

Babeş-Bolyai University  
History and Philosophy Faculty  
History, Civilization, Culture Doctoral School

Doctoral Thesis

**The children of the state**  
**The history of the Hungarian State Children's**  
**Asylums, 1901–1918**

Scientific coordinator

Prof. univ. dr. Pál Judit

Doctoral candidate

Gál Edina-Tünde

Cluj-Napoca

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The child protection laws of 1901 created the legal framework of the Royal Hungarian State Children's Asylums (Act 8/1901, 21/1901). , which was applied from 1903, when the Regulation on the protection of abandoned children was issued (Ordinance 1/1903, Ministry of Interior). The Regulations outlined the methods of placement, selection of colonies, compulsory education, the attributions of the asylum personnel, the conduct, and obligations of the foster parents. According to the Child Protection Acts, all children until 15 years had the right for state protection in the children's asylum. The intention of the state was to overcome the extremely high infant mortality, especially among illegitimate children, and raise them into respectful, loyal, and hard-working citizens. Before the intervention of the state the few private associations (mainly in Budapest) and institutions could not cope with the raising number of unwanted infants. Doctors like Mór Szalárdi started to raise public awareness on infant mortality already from the 1870s. Deputies in the Parliament also stressed the intervention of the state in child protection, enlisting a series of national arguments. Still, more than two decades passed until the actual measures in the matter. The first intervention of the state was the financial support of the raising costs of abandoned children from the National Healthcare Fund (Act 21/1899).

There were 18 children's asylums throughout Hungary. Children admitted into state care were not raised inside these institutions, but they were placed into foster care. According to the Child Protection Act, all children declared abandoned by Guardianship Authority were granted the protection of the state and placed to foster parents by the asylum for a monthly payment. The central institutions were merely a temporary accommodation for children and a hospital for the sick. The children declared abandoned would be cared for at the expense of the state until the age of seven. Afterwards the locality of origin was obliged to bear the childcare costs until age 15, which resulted in many complaints from local officials. Older children were often placed as apprentices to learn a craft.

In my thesis I focus on five institutions, namely Arad, Cluj (Kolozsvár), Oradea (Nagyvárad), Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely), Timișoara (Temesvár). After the First World these five institutions became part of Romania, where these asylums influenced the development of child welfare in the new country. Alongside the history of the state asylums, one follows the birth and evolution of the Hungarian child welfare system and its complementary institutions/private associations during Dualism. In this research I go beyond classical institutional history, and one of the main objectives of the thesis is to investigate the national

ambitions of the state and the extent of Magyarization associated with the state children's asylums, by comparing the contemporary narratives with the available statistical data. This approach was inspired by Tara Zahra's book entitled *Kidnapped Souls*, where the author builds her research around national indifference, arguing that the daily lives of citizens were not as much politicised as nationalist activists expected and their decisions were influenced by opportunism rather than patriotism. The structure of my thesis was dictated by the diversity of the subject, including many aspects of child welfare from the protection of infants to delinquent youth. The nationalizing aspect of the Hungarian State Children's Asylums is highlighted throughout the thesis. Alongside the activity of the medical staff and the politicians involved in child protection, I attempted to reconstruct the living conditions of state children in the foster family.

The main sources of my research are annual reports of the Royal Hungarian State Children's Asylums between 1903–1910 containing elaborate statistical data about the admission of children, age distribution, nationality, mortality, their family background, placement of children, the colonies, foster parents and the observations of the national inspector, Pál Ruffy. Unfortunately, the archives of these institutions were lost (are not accessible) or is very fragmented. Although the absence of the institutional archive raised certain difficulties, the reports and the vast contemporary literature on child welfare made it possible to reconstruct the evolution of the Hungarian state children's asylums. National statistical reports also complete the statistical data. Some of the director physicians of the asylums were particularly active in publishing their (medical) research papers about state children, namely Sándor Szana (Timișoara and Budapest asylums), Gusztáv Genersich (Cluj asylum), and Menyhért Edelmann (Oradea asylum). In addition, many private associations had collaborated with the asylums, like the National Child Protection League and patronage associations, which also had their own reports or even their own journal (*Gyermekvédelmi Lap*). Certain institutions like the White Cross Foundling Home Association in Timișoara and the foundling home services of the Royal Maternity in Cluj had immediate impact on the colonies on these two local asylums. The contemporary press was used to reconstruct the public reception of the state children's asylums.

