

NINETEENTH-CENTURY HUNGARIAN PIONEERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Hungarians are proud of their educational system which, as various surveys proved time after time, has been among the best – at least until recently. In the light of this justified pride, it is amazing how little is known about the history of Hungarian education. I leave aside the valuable former publications gathering dust on library shelves, or university notes of the boring “History of Pedagogy” courses which were compulsory parts of the curriculum during the past decades. More regrettable is the lack of information on education in volumes that claim to survey Hungarian culture, past and present. *Information Hungary* a thoroughly communist propaganda volume (1967), nominally edited by Ferenc Erdei, printed a few pages about the history of education, and many more about the institutional structure of education after World War II. Other pre- and post-war publications in which education would have had a logical place, such as *Mi a magyar?* (1939) and, recently, the *Pannon enciklopédia* (1993), have no chapters about this subject. The most interesting and timely ideas of our educators are hard to find in concise summaries, even harder to locate in the original texts.

While education is admittedly an important social issue that almost everybody has some opinion about, it is also conceived as a field of practical activity. It shares an assumed historical irrelevance with the advancement of technology. While hundreds of millions of people around the world have computers, it is doubtful that many would be interested in the evolution of the computer, from the room-size monsters of the nineteen-fifties to today’s laptops. This pragmatic outlook hardly explains, however, why so many outstanding educators are better known for other abilities. Baron Loránd Eötvös lives in our memory as a scientist, Countess Blanka Teleki a patriot, Count Kunó Klebelsberg a member of István Bethlen’s government. Very few Hungarians would know anything about the pedagogical ideas of these three, not to mention many other educators who have enriched Hungary’s culture.

The goal of this paper is to survey the contribution of some educators of the previous century to Hungarian and world civilization. There was no shortage of great pedagogues: this was the age of Herbart, Humboldt, and Spencer, the old

Pestalozzi and the young Montessori. Our Hungarian educators have not been recognized as equals of these world-famous men and women. It is time to settle this debt.

By 1887 Loránd Eötvös had been professor of natural sciences for fifteen years, which had given him ample opportunity to gather observations about higher education. In that year, the need to share these observations and find allies for an educational reform led Eötvös to address Ágoston Trefort, the minister of religion and education, in an "open letter," which was printed in the April issue of the monthly journal *Budapesti Szemle* (Budapest Observer). Four years later, Eötvös became president of the university and his inaugural speech, printed in *Természettudományi Közlöny* (Journal of Natural Sciences) continued the quest for new ideals.¹ Interestingly, he did not continue publishing about this subject in subsequent years, although pertinent remarks can be found also in his later writings. Probably the seven short months of his ministership of religion and education, a position from which he resigned early in 1895, made him realize how enormously difficult it would be to put his ideas into practice. Nevertheless, some of these ideas are even more timely now than were a century ago.

First, the dream. What does Eötvös have to say about the goals of an ideal university education? The double goal is: to develop leaders of society and the church, and, to educate scholars in different sciences (to which, according to Hungarian and German terminology, also the study of the arts and literature belong; p. 173). Long ago, the prestige of knowledge made young people follow scholars of intellectual eminence in order to learn from them. Thus, universities were formed by a spontaneous search for knowledge, not by administrative decrees (as Eötvös adds sarcastically). Society appreciated learning and made practical use of it, while the leaders of society – such as popes, emperors, and kings – appointed scholars to high positions by making them bishops, counselors, and so on. "This relationship between university and society has guaranteed the prestige and freedom of this institution from the beginning until our times" (195-7). Thus, the duties of the university include conveying not only knowledge but also values. "A nation entrusts us with the best of its sons," who can be impressed and guided only by the eminence and good personal example of their teachers (206).

At this point Eötvös makes a not entirely novel distinction which, however, cannot be emphasized enough. What are the criteria of true scholarship as opposed to bookish knowledge?

