

## “The Most Important Thing Is That a New Society Can Come Into Being”

*Anna Kéthly (1889–1976), a Stubborn and Stalwart Fighter in the Struggle for Democratic Socialism, Women’s Rights, and Trade Union Rights*

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### Abstract

This chapter focuses on the life and fate of the Hungarian politician Anna Kéthly (1889–1976), who was also known as a feminist and labour activist. Covering almost sixty years of history, from the late 1910s to the mid-1970s, it focuses on Kéthly’s contributions to the struggle for social democracy, women’s rights, and workers’ rights in Hungary, relying on Kéthly’s published correspondence, as well as some unpublished writings analyzed here for the first time. Kéthly’s militant vocabulary and her biblical metaphors are striking in their longevity—from her opposition to the authoritarian Horthy regime as a member of the Hungarian Parliament during the interwar period, to the opposition to the communist regime she pursued in exile after 1956. Kéthly self-identified as a social democrat as well a trade unionist. Indeed, the chapter concludes that her labour activism during the time she lived abroad was quite original and went far beyond her political activism in Hungary, which has often been the focus of scholarly attention. Kéthly continuously focused on the rights and life circumstances of the Hungarian working class under communism. She was also concerned with feminism and feminist activism, albeit more discreetly, and persistently advocated for concrete solutions to the unequal relations between men and women.

### Keywords

Anna Kéthly – Hungarian Association of Private Clerks (Magyarországi Magántisztviselők Országos Szövetsége, HAPC) – Hungarian feminism – Hungarians in exile – Hungary – International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICTU) – opposition to communism – social democratic women – woman activist

Anna Kéthly was a twentieth-century Hungarian politician and trade unionist. Although she was a well-known figure in Hungary for almost sixty years, she seems to have disappeared almost entirely from national memory, save for a statue erected in her honor in 2015. Despite her relative obscurity in the popular imagination, the historiography of Anna Kéthly's life and work is quite large and has been produced mainly by independent researchers.<sup>1</sup> However, while there are many works that cover select parts of her life or discuss her in passing,<sup>2</sup> there is no up-to-date biography of her life and work. Moreover, there is very little published material on her role as a union activist before and after World War Two. Fortunately, archival sources exist which allow for an exploration of Kéthly's links with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), an anticommunist international trade union founded on 7 December 1949 that supported her through a solidarity fund until her death in 1976.<sup>3</sup> Within the ICFTU, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) was very powerful. Kéthly was in particularly close contact with the chief of its department of international affairs, Jay Lovestone.<sup>4</sup>

Born in 1889, Kéthly was a member of Hungarian parliament in 1922 and held a prominent position in the lower tier of Hungarian politics during the interwar period, moving into the upper echelons between 1945 and 1948, before she was imprisoned from 1950 to 1954. She then went into exile after 1956 as a result of her important role during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.<sup>5</sup> She settled in Belgium, where she died in 1976 at the age of eighty-seven. During her

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1 I will mention the work of the archivist and historian Erzsébet Strassenreiter, who devoted her life to collecting documents on Kéthly, beginning in the communist period and continuing thereafter. This "singular couple" could be the subject of their own paper. The works of the independent scholars Zsuzsanna Kádár, mainly about Kéthly's years in prison (1950–1954), and Csaba Loppert's work concerning her involvement in the uprising of 1956 are also noteworthy. Librarian Rita Klem focused on the eve of Kéthly's political career; historian Claudia Papp on the relationships between Kéthly and non-socialist movements; and professor of gender studies Andrea Pető has written about the role of Kéthly within the women's movement. Last, but not least, archivist and historian Mihály Zichy wrote about Kéthly's years in parliament and also collected and published part of her correspondence. Kádár 2017; Loppert 2017; Strassenreiter 2011; Klem 2004; Papp 2004; Zichy 2004; Pető 2003.

2 There is no separate entry for Anna Kéthly in the standard reference volume on Central European feminism: De Haan, Daskalova, and Loutfi 2006.

3 The ICFTU, founded in 1945 and separated from the WFTU in 1949, is a transnational trade union organization that brought together many non-communist unions around the world during the Cold War.

4 Morgan 1999.

5 On Anna Kéthly and the social democrats during the entire post-1956 period, see Loppert 2017.

twenty years in exile, she was the most prominent figure of the Hungarian radical democratic opposition to the communist regime up until her death, and she was known for her staunch refusal to compromise and her open distrust of the government's actions, which she regarded as manipulations.

This chapter focuses on three dimensions that defined her public life: first, her unwavering loyalty to social democracy (with Marxist foundations, moreover); second, her commitment to women's struggles for equality and her close and friendly relationships with the feminist movement; and third, her trade unionism as the (co)-leader of the Hungarian Association of Private Clerks (*Magyarországi Magántisztviselők Országos Szövetsége, HAPC*)<sup>6</sup> before World War Two and as a beneficiary of the ICFTU Solidarity Fund after 1956.<sup>7</sup> However, her political trajectory was far from straight, marked as it was by reversals and divergences.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as historian Françoise Thébaud points out with regard to historical writing on feminist activists:

In studying the personal life, the biographer of course is looking for a coherence of life between the ideas that are put forward and practical actions, but he tries also to understand the changing configurations of identities and multifaceted commitments. For these women, there is always the question what the most important struggle is at a given time.<sup>9</sup>

This insight is particularly useful when discussing Kéthly, whose life was ruptured by the establishment of a communist regime in Hungary after 1948. I will also show that upheavals in her political life were closely connected to those of Hungary as a whole and led her to alter to her political agenda. Kéthly's activism evolved from a struggle for the rights of women's activists within the Social Democratic Party of Hungary (*Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, SDPH*) and for working women in the relatively conservative society of the Horthy era (1920–1944) to a universal commitment to anticommunism between 1948 and 1976.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, she continued to socialize with women of the Socialist International and other non-governmental organizations.

