas		1949	
National Society of Hungarian Housekeepers	Budapest	1861	1949	
Reformed Christian Girl's Society	Monor		1950	
Reformed Girls' and Women's Society	Solt			
Reformed Women's Society	Aszód	1929	1950	
Sancta Maria Society Home for Women	Pécs		1950	32
Society of Hungarian Female Artists	Budapest	1908	1948	189
St. Agnes Club for Girls	Sárvár	1931	1950	42
St. Elizabeth Women's Society Ironplant of Diósgyőri	Miskolc	1933	1950	161
St. Stephen Boys National Shelter of Poor Hungarian Mothers with Big Families	Gödöllő	1936	1949	66
Women's Society	Gyula	1870	1949	
Women's Society	Vác	1868	1950	150

Table 2.

Age of the Officers of the Hungarian Women's Societies in 1946⁺

Age Group	MNDSZ	Other Women's Societies
under 25	15	35
25-35	32	65
35-45	20	109
45-55	15	128
55-65	6	76
over 65	0	42
TOTAL	88	455

⁺ My calculations are based on the petitions for reactivation submitted to the Ministry of Interior.