We can call one a true scholar only if he has acquired a general ability of reasoning by the thorough study of one discipline. In addition, he should have acquired a wide range of knowledge, so that he can solve problems of both scientific and practical nature, albeit perhaps only af-

ter a long deliberation and much research. A good judge or lawyer is not one who can immediately quote some article pertinent to the case on hand. Likewise, the good physician is not one who just casts a glance at the patient and immediately decides which fashionable treatment to use.

To solve the many complicated cases in any social activity or scholarly discipline, "one has to possess an integrity of thinking which cannot be replaced by already existing rules" (175). Elsewhere, Eötvös continues the argument. The independence of thought can be taught only by educators who think independently. Therefore, the standard of any university depends primarily on the personality of its professors. A university course cannot offer as complete knowledge as a handbook, yet the teacher can arrive at a synthesis, and can focus on the essence of a subject, more successfully than any book (202–4). As a matter of fact, university teachers should not be expected to enhance their lectures by writing textbooks, argues Eötvös (179).

Next comes reality. Eötvös finds much to criticize about the Hungarian university system of his time, that is, universities before the turn of the century. In the first place, he ostracizes the increasing priority of administration and bureaucracy. "Bad regulations can cripple the activity of the most outstanding teachers," he wrote in 1887. He blames the slavish application of foreign rules which were borrowed from universities of other countries without regard to the Hungarian conditions (173). In Germany, for instance, the freedom of choosing one's courses makes students elect fewer courses which they take seriously, while their colleagues in Hungary take a large number of courses which they never attend (176–7). The tradition in Hungary is not knowledge-oriented but performance-oriented: students register for less demanding courses, or those taught by lenient professors (181).

A Hungarian student is happy to enter the university. [...] He is enthusiastic about everything that is beautiful and good, he loves freedom and nation, and aspires to become a famous person due to his service performed for his country. There is one thing that he is not enthusiastic about: scholarship. Should we blame him? We Hungarians have had brave soldiers, great statesmen, famous orators, but who can mention one Hungarian who became famous and great purely as a scholar? (180)

Eötvös establishes four types of Hungarian university students. The first one despises knowledge since his family is prestigious and so will he be, by virtue of his inherited name. The second group's aim is not knowledge but to get a diploma. The third type will eventually choose a practical field such as law or medicine, and criticizes both theoretical studies and anything else that does not serve his narrow career purpose. Only a small group of idealists study for the sake of knowledge, without considering how it may further their career (181–2).

The result of the heterogeneous motivations and expectations is a frustrated teacher who realizes that his knowledge and synthesizing mind don't appeal to most students. Instead of visiting his lectures, absentee students use notes from the past, or some convenient summarizing booklet, to prepare for their examinations. Eötvös writes: "... after his carefully structured, intelligent and scholarly series of lecture, [the professor] has to ask questions at the high-school level, unless he decides to be absurdly consistent and flunks ninety-nine percent of his students" (172). After a while professors become cynical: realizing that they cannot influence the development of their students, they either lower their standards or lecture at such level that their students don't understand half of it (183).²

In order to remedy the bitter realities of Hungarian universities, Eötvös proposed far-reaching reforms. Two of these targeted the traditional attitudes of Hungarian students. In the first place, Eötvös wanted to make course attendance compulsory (176). Next, in order to counter the pragmatic nonchalance toward scholarly theory, he suggested that those intending to pursue a professional career should be required to take theoretical courses pertinent to their field in the first two years of their studies. Furthermore, Eötvös planned to introduce regular examinations in all such courses, which remind the North American reader of the tests and quizzes that are given here (184–5). Naturally, this new system would put an increased work load on the professors, which should be alleviated by hiring "*repetitors*" – that is, in "our" language, teaching assistants (187). (As Eötvös informs us, compulsory exams and the *repetitor*-system were already in effect at the technical university of Budapest at that time; 188.)