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6 See Bódy 2001, 108 on the composition of the social group of private employees (mostly commercial assistants, industrial assistants, nurses, hotel employees, and janitors).

7 Boxer 2007.

8 Dosse 2005.

9 Thébaud 2010, 40. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

10 Admiral Miklós Horthy became the Regent of Hungary following the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and the creation of an independent Hungarian state. The period between 1920 and 1944 is generally referred to as the Horthy era in Hungary.

Nevertheless, in spite of her exceptional career and the work she had to do to constitute herself as a political subject in a world dominated by men, this chapter critically analyzes her activist trajectory and political thinking. For example, it will demonstrate that she was motivated by ideology when she openly opposed the educational policy of Count Kuno Klebelsberg, the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs of the Bethlen government from 1922 to 1926. Notable is also her lack of serious analysis of the political regimes she fought. It is quite astonishing for a Marxist to equate the Kádár regime with the Egyptian dynasties of antiquity and to speak of “pharaohs” ruling over “slaves.”<sup>11</sup> I will therefore point out blind spots in her thinking.

## 1 Kéthly as a Committed Social Democrat

### 1.1 *Childhood, Youth, and Initial Contact with Politics*

Anna Kéthly was born into a working-class family in a suburb of Budapest. Her father was an itinerant labourer, who worked on train or tramway construction sites and moved around the Habsburg Empire looking for work. Her mother was a housewife born in Somogy county in southwestern Hungary, one of the poorest regions in the country at the time. She birthed fourteen children, of whom five died young. Kéthly’s early political education is a bit mysterious, although her father was a member of the SDPH. She herself gave several complementary, but not contradictory, versions of her first contact with socialism. In a speech in Zurich at the Socialist International’s commemoration of her eightieth birthday, she emphasized her curiosity as a child, which eventually drew her to a funny character living in a shanty in front of her suburban house. She recounted that every evening, small groups of workers visited him to listen to speeches about socialism.<sup>12</sup> One evening, her curiosity drove her toward the socialist’s shack, where she heard the following statement: “A socialist is a living torch, blessed are those who, at the end of their lives, can say that they brought light to many people.” She did not actually understand what he was saying at first, but she thought of this prophet over and over again when she encountered injustice and impoverished children.<sup>13</sup> The moral/ethical part of the socialism of her childhood probably also affected this girl, who was also imbued with Christian imagery.

11 Kéthly 1961b, 1.

12 “Kéthly Anna felszólalása a születésnapjára rendezett ünnepen” [Speech of Anna Kéthly at her birthday party], Zürich, 15 November 1969, in Kéthly 2007, 51.

13 Kéthly 2007, 51.

In an article published in the emigrant newspaper she edited from 1957 to 1963—the *Népszava London* (*Voice of the People London*), addressed more fully below—she told a different story. She recalled standing on the pavement of Budapest in 1896 with her grandmother, watching two collective demonstrations: the Millennium<sup>14</sup> parade with aristocrats in beautiful costumes (*díszmagyar*) that she admired, and then a May Day parade organized by the SDPH, in which a wide range of craftsmen including tailors, carpenters, printers, and industrial workers participated. In her mind, this working-class memory complemented—even completed—the national memory she had also witnessed in the Millennium celebrations.<sup>15</sup> In a third recollection, she took part in a political meeting with Dezső Bokányi, one of the party’s best speakers, in May 1903, and this made a strong impression on her.<sup>16</sup>

Her initial commitment to social democracy was based on impressions, emotions, and meetings, and only thereafter expanded through reading and her participation in activities organized by the HAPC<sup>17</sup> and women’s associations around 1919. Although she is thought to have officially entered the local section of the Budapest social democratic party in 1917, at the age of twenty-eight,<sup>18</sup> the scant evidence related to her earliest public activities<sup>19</sup> do not indicate any “purely political activities” before 1921. From 1919 to 1921, she was a social activist committed to democracy and pacifism. She feared the type of political violence perpetrated by the red activists during the short-lived the Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919) and supported by Béla Kun’s councils, which led her away from communism for good, even if she seems to have been sensitive to the patriotism undergirding the commitment of some of her comrades in the Hungarian Red Army.<sup>20</sup>

14 Expression used to define the millennial anniversary of the settlement of so-called Magyar tribes along the Danubian basin.

15 Kéthly 1958a.

16 Mentioned in the interview with her friend Zseni Várnai. Kéthly 1946a, 18. About political life in Hungary from the Austrian Empire to the Second World War, see Janos 1982.

17 Note that Hungarian social democracy, similar to the German or Austrian model, was based on the symbiosis of party and trade unions so that, at least until the First World War, unionization was the main (and tolerated by the authorities) form of party membership. See Lux 2008.