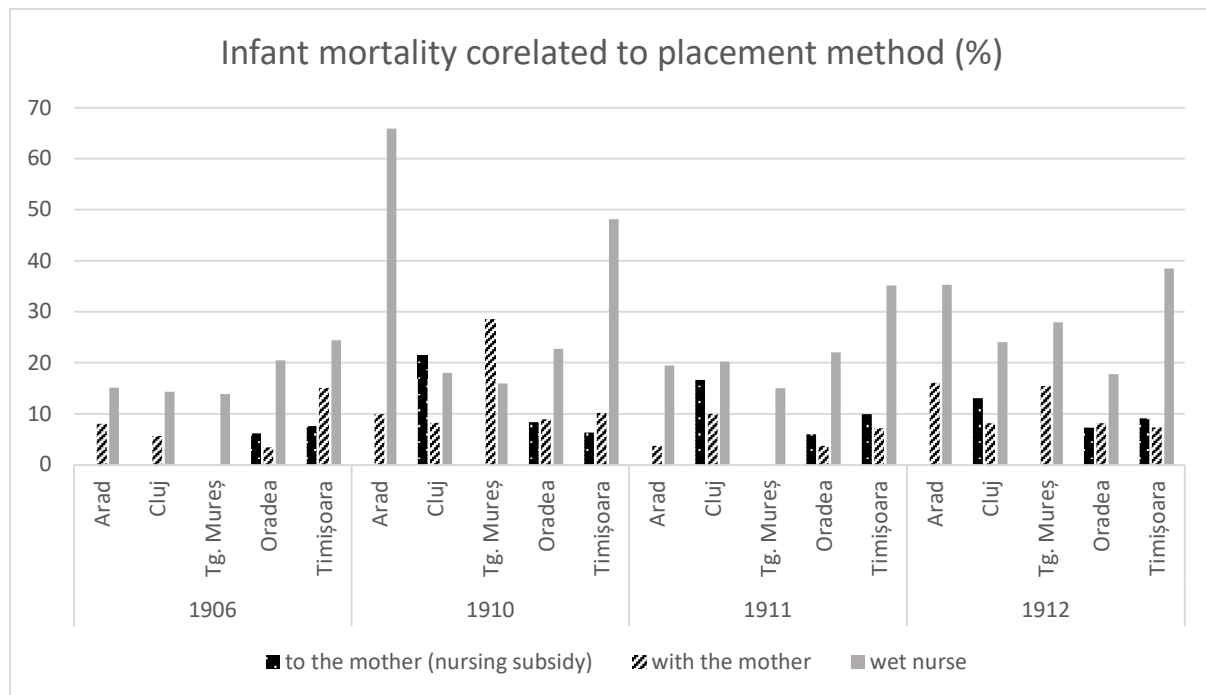
Children of all ages were placed in foster care for a monthly payment. Foster parents were selected from easily-accessible villages and towns where at least 30 families offered for foster care and where the local community showed interest in child protection. They were called colonies. The selection of colonies was the privilege of the director-physician of each local state asylum, and had to be approved by the national inspector of the asylums, Pál Ruffy. Only Hungarian villages were chosen as colonies, therefore state children grew up in Hungarian

communities, resulting in the Magyarization of state children of various nationalities. Foster families also needed to match certain criteria to qualify as a foster parent, such as being respectful, patriotic citizens, with the ability to raise a child in decent living conditions. Peasant and artisan families were preferred. Certain asylums like the one in Timișoara had difficulties in finding enough suitable Hungarian villages for colonies, therefore the existing ones were overcrowded. The Cluj asylum was also limited in its geographical expansion and its colonies were also scattered in the nearby Hungarian villages. The state children and their foster parents were regularly supervised by colony doctors, later colony supervisors, and once a year the head doctor of the institution. Colony supervisors were generally women, who received special training organised by the asylum. The first colony inspector was trained and employed in 1906 by the initiative of Sándor Szana, the director of the Timișoara asylum. In a few years the training of colony supervisors became regular and they were employed in every asylum of the country.

There was a very big variety among the clientele of the asylum. A child could be declared abandoned by the Guardianship Authority, if he or she was a foundling or could not be properly raised by their parent(s), relatives, or any welfare institution. This offered parents in deep poverty the possibility to put their children in state care until they remediated the cause of abandonment. Widows and widowers also sought help in the asylum, if they were unable to tend for their children and work at the same time. There were also children who required special care, such as the physically disabled or the mentally ill. The largest group however consisted of illegitimate children of housemaids and unwed mothers: women in this situation either did not have the possibility to raise their children or wanted to dispose of their “shame,” and thus preferred to admit their offspring to the institution. For example, in the Cluj asylum 40.5% of the mothers were housemaids. According to the national statistics in 1906, 54.86% of the newly admitted children were illegitimate.

