

The Women's Debating Club of Countess Károlyi; Hungarian Women's Revolutionary and Counter-Revolutionary Activism in 1918/19

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1. Introduction

Throughout 1918 and early 1919 Countess Katinka Andrassy hosted the Women's Debating Club in Budapest. During its brief existence, through the last year of World War I and the heady months of the armistice and two revolutions, the Club functioned as a meeting place for women politicians and political women of all stripes, including leaders of the pre-war women's movements, socialist women, and aristocratic women with a newfound interest in politics. A unique and previously unexplored case of women's activism, the Women's Club foreshadowed and reflected the fundamental political changes in women's politics and politics at large; and as an institution straddling the private and the public, it demonstrated the limits of women's activism even in revolutionary times.

2. The Károlyis

The Club's hostess, Katinka Károlyi, née Andrassy (1892–1985) came from a fabled Hungarian aristocratic family. Her grandfather, Gyula Andrassy, was the first prime minister of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after the 1867 *Ausgleich*, her uncle the last minister for foreign affairs of Austria-Hungary. When Katinka Andrassy wed the scion of the Károlyi family, Hungary's other longstanding aristocratic dynasty, it was a match made for the pages of the "Gotha Almanach".¹ But the golden couple seemed intent on defying their respective families' expectations. Mihály Károlyi (1875–1955), a playboy

¹ Cf. Tibor Hajdú and György Litván, *Szerette az igazságot* [He loved the truth], Budapest 1977; Tibor Hajdú, *Ki volt Károlyi Mihály?* [Who was Mihály Károlyi?], Budapest 2012; Károlyi Mihályné, *Együtt a forradalomban* [Together in the revolution], Budapest 1967, especially pages 158–163.

in his youth, turned into a serious politician and devoted family man – though his taste for dueling remained undiminished. As founder and leader of the opposition Independence and 1848 Party, he worked towards peace almost from the beginning of the war. From 1917 on he cultivated ties with the extra-parliamentary opposition and became an advocate of democratic reforms.²

While Károlyi served in the war, his young wife visited him on the front, and, between pregnancies, she, too, was looking for a cause. In her memoirs, Katinka described her growing interest in politics, the couple's efforts to open their house to liberal intellectuals, artists, and writers, and the horror of their relatives who fretted over encountering these "unsuitable people" at her parties.³ In 1917 the Károlyis befriended Rosika Schwimmer; and from then on the leader of the Hungarian liberal feminists would advance, in an unofficial diplomatic capacity, Károlyi's peace initiatives. (It was for these efforts that Károlyi would reward Schwimmer in late 1918 with an appointment as Hungary's ambassador to Switzerland.) Katinka described the encounter with Schwimmer as the turning point in her own emancipation and political education.⁴ Katinka's family background might have allowed for charitable activities or membership in the conservative women's movement in which a number of aristocratic women held positions. But as an enthusiastic champion of the suffrage, she overstepped the boundaries set for women of her class "whose members did not consider feminism a socially acceptable position: in their eyes feminism was a synonym for free love and the demand of suffrage ridiculous as it would strip women of their charm."⁵

Between October 1918 and August 1919 Hungary had gone from a kingdom within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to an independent republic, and experienced, in quick succession, a bourgeois democratic and a Bolshevik revolution and a counter-revolution. Following a crippling armistice and military occupation, the Trianon Treaty, signed on June 1920, reduced the country to approximately one third of both its pre-war territory and population. The revolutionary years brought decisive changes to electoral rights as well. Supplanting the previous, highly limited franchise, granted to approximately six per cent of the male population, universal suffrage, including women, was introduced by the Károlyi government in November 1918. (The first decree of the new People's Republic of Hungary granted the vote to men over 21 and women over 24, with a literacy requirement for the latter.) The elections, scheduled for March 1919, were swept away by the Republic of Councils. In June 1919 an election for Councils was held but it excluded vast numbers of voters not by gender but class. In August 1919 counter-revolutionary forces ended Hungary's short experiment of proletarian

2 Cf. note 1 and Mihály Károlyi, *Hit, illuziók nélkül*, Budapest 1977, originally published as *Memoir of Michael Károlyi, Faith Without Illusion*, London 1956.