18 Strassenreiter 2011, 12.

19 Müller 1964, 368.

20 Letter from Anna Kéthly to Béla Király, 23 March 1960, in Kéthly 2007, 272–273.

### 1.2 *On the Public Stage*

Anna Kéthly officially came onto the public stage in 1921, during the SDPH's traditional May Day meeting, which preceded the annual parade. She was actually nominated to be the party registrar by Mrs. Müller, the head of the women's association of the party, who wanted Kéthly's appointment to demonstrate the party's commitment to equality between men and women. Kéthly was immediately noticed by both those social democrats who remained in the country and those who had gone into exile because of political repression, and she soon became a public figure. Her charisma helped party functionaries explain her accelerated rise within the party to the point of becoming a candidate in the third position on the list of the first electoral district of Budapest (Buda) during the national elections of 1922. Two candidates were elected, but the second was also elected in a provincial district and chose to represent it instead. Kéthly took her place, becoming the youngest member of Parliament and the second woman elected to serve in the body.<sup>21</sup> During her long parliamentary career, she spoke out on concrete social issues (workers' rights, public education policy, the rights of widows and orphans) mostly without explicitly connecting these issues to the general political demands of the Social Democratic Party; she relegated these discussions to her articles in the partisan press, both the mass-market daily *Népszava* (*Voice of the People*) or more theoretical periodicals such as *Szocializmus* (*Socialism*).

She sometimes followed a very narrow ideological line in her discussion of issues. Concerning public education, Kéthly, as a member of the education committee, addressed Parliament when bills concerned this field, such as in a speech given on February 10, 1926 about the plan to construct rural schools presented by the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Count Kuno Klebelsberg. This particularly ambitious project envisaged a complex system of financing school construction through revenue collected from landowners and taxpayers. City councils were to collect these various contributions and pass them on to contractors. In this case, Kéthly had some difficulty arguing against the project, which required rural elites to contribute and aimed to eliminate rural illiteracy. In the opening of her parliamentary speech, she recognized that the project was a "grand design" but then denounced the methods of its implementation with unconvincing arguments: on the one hand, local financing risked placing the future schools under the control of local notables; on the other hand, there was a question concerning the lingering religious orientation or schools that contradicted what the French would call *laïcité*. "We

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21 The first was a nun, Margit Schlachta, elected in 1920.

socialists know only state and public schools, and we are enemies of denominational education.” In short, under the pretext of unreachable goals, she and her party refused to vote in favor of quite progressive law.<sup>22</sup>

Kéthly never changed her *credo*, her fundamental political orientation, during her long political life. She was and remained a Social Democrat, whose main ideas were directly rooted in the experience of World War One and its chaotic and bloody aftermath in Hungary. She always maintained the hope of a socialist society achieved through democracy. This was true during the Horthy period, the early postwar years (1944–1948), the years of repression and imprisonment (1948–1956), her “emergence from nothingness”<sup>23</sup> in 1956, and her two decades in exile (1956–1976). Along with many of those she corresponded with during her exile, she looked back on history at the end of her life, articulating her own definition of socialism and the consistency of her Marxist convictions: “Without ideology, an effective workers’ movement is not possible, people must follow concrete and precise ideas, we must think within the framework of a system of clear ideas, and not from vague generalities such as ‘humanism,’ ‘democracy.’ For my part, I reject the view that Marxism is no longer relevant.”<sup>24</sup>

From a Marxist perspective, she condemned the emerging economic relations between West and East through *detente*. For example, in 1965, in a letter to her secretary Ágnes Martony, she described as shameful the economic agreement signed between the (Fried.) Krupp AG and the Hungarian government related to the latter supplying industrial buildings and a labour force, considering it an exploitation of Hungarian productive forces organized by the communist dictatorship in the service of German capitalists.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Kéthly acknowledged the difficulty of pursuing the socialist ideal in so far as man is not omnipotent, but she highlighted the need to try: “We poor people on earth cannot create in such a way that we do not come into contact with the dirt of everyday life, [we can] only rebuke those who look down from the ivory tower at the bustling crowd below.”<sup>26</sup> Between 1971 and 1973, when she was more than eighty years old, she became the prime mover behind a project known as the Alternative.

22 See *Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója 1927*, passim, sitting of 10 February 1926.

23 Kéthly 1956.

24 Letter from Anna Kéthly to Vilmos Vass, 31 July 1972, in Kéthly 2011, 202.

25 Letter from Anna Kéthly to Ágnes Martony, 18 March 1965, in Kéthly 2007, 301.

26 Letter from Anna Kéthly to István Szabó, 18 May 1959, in Kéthly 2007, 36.

### 1.3 *The Alternative*

The Alternative refers to a set of proposals the Hungarian Social Democratic Party-in-exile developed under Kéthly's leadership in the early 1970s. These proposals were summarized in a thirty-page document presented at a meeting of the Hungarian Social Democrats-in-exile held in Vienna in June 1973 in the presence of delegates from the Socialist International. These proposals included a reaffirmation of the Marxist identity of the party, the desire to establish a neutral Hungary and to experiment with new forms of democracy based on the experiences of the workers' councils that emerged during the Revolution of 1956, and, finally, it called for the reconciliation of social progress and the market economy.<sup>27</sup>