The survival of infants represented the greatest concern for the director physicians of the asylums. Infants were the most fragile group of children, who had the highest rates of mortality. Breastmilk was the best and the sole proper nutrition for infants. As a result of inappropriate feeding methods (i. e., unhygienically prepared animal milk, other wheat-based puree substitutes common among the population), infants had a high risk of dying from gastro-intestinal diseases. The state asylums endeavoured to keep the mother and the infant together for the breastfeeding period in order to raise their survival chances. Three methods were used for placing infants: 1. to the mother (if she had stable accommodation), 2. placed together with the mother to a foster family, and as a last resort, 3. to a wet nurse. Certain asylums (Oradea and Timișoara) had higher rates of keeping the infants together with the mother for the breastfeeding period. The Cluj

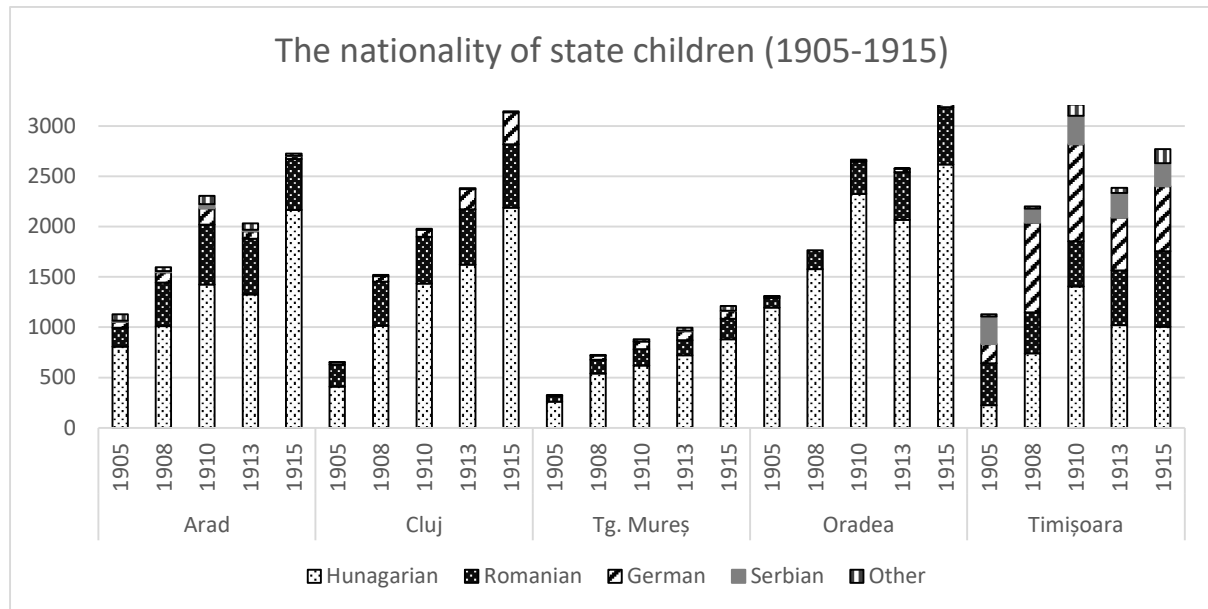
asylum benefited from a stable group of women in its surroundings who accepted to wet nurse abandoned children. The table below shows that infants breastfed by their own mother had the highest rates of survival.



In contrast with the attempt to keep infants together with their mother for the breastfeeding period. After weaning, if left in state care children were separated from their mothers/natural family and placed with foster parents. This rule was strictly followed. While infancy was about survival, childhood was about blending into a chosen and supposedly ideal foster family. The image of the ideal foster mother was depicted in the diploma of the good foster parent, which is packed with political symbols and reflects the perspective of the state. In this image the Hungarian mother is blessed by the symbolic representation of Hungary with the Holy Crown on her head, for raising the children of the state. In this aspect children were objectified, considered as a human capital of would-be-patriots: they were expected to be raised as Hungarians. Other sources however show a more pragmatic picture of foster parents, who were primarily preoccupied with the physical necessities of child raising, rather than offering a national education. As a result of the exclusively Hungarian colony-system where abandoned children were raised, the process of acculturation of the non-Hungarian proteges took place naturally, without any special effort on the part of the foster parents.

There was an exception worth mentioning regarding the religious education of the abandoned Jewish children. The Jewish community was culturally associated with Hungarians, but abandoned children were often placed to Christian families. From 1909 the National Israelite

Patronage Association intervened in replacing the abandoned Jewish children from Christian families to Jewish foster families. Noting that the replacement of Jewish children did not interfere with the Hungarian upbringing of the proteges, the association successfully collaborated with the asylum and adapted to the regulations.



The table above indicates the nationality of the children in state care. It reveals that the national proportions of the general population in each region is not reflected in the proportions of the children in state care. The Romanian community was underrepresented among the protected children, whereas in many regions Romanians were the dominant nationality in the countryside (especially in the mountains except the Székely lands). Most state children were Hungarian, which can be explained by their urban provenance. Infant abandonment was characteristic to big urban centres, where the population was predominantly Hungarian. This way the traditional Romanian communities were less affected by the Magyarization through state children's asylums. This way however they were left out of its benefits too, like the spreading of hygienic knowledge about infant care.