There are also other aspects of what we know as a North American university tradition that Loránd Eötvös liked. He spoke with appreciation about people of good fortune who, whether scientists or at one time humble craftsmen, have offered millions to establish new universities or support existing ones (205). This system of endowments may have appealed to him as a sign of the social appreciation of knowledge.

At the same time, Eötvös also professed other ideas which are entirely contrary to the American and, by now, also the European concept of a socially open university system. He brazenly attacked the sacred cow of our times: that everybody has the "right" to higher education. He praised in German universities the fact that students represented overwhelmingly the educated and well-heeled upper middle class, consequently they did not have to worry about high tuition fees and other study expenses. He found many more people from the lower social strata at Hungarian universities: young men whose families knew little about scholarship, and themselves had to live in crowded, unheated rooms, worry about fees and textbooks, and spend much of their valuable time tutoring for meager compensation (178, 181). In order to demonstrate the controversial character of Baron Eötvös, we have to add that he also founded an elite college in 1894, named after his father, to help talented lower-class students to worry-

free university studies. Of course, this was not the only goal of the renowned Eötvös College. It is typical, however, that the college admitted only young men. We learn from Klebelsberg that as late as 1928 there was no comparable college for women.³

If university studies were a matter of luxury, the same held for university teaching. Eötvös refuted the arguments of critics – arguments that sound familiar to us once again – that professorial salaries should not come shamefully close to those of high-ranking statesmen (190). If the comfortable life of professors is not secured, how can they devote all their time and energy to their scholarship? (191) Should they perhaps quit teaching and practice their knowledge in various professions for more lucrative compensation? (193) All this sounds as if we were listening to a public debate of our time. Also, Eötvös suggests that for every outstanding young scholar a university chair (“*cathedra*”) should be created so that they don’t have to wait disappointingly long till professors already occupying the few existing chairs retire or die (203–5). In other words, he regarded individual excellence as a quality more important than the balance among the disciplines.

At first impression, the upbringing of young women seems to be a matter entirely different from university education. Not so! What Countess Blanka Teleki and Mrs. Pál Veres strove for, was actually the establishment of a women’s college to educate Hungarian girls to be mothers and wives knowledgeable about culture, good patriots, and, if they so chose, prepared for university studies. It is worth noting that the first European university that admitted women was the university of Zurich in 1869–70. In Hungary, the faculties of art, medicine, and pharmacy opened up for women in 1895–96 – as the *Révai Lexikon* modestly adds, “with some restrictions.” In fact, Count Klebelsberg reported that as late as the 1920s the medical school of the university of Budapest still managed to avoid admitting women.⁴

Countess Teleki, Mrs. Veres, and other pioneers of the liberation of women (such as Countess Teréz Brunszvik, or Teréz Karacs, daughter of an engraver) did not make much secret of the fact that the access of women to higher education was part of the general struggle for emancipation. Their goals went beyond those set by eminent men of the reform era, notably András Fáy,⁵ whose program consisted only of educating girls to become mothers and wives of refined culture. The emancipators admitted the crucial role of women in the family, but regarded education as something that also opened various fields of social activity and provided options for women – options comparable to those available for men.⁶ In 1848 Teleki’s students compiled their own proclamation of what Hungarian women expected from the revolution. Two of their demands were: unconditional equality with men, and, in particular, availability of university education for women.⁷ When the Austrian administration tried Teleki in 1853 and sentenced her to ten years in prison, the indictment mentioned in three instances

her struggle for emancipation as a crime just as severe as her activity in favor of the revolution.⁸ In a more permissive period, between 1865–71, Mrs. Veres stated the same need for emancipation, at the same time reminding women also of their duty as human beings to aspire for self-perfection through education.⁹ In short, rights also mean responsibilities.

Blanka Teleki's and Mrs. Veres's activities centered around the establishment of a women's college. Teleki's was a short-lived enterprise, operating only for two years (1846–48). Mrs. Veres had more success: after years of preparation her institution opened in 1869 and, having survived numerous twists of educational policy, it still exists as a Budapest high school named after its founder.