The famous Hungarian-born French historian and sociologist Pierre Kende—a former communist who joined the 1956 Revolution, was later exiled to France, and then became a member of the left-wing intellectual opposition to Kádár's regime—told me about the many trips Kéthly made to Paris, when she was already over eighty years old, to meet him in a little café not far from Saint-Germain-des-Prés. He recalled she spoke like a student during the many hours they spent together, working to elaborate a socialism of the possible.<sup>28</sup> Above all, she hoped for “intelligent and humane” changes in a future Hungary liberated from communism.<sup>29</sup>

## 2 Kéthly as a Socialist Feminist

### 2.1 *Facing Horthy's Counter-Revolutionary Power and Changes in Women's Rights*

The changes she likely had in mind when speaking to Pierre Kende necessarily involved women, as the question of their rights was always a major dimension of Kéthly's political thinking. To understand her positions, it is necessary to understand the history of women's suffrage in Hungary. A franchise reform law was passed on 22 November 1918, granting the right to vote to all women aged twenty-four and older (for men, it was twenty-one), who could read and write (a regulation applying only to women), and who had been Hungarian citizens for more than six years. Béla Kun's Soviet Republic lowered the age of political majority to eighteen, but only for working women (and men). After its fall in August 1919, Hungary experienced a particularly intense counterrevolutionary

<sup>27</sup> “Szociáldemokrata Alternatíva-1973” 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Pierre Kende, Malakoff [France], 22 June 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Anna Kéthly to Pierre Kende, 31 October 1973, in Kéthly 2011, 223.



reaction, during which women activists were among the victims of political reprisals and violence.<sup>30</sup> Women's (and men's) right to vote reverted to the age of twenty-four, and women alone had to have completed four years of elementary studies. It was at this time that Kéthly became an activist in the women's branch of the socialist party, which essentially focused on caring for imprisoned women and their children.

The counterrevolutionary regime had its own women's organization, the National Federation of Hungarian Women (Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége, NFHW), founded in January 1919 by the writer Cécile Tormay. This organization aimed to promote a conservative and Christian model of women's roles in society and to fight, in its own sphere, against progressive feminism, which it blamed (along with other things) for Hungary's military defeat and territorial losses.<sup>31</sup> First, the NFHW attacked the Feminists' Association (Feministák Egyesülete, FA), which was created in 1903 by the accountant Rosika Bédy-Schwimmer, who struggled for women's suffrage and ran the journal *A Nő és a Társadalom* (*Woman and Society*), which was concerned with and reported on the everyday lives of women workers. During World War One, Schwimmer was an unwavering pacifist activist, before becoming among the world's first female ambassador (to Switzerland) during the short-lived republican government led by Count Mihály Károlyi between November 1918 and February 1919.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the NFHW targeted the Association of Social Democratic Women, whose leading figure was the young social democratic clerk Mariska Gárdos. In 1905, Gárdos, at the age of barely twenty, gathered crowds of working-class women in one of Budapest's most prestigious places (the Vigadó) to announce the launch of a newspaper for socialist women workers entitled *Nőmunkás* (*Woman Worker*).<sup>33</sup> Gárdos also constantly battled with the male party leadership over the recognition of social democratic women's identity and claims. After a time, she was sidelined because of her strident woman's activism, although she made a big comeback during the Hungarian Soviet Republic of Béla Kun (21 March 1919–1 August 1919). After its collapse, she fled to Austria, paving the way for a more moderate personality like Anna Kéthly to take the lead on working women's issues.

30 Selected testimonies on the repression of women activists in 1919–1920 in Csillag 1981. About the women's movement in Hungary between 1918 and 1923, see Szapor 2017.

31 On the rejection of the values of the FA by the NFHW, see Acsády 2011.

32 On the period before the First World War, see Zimmermann 1999.

33 For more on the political destiny of Bédy Schwimmer and Gárdos, see Zimmermann 1996.

## 2.2 *Early Discussions on Feminist Issues*

In October 1920,<sup>34</sup> a young, and virtually unknown social democratic woman named Anna Kéthly sent an open letter to the Social Democratic Party, which was then published in *Woman Worker*. The letter accused the party's almost all-male leadership of what today would be called *machismo*. She mentioned qualities such as "modesty" and "humility" that party leaders ascribed to women as grounds for a purely theoretical equality, which was certainly written into the party's programs but which in reality amounted to a recognition of women as having a purely decorative role in the party. The letter ended with a call for the mobilization of socialist women that had an undeniably feminist accent: "We women comrades! Let's go ahead and show them that we are not a negligible quantity."<sup>35</sup> The editor-in-chief at the time supported Kéthly's campaign. The editorial from 15 October 1921 demanded the education of women,<sup>36</sup> and the one from 1 December 1921, also signed by Kéthly,<sup>37</sup> sarcastically called on women to maintain their ignorance of public affairs and confine themselves to the kitchen and the education of children in an effort to lampoon attitudes toward women. Kéthly's approach meets Karen Offen's definition of a feminist, providing "women's own formulation of needs, the awareness of the institutionalized, gender-specific discrimination against women group as well as the demand for a change of such ideological concepts or institutions to correct male dominance in culture and society."<sup>38</sup>

Kéthly also knew that in order to have a real impact among her comrades, she needed to justify her demands using socialist ideology. She therefore referred to the Marxist thinker August Bebel to make a case for improving the position of women in public and private life.<sup>39</sup> In 1928, she also wrote a preface to his famous book *Women and Socialism*, which explained the origins men's domination over women in the capitalist system and the domestic sphere.<sup>40</sup> She, finally, convinced Hungarian social democrats, with the help of other activists, to increase the proportion of women engaged in street politics. As a

34 Kéthly 1920, 2.

35 Kéthly was one among many other social democratic women in Europe fighting for the equality of women in labour parties during interwar period. For more on the gender gap in European social democracy during this time, see Gruber and Graves 1998.