3 Károlyiné, *Együtt*, see note 1, 224. English translations of this and all following quotations from the Hungarian originals are by the author.

4 Cf. Károlyiné, *Együtt*, see note 1, 228–230.

5 Károlyiné, *Együtt*, see note 1, 230.

dictatorship. At the January 1920 national elections universal suffrage, including women, was put into practice for the first time and resulted in a right-wing coalition government.⁶

During the revolutionary period women's activism reached an unprecedented peak, its contours continuing but also breaking with previous trends.⁷ Before 1914 various strands of the Hungarian women's movement had been loosely held together by their shared demand of the suffrage, but this unity was tested during the war. The rich associational life of middle-class women, organised along professional and religious lines, found a new purpose in war relief work.⁸ Bourgeois feminists and socialist women also supported the home front but opposed the war from early on. The war years might have erased some of the differences between conservative, liberal, and socialist women by reinforcing the gendered norms in their relief activities but by 1917–1918 the political fissures between the respective programmes of socialist, feminist, and conservative women had become more pronounced.

Once the euphoria over the end of the war subsided, this fragile coalition could not last. Károlyi's initial broad support, based on the hope that his anti-war stance would reap a favourable peace settlement, proved similarly short-lived. The Association of Feminists was among the first to salute the democratic revolution and two of its leaders were elected into the newly formed National Council. But the Feminists failed to capitalise on the granting of suffrage in November 1918, despite their long fight for its achievement. Moreover, despite their efforts to hold their organisation above party lines, many of their members had joined political parties from left to right. A group of high-profile former feminist activists broke ranks and formed the Women's Section

6 László Kontler, *Millennium in Central Europe*, Budapest 1999, is the best recent survey of Hungarian history. For an overview of Hungarian women's movements in the aftermath of WWI, cf. Judit Acsády, *Diverse constructions: Feminist and conservative women's movements and their contribution to the (re-)construction of gender relations in Hungary after the First World War*, in: Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe eds., *Aftermaths of War: Women's Movements and Female Activists, 1918–1923*, Leiden/Boston 2011, 309–331; Judith Szapor, *Who Represents Hungarian Women? The Demise of the Liberal Bourgeois Women's Rights Movement and the Rise of the Right-Wing Women's Movement in the Aftermath of World War I*, in: *ibid.*, 245–264.

7 Cf. Eliza Ablovatski, *Between Red Army and White Guard: Women in Budapest, 1918–1919*, in: Maria Bucur and Nancy Wingfield eds., *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, Bloomington 2006, 70–93, and Judith Szapor, *Feministák és 'radikális asszonyok' – női politikusok az 1918-as demokratikus forradalomban [Feminists and 'radical women' – Hungarian women politicians in the 1918 democratic revolution]*, in: Beáta Nagy and Gábor Gyáni eds., *Nők a modernizálódó magyar társadalomban [Women in modernising Hungarian society]*, Debrecen 2006, 254–277.

8 Cf. Acsády, *Constructions*, see note 6.

of the Bourgeois Radical Party.⁹ Women activists associated with the Social Democratic Party and the newly formed Communist Party also took on highly visible roles.¹⁰

3. The Women's Debating Club

Throughout the revolutions from October 1918 to July 1919 female activists also engaged in politics in informal settings, using their familial and social networks. Yet few of these activities left any documentary evidence, making the case of the Women's Debating Club all the more valuable as the only known setting in this highly polarising period that saw women activists of all ideological stripes meet, debate ideas, and jostle for influence.

Katinka's idea for a contribution to the struggle for women's rights had taken shape in early 1918: it was to be a Women's Debating Club, modelled on the English gentlemen's clubs and, as she pointedly added, a first in Hungary. The ambiguity of her perception of women's political roles – supportive rather than independent – was reflected in the Club's main goal: “to get in touch with young women of my generation, in order to gain their support for Mihály's program” – most importantly, his efforts to end the war.¹¹ Recently consulted documents in the voluminous archives of Rosika Schwimmer offer irrefutable evidence that the Hungarian feminist leader had a much more pronounced role in the Women's Club than what transpires from the memoirs of the Countess.¹² For once, Schwimmer took a back seat and allowed the Countess to mobilise her invaluable social connections, to advance the twin objectives of peace and suffrage.