Countess Teleki's educational principle was mainly patriotic. She wanted to bring up young women well-versed in Hungarian history and literature. She recognized that due to a lack of qualified teachers, mainly foreign tutoresses were hired by well-to-do families to teach their female offspring. The result was an entirely cosmopolitan upper-class youth that usually didn't speak Hungarian.¹⁰ Ironically, to this youth belonged also Hermina Beniczky, young wife of deputy lord lieutenant Pál Veres, who still spoke German better than Hungarian in the early 1840s.

Mrs. Veres blamed the conventional division of labor for the intellectual backwardness of women. Unlike men, girls were deprived from education after the age of sixteen, were expected to get married by eighteen, and the only expectation they were facing for the rest of their life was to be mothers and housewives. Without intellectual stimulus and enlightening company, women could not be expected to show any spiritual advancement (131–5). At the same time, technology gradually rendered void such arguments as those referring to women's more delicate physical makeup. Mrs. Veres listed the fields of finance and commerce, education, pharmacy, and medicine as naturally suited ones for women (158), emphasizing especially the importance of training woman physicians, "since it is embarrassing to consult a man in the matters of our ailments." (182). She also thought that the list of occupations available for women would grow in the future (206). As for the past, she pointed out the vicious circle that the division of labor created: legislation was in the hands of men who could thus keep women away from education and legal reforms (180).

With the division of labor there came a division of values. Preceding Lev Tolstoy and August Strindberg by at least two decades, Mrs. Veres condemned the tradition of assigning only external values to girls to be married (137). Less attractive girls brought up with such values would always feel unwanted and unhappy (140). On the other hand, educated women found value and strength in their intellectual interest and were less inclined to think of their appearance only (137).

With all her zeal to open up the horizon of employment for women, Mrs. Veres knew well that the basis of society was the family. The special role of women is to conduct the education of their children from the day of their birth. Women are the most influential teachers. Mrs. Veres did not want to see all women undertaking various jobs, but regarded a knowledgeable mother, who could teach her children and be intellectual partner of her husband, as the ideal.¹¹ She commented on what a pitiful sight it was to see young mothers who had no information about the physical and mental needs of their children (179). Echoing Countess Teleki, she too pointed out that, since uneducated women soon recognize their inability to raise children, they find tutoresses abroad who know nothing about Hungarian customs and values (162). She also believed that guarded from the vanities of social life young women should continue their education until the age of eighteen (138). Generally, however, she recognized as early as 1867 that women had to solve the problem of their own higher education themselves, since there was no indication that the existing political and social establishment would be willing to further this cause (141, also 159).

As already noted, Mrs. Veres (like earlier Countess Teleki) campaigned for the establishment of a model college for young women, which was also intended to educate teachers for the future. In 1869 the college was inaugurated with one class of fourteen students. Excellent teachers, all of them men, were hired to teach the different subjects – among them the famous Pál Gyulai, who had always supported the cause of women's education (191). A great boost to the prestige of the school occurred in 1871 when Queen Elizabeth visited the college and addressed teachers and students in Hungarian (200).

The scope of the studies was ambitious. Already Blanka Teleki's program included the teaching of history, geography, the abstract and empirical sciences, Hungarian language and literature, French, German, religious studies, dance, music, feminine handcraft, and physical education.¹² Most of the above became part of Mrs. Veres's educational plan, with some additions such as aesthetics, logic, psychology, hygiene, and certain practical skills such as the basics of business and bookkeeping (143, 163, 173, 190). One notices, however, the absence of social skills such as dance, music, handcraft, and physical education. Mrs. Veres despised the first three subjects as the only skills traditionally taught to young girls (172), while one may question her indifference toward the physical development of young women (save hygiene). It is also worth noting that she must have understood by literary education something different from the romantic and sentimental novels that further separated young girls from the realities of their life (139–40). Everything considered, it was a comprehensive and practical curriculum that entirely ignored such traditional fields as philosophy, theology, and the classical languages.