Those of another nationality who had socialized in a Hungarian community during childhood unquestionably became Hungarian. However, the total number of denationalized children is impossible to estimate because above half of the children admitted into state care did not spend their entire childhood with foster parents, but many were reclaimed by their natural family. About 24% were retrieved within a year spent in state protection. A lot of infants were retrieved by their mother right after weaning. Many parents admitted their child to the asylum with the intention of reuniting as soon as their financial situation had been stabilized. Integration



into the foster family was not always successful: for example, due to the great trouble, investments, and intensive national propaganda, the (abandoned) Székely children brought back to Transylvania from Romania did not integrate in the new families as activists had expected. Many went back to their parent(s) in Romania.

Children's voices are rarely captured in the sources. Some aspects of their living conditions in the foster family can only be reconstructed through the narratives of the colony supervisors and the director physicians. Most foster parents were "relatively unobjectionable," who provided mainly the physical needs of the fosterlings, like a temporary housing and food. As any other peasant or craftsman's child, the fosterling also attended school (this was strictly controlled), and worked around the household. There were outrageous examples too of physical abuse, bad treatment or neglect, and some foster parents were denied of ever receiving state children. Older children worked as apprentices or agricultural labourers, while girls were implicated in household chores.

The newspapers and literary fiction often give a hint on the identity of abandoned children. Some of them received a new (often ridiculous) name which often reminded the child of his or her abandoned status, like in the story of "Gyula Nothing." Although the provenance of most children was known, these cases rouse journalists' interest and used it to picture the vulnerability of abandoned children. Clothing also shaped children's identity. The uniform-like garments provided by the asylum stigmatized them in the community, and their abandoned status was publicly visible. State asylums encouraged purchasing local clothing which facilitated the integration of state children into the community. Contemporary photos captured the state children dressed up in (festive) Hungarian national costume from the Călata/Kalotaszeg region (Transylvania) which were displayed in the newspaper or the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden (1911). These photos represented the ideal homes the state offered for the abandoned children.

From 1907 state protection was extended to "morally abandoned" children too. According to Ordinance 60 000/1907 children exposed to moral deprivation in their environment also had the right for state care and were admitted to the asylum. These teenagers needed special education that the asylums were not prepared to handle. As a result, private associations like the National Child Protection League established specialized institutions for older children with behavioural problems. Great emphasis was placed in finding the adequate placement and education for them. New legislations enabled the emergence of patronage associations specializing in the supervision of delinquent youth but also embraced abandonment cases too. In

the narratives of these new private associations the national education received great importance as well.

As the infant welfare movement gained momentum throughout Europe, state children's asylums were criticised for not significantly improving the general infant mortality rate in a decade. Asylums were initially established for the urgent matter of infant abandonment and marginalised children. A new society was established by the support of the state and local authorities: the Stefánia Association for the Protection of Mothers and Infants to assist the general infant population. Its story is not about abandoned infants anymore but about infant protection activists, and the visiting nurses. They have however strongly collaborated with the state asylums. In Oradea/Nagyvárad the local Stefánia office was organised by Menyhért Edelman, the director-physician of the local state asylum. The local Stefánia offices were organized during the First World War, and their momentum halted on the regions annexed to Romania: they were reorganized, incorporated into other institutions, or became a minority association.

After 1918 the Romanian state inherited five of the Hungarian state asylums. In the epilogue I discuss the importance of their legacy, their reorganization and public reception. These institutions were the most efficient child welfare institutions in the new country, which doubled with a past of Magyarization condemned by the Romanian society. Despite the denationalizing activity associated with the institution, the Romanian medical community had recognized their efficiency and adjusted them to the needs of the Romanian population. In the first years the new Romanian administration tried to reverse Magyarization and reintroduce children into Romanian communities by re-placing them to Romanian foster parents. Alongside children of Romanian origins, others too were placed to Romanian families. Many state children were subjected to denationalization multiple times. The asylum faced many challenges in finding Romanian foster parents, therefore they still employed Hungarian foster parents for many years, especially for placing infants.

The state children's asylums were a state of the art institution in dualist Hungary, appreciated by contemporaries. They were founded to support abandoned infants and children. Through the method of foster care and the selection of colonies, all abandoned children grew up in a Hungarian environment. The number of children estranged from their nationality of origin is impossible to estimate because of the high mobility of protected children, and the plasticity of national identity in case of children experiencing different cultures during childhood. Despite the patriotic phrases in the public discourses, the director-physicians of the studied state children's

asylums were primarily physicians, endeavouring to save as many infants as possible. In my thesis I intended to highlight this duality.