With dramatic historical events taking over its pages, Mrs Károlyi's memoirs devote no more than a few comments to the activities of the Club; yet the description leaves no doubt it was close to her heart: “as an infant, separated from the mother's body”¹³ she watched it grow, constantly worrying about its fate. She describes the participants: countess Albert Apponyi and her conservative flock, socialist women, representing the working class, and some middle-class women – regrettably, she fails to name any in the latter two categories.¹⁴ She also mentions that members included the feminist leaders Vilma

9 Cf. Szapor, *Feministák*, see note 7.

10 They included Ilona Duczynska and Anna Lesznai. Cf. György Dalos, *A cselekvés szerelmese* [The lover of action], Budapest 1984, 27–89, and Erzsébet Vezér, *Lesznai Anna élete* [The life of Anna Lesznai], Budapest 1979, especially 74–79.

11 Károlyiné, *Együtt*, see note 1, 239.

12 The Rosika Schwimmer Papers, 1890–1983, at the New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Mss Col 6398, contain dozens of documents offering clear evidence that Schwimmer was the driving force behind the Women's Club, instrumental in shaping its organisational framework and activities. Due to limited space, a detailed account of Schwimmer's engagement cannot be included here.

13 Károlyiné, *Együtt*, see note 1, 250.

14 Cf. Károlyiné, *Együtt*, see note 1, 240.

Glücklich and – without as much as a hint at her crucial role – Rosika Schwimmer, but also conservative women politicians, such as Sarolta Geöcze, the pre-war leader of the Christian Social women's movement.¹⁵ The memoirs reveal very little about the topics discussed, only that the discussions betrayed the already deep divisions between the conservatives, that is women of the Countess Károlyi's own class, and the progressives.¹⁶

How successful was the Club? Was there a genuine chance to bridge the differences between the two sides? The account of Katinka Károlyi, written in the late 1960s, seems to suggest that the Club was highly successful in providing a forum to a representative cross section of political women and a conversation transcending political and class differences, with the progressive side dominating the debates. When it comes to the Club, there is a puzzling lack of reflection or hindsight in Katinka Károlyi's memoirs: the nearly four decades following the events she describes had not seemed to alter her perspective. Was the Club truly the success the Countess claims it to be? What was really going on at the meetings?

4. A Right-wing Conspiracy

The testimony of another witness, the writer Emma Ritoók provides the view from the other side, as it were, shedding light on the veritable right-wing conspiracy launched right under the Countess' nose. The writer and philosopher Emma Ritoók (1868–1945) was a founding member of the Sunday Circle that included, among others, the philosopher Georg Lukács, the writer Béla Balázs, and the artist Anna Lesznai. As Ritoók's fellow members of the Circle had moved to the Left, first to an anti-war stance and the support of the Károlyi revolution, then the support of the Bolshevik revolution, so did Ritoók move in the opposite direction. In January 1919 she completed the break with her former friends in the progressive intellectual avant-garde when she co-founded the National Organisation of Hungarian Women (MANSz) with her sister-in-law, Cécile Tormay.¹⁷

By early 1920 MANSz became the representative, government-supported women's movement with a right-wing, nationalistic agenda – yet its beginnings as a clandestine,

¹⁵ Cf. Károlyiné, *Együtt*, see note 1, 238.

¹⁶ Documents in the Rosika Schwimmer Papers, see note 12, offer additional information on the invited speakers and topics of the planned monthly debates.