All great ideas of the past are parts of our own time in one way or another. Elite education may not sound attractive nowadays, yet, should we not recon-

sider the present trend of the open university by weighing its shrinking advantages against its growing disadvantages? Asserting the personality and central role of the teacher is another timely idea today, when education via internet, and a parasitic claim to make university professorship more or less dispensable in the sense as we have known it, are in vogue. Among the comments of woman educators we should notice the absence of a call for coeducation. Equal access to education; yes, but through the establishment of colleges for girls. Leaving the highest stage: university education aside, one may ask: can adolescents be taught their sex roles together? Are they educated for sex roles at all? This was, namely, one goal of our contemporary feminists.

While only individuals or a small group of educators have been scrutinized, we can derive some observations from our study. Striking is the pragmatic character of the stated pedagogical ideas, not with regard to their goals but due to their connection to the operation of institutions. While the social function of education is never left out of focus, it is not exaggerated either. Nevertheless, Eötvös was more of an idealist than Mrs. Veres. As has been mentioned, one may hypothesize that it would not be easy to find consistent writings about higher education in the Western tradition that keep a precious balance between lofty philosophy and a narrow administrative perspective as successfully as some of the modern classics of Hungarian education. Indeed, the nineteenth century also brought other extremes, such as Herbart's assumption of a meticulously planned education, which was supposed to work as a clock, and Spencer's liberalism that calls into question the possibility of setting uniform goals. Obviously, perennial ideas both supersede such dogmatism and find a balance between extremes. Above all, they still can be appreciated and enjoyed. Such are the ideas of the Hungarian educators whom we have scrutinized.

Notes

1. Cf. pages 171–211 in *Eötvös Loránd tudományos és művelődéspolitikai írásaiból*, ed. Barna Bodó (Bukarest: Kriterion, 1980). All page references to this source will appear in the text. Bodó mentions another, similar collection by Elek Környei: *Eötvös Loránd a tudós és művelődéspolitikus írásaiból* (Budapest, 1964). It seems that these are the two basic, but probably overlapping, sources to study Eötvös's cultural theoretical writings.
2. Count Kunó Klebelsberg, minister of religion and education 1922–1932, corroborated Eötvös's critique of the university of Budapest before World War I, calling it a diploma factory and a "mammoth university" whose professors lecture from their long published books and only 10% of the students attend lectures. (*Tudomány, kultúra, politika: gróf Klebelsberg Kunó válogatott beszédei és írásai 1917–1932*, (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1990), 480–881, 495.)
3. Klebelsberg, 477.

4. *Ibid.*, 473.
5. Author of *Nőnevelés és nőnevelő intézetek hazánkban* (1841).
6. Cf. Györgyi Sáfrán's introduction to the collection *Teleki Blanka és köre*, ed. Gy. Sáfrán (Bukarest: Kriterion, 1979), 12. A more thorough survey of nineteenth century women's education, whose ideological focus is slightly different, is the chapter "A magyar nemzeti nőnevelés," in Gyula Kornis, *A magyar művelődés eszményei, 1777–1848* (Budapest: Kir. Magy. Egyetemi Nyomda, 1927), II. 453–578. The sheer number of the pioneers of women's education that Kornis mentions proves the immense debt of post-war Hungarian scholarship to this aspect of national history.
7. Sáfrán, 19.
8. *Teleki Blanka és köre*, 50, 53, 56.
9. *Veres Pálné Beniczky Hermin élete és működése*, comp. Rudnay Józsefné and Szigethy Gyuláné (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1902). The idea of responsibility occurs on page 154; cf. also pages 156, 179, 262, 302–3. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.
10. Sáfrán, 13–14, 25, 31; *Teleki Blanka és köre*, 49.
11. This is not an entirely original idea, and Mrs. Veres quotes several related views on page 221 of the above noted collection. She fails to mention Erasmus of Rotterdam who had also stated the same idea.
12. *Teleki Blanka és köre*, 26–27.