36 Kéthly 1921a, 1.

37 Kéthly 1921b, 1.

38 Offen 1988, 152. Concerning socialist feminism, see the seminal paper of Barbara Ehrenreich. Ehrenreich 2005.

39 See Klem 2004, 225. The author speaks about Kéthly opening a political meeting advocating Bebel.

40 Kéthly 1928a.

result of her work, social democrat women managed to hold fifty public meetings separate from male party members during the Budapest electoral campaign of 1930.<sup>41</sup>

Anna Kéthly's electoral campaign—which occurred following the implementation of a new electoral law that further limited women's right to vote by excluding women (but not men) younger than thirty from franchise—provoked comments about her appearance and the female body. A newspaper in Szeged, one of the largest cities of southern Hungary with a rather liberal tradition, made the following remarks about Kéthly: “the creole face, the dark look of her eyes, [...] her calm speech gives her a lot of masculinity.”<sup>42</sup> Her political credibility was linked to her physical appearance, and her unemotional elocution was attributed to a “virile” character. During the campaign, she spoke at many women's meetings and became very popular.<sup>43</sup> Her election to Parliament was certainly noticed, but it did not provoke excessive commentary. Her connection with Margit Slachta, a leading figure of the devotional Catholic women's movement associated with the government party who had been elected the previous term, was nevertheless emphasized, perhaps especially because both women were single and childless. In her public image and in interviews and official declarations, Kéthly minimized her feminist identity and asserted herself as a member of the party. This was the case, for example, in an interview she gave to the most famous liberal newspaper, *Pesti Napló* (*Pest Daily*), during which she declared that she was not a feminist, arguing that feminism would only cure the symptoms of a sick society; rather, she asserted herself as a socialist who wanted to cure society as a whole. For this reason, she declared, “we don't need a special women's policy.”<sup>44</sup>

### 2.3 *Kéthly's Activities in the Hungarian Parliament and the Labour and Socialist International*

A member of Parliament from 1922 to 1948, Kéthly was a tireless defender of working women, widows, and orphans. Throughout this time, she remained dedicated to the protection of the weakest, which explains why she could, in certain cases, ask for the differential treatment of women. In one case, she argued in favor of special labour protections for women workers, asking for a complete prohibition on woman's night work which, if not abolished, could compromise the future of the country. Actually, the question of women's night

41 Papp 2004, 174.

42 Szeged, 1922, 2.

43 Klem 2004, 226.

44 Interview with Anna Kéthly in “Beszélgetés Budapest női képviselőjelölteivel” 1922, 4.

work and, more broadly, women-specific labour regulations, had triggered a major European-wide debate in the interwar period. While the International Labour Organization (ILO) and International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) supported women-specific restrictions on night work, feminists supporting the full legal equality of women, like those involved in the Open Door International (ODI), opposed such measures.<sup>45</sup>

Kéthly also addressed practical considerations related to women's work, which was often harder (and even more poorly paid) than men's. This is the case in her speech from 17 November 1927, in which she characterized women as "slave[s]" who laboured as workers, wives, and mothers. She gave concrete examples of workers in glass and lamp factories, who worked at temperatures between 40 and 45°C (104–113°F) for more than twelve hours a day. She also referred to women workers' health problems and the challenges of childbirth, drawing attention to the ruling classes' prejudices about working-class women's so-called lack of sense of collective responsibility and lack of culture. According to these prejudices "the working woman does not have enough culture to understand" that the period before and after giving birth to a child "doesn't only belong to herself but also to the community [and] that she owes it to the community to take special care of herself during this period." Kéthly rejected such views, arguing that "this is not a question of the culture of the woman worker" but "a severe economic problem" since the woman worker simply was "forced to work" during the pre- and postpartum period.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, she recognized how issues related to the woman question magnified the broader inequalities of capitalist society. During a speech in Parliament on 4 April 1930, Kéthly insisted on respect for the principle of "equal work, equal pay," especially in industries where women workers were the most exploited.<sup>47</sup> She rarely spoke about women's rights in a strictly political sense. Of her more than 300 interventions in Parliament, only one speech from 20 March 1929 took such a stance, defending as it did the right of women to vote in local elections, which at the time was called into question by a bill. She stated that women's right to vote in local elections existed in most European countries.<sup>48</sup>

This allusion to other European countries is typical of Kéthly. Indeed, she had a particularly broad view of political, social, and economic issues and never hesitated to use foreign examples to defend her arguments. She had many regular contacts, in particular women, thanks to the transnational dimensions of

45 Zimmermann 2019, 205.

46 *Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója*, 1927 passim, sitting of 17 November 1927.

47 *Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója* 1927 passim, sitting of 4 April 1930.