¹⁷ On Ritoók, cf. András Lengyel, *A Vasárnapi Kör "renegátja"*. Utak és csapdák; Irodalom- és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok [The renegade of the Sunday Circle. Paths and traps; studies in literary and cultural history], Budapest 1994, 7–76, and Judith Szapor, *Disputed Past: The Friendship and Competing Memories of Anna Lesznai and Emma Ritoók*, in: AHEA. E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, 5 (2012), at <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012/7>. On Cécile Tormay, cf. Judit Kádár, *Az antiszemitizmus jutalma. Tormay Cécile és a Horthy-korszak* [The reward of anti-Semitism. Cécile Tormay and the Horthy-era], in: *Kritika*, 3 (2003), 9–12.

counter-revolutionary organisation can be traced to the meetings of the Women's Club. What makes Ritoók's testimony, provided in her unpublished memoirs, indispensable is its author's pre-existing ties to the avant-garde literary and intellectual scene. Ritoók's turn to the Right came at a heavy personal price; in the late 1920s, when she was writing her memoirs, Ritoók was still grappling with it, trying to justify her past connection to the Sunday Circle.¹⁸

In an entry from December 1918 she described a fateful meeting of the Club:

There is a meeting at the Women's Club [...] Despite my expectations there is a great many people at the meeting, from the party of Mrs Károlyi [and] many Jewish women who 'til now had not participated in the activities of the Club – I've known them for their Radical views – the Polányis, Mrs Jászi whom I saw there for the last time [...], many feminists; Mrs Károlyi showed off her entire regiment ... Only Mrs Jászi noticed me: "I see you are with the countesses now," she said somewhat sarcastically. "With the good Hungarians", I replied and I felt [...] a range of emotions running through me, from regret to stupidity, bitterness, betrayal, that I had spent so much time with these people. It was a strange meeting. As if we all anticipated a decisive battle and while we have not prepared for it in advance, we 'good Hungarian women' all happened to be present.¹⁹

Ritoók added: "I believe it was at this meeting or perhaps another one not much later that we voted out Mrs. Károlyi's entire leadership and elected officials. And since then it has been my conviction that one can only be victorious if she faces the enemy head-on."²⁰

The one name conspicuously missing from Ritoók's dispatches was Cécile Tormay's, the emerging leader of MANSz. Tormay, firmly anchored in the pre-war conservative literary scene, shared none of Ritoók's ambivalence towards the progressive intellectual elite. According to Ritoók, "Cécile was always against the idea of joining the Club" –

18 On the Sunday Circle, cf. Éva Karádi and Erzsébet Vezér eds., *A Vasárnapi Kör; Dokumentumok* [The Sunday Circle; documents], Budapest 1980, and Mary Gluck, Georg Lukács and His Generation 1900–1918, Cambridge, MA 1985.

19 Emma Ritoók, *Évek és emberek 1920–1933* [Years and people], Manuscript, National Széchényi Library, Manuscript Division, fond 473, 292f.; Csilla Markója, *Három kulcsregény és három sorsába zárt vasárnapios – Lesznai Anna, Ritoók Emma és Kaffka Margit találkozása a válaszüton* [Three romans-à-clef and three Sunday-members, encapsulated in their fate – the encounter of Anna Lesznai, Emma Ritoók and Margit Kaffka at the crossroads], in: *Enigma*, 52 (2007), 67–108, and Szapor, *Past*, see note 17, describe Ritoók's friendship and break with Anna Lesznai, a fellow member of the Sunday Circle. Married to Oszkár Jászi between 1913 and 1920, Lesznai was the Mrs. Jászi mentioned by Ritoók. "Polányis" refer to Cécile Pollacsek and Laura Polányi, members of a famed intellectual family and close allies of Jászi and his Bourgeois Radical Party. The "Radical views" refer to their political affiliation with this party.

68 20 Ritoók, *Évek*, see note 19, 293.

she would not want to “get mixed up with these people”.²¹ Tormay’s own, half-fictional account of the revolutions, “An Outlaw’s Diary” suggests that her absence from the Club was a highly calculated move, informed by her anticipated, future political role.²² Yet she was kept informed: in her book Tormay devoted a substantial entry to the same meeting, characterising the conspirators as a highly organised group and the Countess and her flock of “socialist, feminist, and radical Jewish adherents” as a pathetic bunch with no leadership, easily undermined by the “nationalist ladies”.²³ As was her habit, Tormay also overstated her own significance, claiming that her name was frequently invoked and her participation requested by Club members.²⁴