48 *Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója* 1927 passim, sitting of 20 March 1929.

her activism.<sup>49</sup> She participated in three Women's Conferences of the Labour and Socialist International between 1925 and 1931 (in Marseilles in 1925, Brussels in 1928, and Vienna in 1931), where she cultivated robust networks, deep bonds of comradeship, and strong friendships, in particular with the Austrian delegate Gabriele Proft and Marion Philips from England. Absolute pacifism, the link between war, fascism, and women's inequality was among the dominant themes of her interventions at these conferences, which were always received with great respect by the audience. On her return to Hungary, she reported on the major themes of the conferences in publications like the *Voice of the People*, *Woman Worker*, or *Socialism*.

#### 2.4 *Kéthly's Relationship with the Feminists' Association (FA)*

Kéthly's activities raise the question: Was she a representative of only her party concerning women's rights, or did she also support the FA? Within the broader European context, this question reveals the supposed cleavages between so-called bourgeois suffragists and revolutionary or left-wing women activists, which has received nuanced treatment by Marilyn Boxer.<sup>50</sup> "Bourgeois" was used pejoratively by Marxist-socialist women like the German activist and politician Clara Zetkin at the beginning of the twentieth century, and this became the orthodox position of the international socialists (and even more so, communists) after the World War One. In Hungary, members of the FA, most of whom were working women such as schoolteachers, post office employees, or clerks themselves, were actively engaged in efforts to secure working women's rights.

Claudia Papp, who has studied the archives of the FA during the interwar period,<sup>51</sup> discovered a close relationship between Kéthly and the FA: her name appears on a register of individual members of the association, on an invitation to a dinner (which attests to her socializing with FA activists),<sup>52</sup> and on invitations to the association's annual congress.<sup>53</sup> Papp also refers to Kéthly's cooperation with the FA on actions related to women's rights<sup>54</sup> both in Hungary and abroad. It is also worth noting that she was scheduled to speak at the tenth

49 On the transnational activism of socialist women in the interwar period, see Ghit 2021.

50 Boxer 2007.

51 Papp 2004.

52 Letter from the Feminists' Association to Anna Kéthly, 10 December 1926, Domestic Correspondence Number 8, Feministák Egyesülete [Feminists' Association], P999, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára [National Archives of Hungary, MNL OL], Budapest, Hungary.

53 Letter from the Feminists' Association to Kéthly, 15 April 1926, Domestic Correspondence Number 8, P999, MNL OL.

54 Papp 2004, 452–453.

Congress of the International Alliance of Women (IAW) held at the Sorbonne in Paris in June 1926, but withdrew at the last minute. Eugenie Meller-Miskolczy, the Corresponding Secretary of the FA attending the congress, paid tribute to Kéthly at the congress, describing her as one of their (FA's) own:

Infinite gratitude and warm admiration for the wonderful work of our member, Miss Anna Kéthly, in our National Assembly. Being a member of the Social Democratic Party, it is quite admirable how she has succeeded in winning the deep respect of all members of the National Assembly. She never fails to make use of every available occasion to speak on behalf of the economically and socially weak and of women and children. Her proposals and beautiful speeches on this subject are so numerous that it is absolutely impossible to quote or enumerate them.<sup>55</sup>

### 2.5 *Total Pacifism*

One of the main struggles shared by Kéthly and the FA was the fight for peace and the refusal to use belligerent methods to challenge the Treaty of Trianon. This militant commitment to peace was very badly received in postwar Hungarian society, where territorial revisionism enjoyed near-total consensus. Kéthly's parliamentary immunity made it possible for her to contribute to and publicize the pacifist cause. For example, together with the FA, she regularly participated in the international summer school for peace (once serving as a lecturer in Lepence, Hungary in 1929) as a member of the transnational network of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). She also expressed her distaste for war in International Socialist Women's forums, in particular at the International Women's Conference in Brussels in 1928, where she expressed absolute opposition to the mobilization of women in times of war. She held that women must refuse to serve even in civil defense structures and campaign for the closure of arms factories. In this vein, she also published a theoretical article in *Socialism* the same year.<sup>56</sup>

As a journalist for the *Woman Worker* starting in 1921, and later as its editor-in-chief between 1926 to 1938, Kéthly could also publish and promote radical propaganda in favor of world peace. As late as 1937, an editorial in the *Woman Worker* reported on the International Women's Peace Conference held in Lucahovice, Czechoslovakia. The general theme was the total opposition to

55 Rapport sur le 10<sup>e</sup> congrès de l'Alliance Internationale pour le suffrage des femmes [Report on the 10th Congress of the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage], Paris 30 May–6 June 1926, 236.

56 Kéthly 1928b.

war—regardless of whether it takes place in Europe or in Asia and involves “white, black or yellow” soldiers—as well as the refusal to distinguish between defensive and offensive warfare; therefore, no particular characterization of the Franco camp (in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939) was given, and the only mention of it related to the fact that Moroccan soldiers were associated with it.<sup>57</sup>

The social democratic press reported rather benevolently on the pacifist agenda of the feminist movements. Nevertheless, an affirmation of political orthodoxy explains the ideological rejection of “feminists” in some articles published in the *Woman Worker*. (Bourgeois) “feminists” were accused of being idealists, offering nothing more than biological justifications for the so-called aggression of men and the so-called pacifism of women. Feminists were also accused of using only congresses and petitions to elevate women’s place in the existing society, whereas socialist women fought alongside men to destroy capitalism and imperialism, which constituted the real reasons for the inferior position of women in society.<sup>58</sup>

After World War Two, Kéthly remained a pacifist activist. She did not pursue women’s politics in the SDPH to the same extent, but she published writings that took stock of the history of the women’s movement. For example, in 1946, she wrote an introduction to a short essay by the Austrian socialist Marianne Pollack in which she placed the women’s movements in a broader political framework from which only the Social Democratic Party emerged as fully legitimate because it fought for a new social order. In contrast, feminist organizations were accused of being only “female-orientated” and advocating for depoliticization.<sup>59</sup> In 1948, she published another essay in the yearbook of the *Voice of the People* in which she again insisted on the link between capitalism, war, and the status of women.<sup>60</sup>

## 2.6 *Kéthly on Women and her Own Public Persona*

Anna Kéthly’s thinking was shaped by number of opinions about women and their roles in society. They must be able to choose who to marry and enjoy an egalitarian relationship afterward; however, they must also be a (good) mother and wife as well as a good housewife; hence, her objection to women who live in luxury and pay employees to educate their children and clean their house.<sup>61</sup>

57 [Unsigned, most probably Anna Kéthly] 1937, front page.

58 Papp 2004, 455.

59 Kéthly 1946b, 3–6.

60 Kéthly 1948, 26.

61 [Unsigned, most probably Anna Kéthly], 1934, front page.

Kéthly clearly criticized certain new patterns of behavior among married women that spread throughout Hungary in the 1920s and 1930s, inspired by the American “flapper” or the French “*garçonne*.” Hungarian historian Balázs Sipos published seminal study on this phenomenon, which revises interpretations that insisted on the purely reactionary character of the interwar period with regard to gender relations. According to Sipos, even in the Christian national atmosphere of the time, some women belonging to the Budapest bourgeoisie (Sipos speaks mainly of women from this milieu) abandoned their homes to go shopping or dancing and entrusted the education of their children to domestic servants.<sup>62</sup>

Kéthly also took up the idea of women’s gender-specific skills, in particular in social policy: “There are things that women understand better, for example social policy.”<sup>63</sup> Finally, she tackled the prejudices of her time. For example, in an article advocating the vocational career, Kéthly argued that professions intended essentially for boys were suitable for girls too. For example, she considered the job of (auto) driver (*gépkocsi vezető*) as legitimate as that of an actor, painter, or artist in general.

The public persona of Kéthly herself was complex. She remained single and childless her entire life, and she exhibited no fear when speaking to entire assemblies of working-class men, as for example, on 8 January 1930, when she greeted construction workers as a delegate of the social democratic parliamentary faction. She was stern and sometimes rude, which is why she gained the respect of her conservative male political opponents. Public opinion said that “there is only one man in the parliament, and it’s a woman.”<sup>64</sup>

However, Kéthly abandoned her somewhat austere appearance when she attended concerts or the theater with friends she met in the social democratic movement. These friendships, some of them lifelong, played a major role in her life.

## 2.7 *The Women’s Agenda after 1948*

After 1948, Kéthly adopted an anticommunist stance, first in Hungary and then in the West after the occupation of her country by the Soviet army in 1956. However, I did not find evidence that she took a special interest in the condition of women in communist Hungary, either in her correspondence or in articles she published in newspapers during her years in exile. The anticommunist struggle overwhelmed all other struggles until her death, even if those

62 Sipos 2019.

63 Kéthly 1930, 7.

64 In the original: “Egyetlen férfi van a parlamentben, és az is nő.”



struggles related to women. In the 1960s and 1970s, Kéthly continued to attend the international conferences of socialist women regularly, but there is no mention of women's liberation movements in the various exile publications for which Kéthly was editor-in-chief or in which she played an important role. She never quoted from the writings of feminist activists either. In terms of her social life, however, she tended to socialize with groups of women, as in 1969, when she celebrated her eightieth birthday among the members of Future-oriented Socialist Women (*Femmes Prévoyantes Socialistes*), a mutualist feminist organization; in a photo from the time, we can see her sharing a modest meal with her Belgian comrades.

Despite this shift in focus, she never stopped thinking about the condition of women. As a unique testimony of her ideas, she wrote a long-form article in 1975, on the occasion of the first International Women's Year, for a literary journal published for exiles in Paris entitled *Irodalmi Újság* (*Literary Newspaper*). In it, she discussed the struggles of social democratic women who fought for the "transformation of society" and the women of the Hungarian feminist movement whose "admirable" figures were more concerned with equality within the existing framework. She ended the article with a call for the equality of women's work and the abolition of the central role of money in conjugal relations.<sup>65</sup>

### 3 A Politician as Labour Activist

Her defense of women's rights was intimately linked to Kéthly's union experience,<sup>66</sup> which preceded it chronologically. She initially joined a union of private employees around 1909, before joining the union of public employees of Kassa (today Košice in Slovakia) in 1916.<sup>67</sup> She was a shorthand typist, probably working as an office clerk in the public sector, and became a permanent trade union official in charge of secretarial work. She was supposed to be "very modest," a quality typically associated with women.<sup>68</sup> She was first mentioned as an official of the private-sector clerks' movement in June 1919, when she traveled

65 Kéthly, "1975-A nők éve" [1975: Women's Year] in Kéthly 1994, 413–414.

66 Strassenreiter 2011, 12.

67 It should be noted here that the beginning of young Kéthly's professional and trade union career remains somewhat obscure. The most detailed source—her "confession" written during her years of imprisonment during the Rákosi regime—remains, at the very least, questionable. This is why in order to give an account of her career, I rely on articles in the press that appeared just after her election to parliament.