If both sides claimed success, how can the historian draw up the Club’s balance sheet? Granted, during the last months of the war the Club succeeded in bringing together women from a wide range of political views and social backgrounds. But the Club failed in all other respects: it did not prolong the Károlyi-government’s dwindling support by a minute and the Club’s membership, never united to begin with, became further polarised along the fissures opening up in Hungarian political life. By March 1919 the Women’s Debating Club ceased to exist, and so did the fragile pre-war coalition of women activists. Following the brief intermezzo of the second, Bolshevik revolution, Hungarian women’s politics – mirroring the shift in political life at large – was overtaken by MANSz, the nationalistic, anti-liberal women’s movement for the rest of the interwar period.

And yet mainstream, male politics had no equivalent for the institution created by the earnest efforts of Countess Károlyi. The politically minded women who attended the meetings of the Club represented a broad, if short-lived coalition, again unequalled in male politics. In its other, unintended capacity, as the setting for a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, the Club was home to a unique phenomenon as right-wing women’s activism did not mirror as much as precede the counter-revolutionary organisation of male political leaders. Emma Ritoók and Cécile Tormay, fellow conspirators in late 1918 and early 1919 would soon have a fallout; after 1920 they were barely on speaking terms and agreed on very little. Yet they would always be in agreement on women’s role in the counter-revolution: it was their kind of women, the “Countesses”, “the good Hungarian women”, in Ritoók’s words, who took the initiative at a time when right-wing male politicians were still paralysed, hesitant to act, even co-opted by the Károlyi government.

21 Ritoók, *Évek*, see note 19, 294.

22 Cécile Tormay, *An Outlaw’s Diary*, I, Revolution, Budapest 1923, 145 (Hungarian orig.: *Egy bujdosó naplója*, I, A forradalomban, Budapest 1920).

23 Tormay, *Outlaw*, see note 22, 145.

24 Cf. Tormay, *Outlaw*, see note 22, 145.

5. Conclusion

While the case of the Women's Club can help answer questions concerning the trajectories of the Hungarian women's movements and the connection (and disconnect) between female activism and mainstream, male politics, it also raises more questions, hopefully leading to further studies. What does the Club's brief existence reveal about women's political activism in the 1918/19 revolutionary period? Did the revolutions and the counter-revolution allow women to articulate their gender-specific interests?

Successive developments suggest tentative answers: I already mentioned the failure of the liberal Association of Feminists to capitalise on the granting of the suffrage. Well before the onslaught by the counter-revolution, their organisation crumbled under political crises and divisive electoral campaigning. As for the new, right-wing women's organisation MANSz, there is no doubt of its proactive role in the counter-revolutionary conspiracy; but the question whether it represented an independent women's agenda remains. That is the paradox of MANSz: Tormay, Ritoók, and their Christian Social allies Sarolta Geöcze and Margit Schlachta, were all highly educated and visible women; yet their programme of national regeneration and support of the new, nationalistic and anti-Semitic regime were based on the rejection of the liberal model of women's emancipation. Of all the strands of female activism represented at the Women's Club, liberal feminists alone remained true to the principle of representing exclusively women's interests. In the end it did not make the slightest difference: feminists, socialist women, and all those who supported either or both of the revolutions, would be ostracised from postwar political life.

If the unprecedentedly broad political and social spectrum of women politicians represented the potential of the Women's Debating Club in its early days, the rise of MANSz became its most lasting, albeit unintended legacy. Countess Károlyi's attempt to prolong the short-lived solidarity of political women across social classes and political creeds did not even last as long as her husband's government; and contrary to her intentions, the Club ended up providing the setting for right-wing, nationalistic women to launch an organisation that would eventually undo the gains of liberal women's emancipation, achieved in the pre-war and revolutionary periods. The most important lesson of the brief history of the Women's Debating Club however may be the evidence it brings to the endurance of the in-between space, the shifting ground between the private and the public. Even as new forms of political activism opened up to them, the Club, a throwback to earlier historical periods, remained irresistible to women activists on all sides as a space they were willing to share, keen to compete for, and determined to control.