68 Szakasits 1922, 94.

to Kassa to assist in the victory of Red Army.<sup>69</sup> Her qualities as a stenographer certainly contributed to her political ascent. After her entrance into politics, she became—once again, rather quickly—one of the most important personalities in the social democratic HAPC.<sup>70</sup>

### 3.1 *Delegate of HAPC in Parliament*

In Parliament, faithful to the directives of the social democratic movement, she behaved as a trade unionist, defending the interests of employees, among others, when the situation arose. She intervened on 3 and 4 November 1923 to protest the prohibition of a congress of the HAPC by police authorities.<sup>71</sup> During her speech on 11 June 1927, she criticized a plan for compulsory governmental health insurance by arguing that the organizations resulting from it would be dependent on the state. Nevertheless, she admitted the legitimacy of a specific fund for employees, which she believed was the result of the union's struggles.<sup>72</sup> On 1 February 1928, she reported on a visit to the town of Gyöngyös, northwest of Budapest, which had suffered a catastrophic fire in 1917. In the Hungarian tradition of working-class sociography,<sup>73</sup> she accurately described the housing market situation in the medium-sized city, which saw the construction of luxury housing but very little social housing after the tragedy. Because of the lack of new and affordable housing, rents were too high for working-class families, and seven or eight individuals were crammed into a small space. Moreover, between fifty and sixty families were evicted, according to Kéthly.<sup>74</sup> She also identified the issues of low wages and increased working hours of employees as subjects of concern.<sup>75</sup> Parliament was a platform to defend the rights of the workers without explicitly connecting demands to socialist ideology. This restrained speech was clearly the result of the Peyer-Bethlen pact, signed in December 1921, which permitted the existence of the social democratic movement in the authoritarian Horthy regime while at the same time limiting its realm of action; in particular, the pact prohibited

69 Molnár 2020, 168.

70 *Magántisztviselő* in Hungarian. This professional category was formed at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the mobilization of various guilds that did not wish to be assimilated into the emerging working class. Paradoxically, it was social democracy, ideologically opposed to anything that interposed itself between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, that contributed to giving this body an identity. See Bódy 2001.

71 Zichy 2004.

72 *Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója* 1927 passim, sitting of 11 June 1927.

73 See Litván 1974.

74 *Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója* 1927 passim, sitting of 1 February 1928.

75 *Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója* 1927 passim, sitting of 6 February 1929.

the *politicization* of the trade unions dependent on the SDPH.<sup>76</sup> This created a situation in which activists, who generally occupied multiple positions in the movement (e.g., party leader, newspaper editor, trade unionist), had to carefully balance their speeches in order to avoid sanctions that could go as far as imprisonment.

### 3.2 *A Cold War Trade Unionist*

Trade unionism does not appear to have been a major element of Kéthly's public life between 1945 and 1948. She was arrested as a so-called rightist social democrat in 1950; was accused of being an English spy due to her transnational contacts in the interwar period; and was imprisoned for four years during the Stalinist era in Hungary. After her release in 1954, she was mainly focused on trying to reconnect with members of the SDPH. Her labour identity returned strategically to the forefront of her politics from the very first days of her exile in the West, insofar as the American branch of the ICFTU, through its representative Jay Lovestone, became her patron, ensuring her passage from Vienna to New York in 1956.<sup>77</sup> Lovestone's letters to Kéthly contain constant coaching, which is further confirmed by Kéthly's calendar between 1956 and 1958, which shows regular appointments with him—up to three times a week.<sup>78</sup> In a letter from 20 May 1959, Lovestone almost demanded she come to a conference of the ILO: "As you know the annual convention of the international labour organization will be meeting very soon at Geneva [...] we are very anxious that you should come to Geneva." A hotel room was even reserved for Kéthly.

During her years in exile in Brussels from 1958 to 1976, she received an annual pension from the ICFTU, whose European branch was based in Brussels, in the amount of 120,000 Belgian Francs in 1971 (around 25,000 Euros in 2022). The ICFTU also financed the émigré newspaper *Voice of the People* (*London*), published from 1957 to 1963, which was supposed to be the newspaper of the free Hungarian trade unions, the existence of which was actually denied by some emigrants.<sup>79</sup> It must be noted that the *Voice of the People* printed in Hungary

76 Károly Peyer was the chief of the social democrats; István Bethlen was the prime minister of Hungary in 1921. Their agreement was initially secret.

77 She was in Vienna attending a convention of the Socialist International when Soviet troops invaded Hungary.

78 See Morgan 1999 and Anna Kéthly's *Diary*, Andor Bölcsföldi papers, Anna Kéthly 469/1747 Manuscripts collections, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár [National Széchényi Library], Budapest, Hungary.

79 Letter from an unknown Hungarian emigrant to Anna Kéthly: "Egy levél amelyre a Minagyasszonyunk és Gyámolítóanyánk Kéthly AnnaMária 'elfelejtett' válaszolni" [A letter to which AnnaMária, our Lady and guardian mother "has forgotten" to answer], Folder

had become the official newspaper of the trade unions when the Communist Party took control in 1948. Kéthly was the editor-in-chief of the London-based *Voice of the People* and made it a high-quality anti-totalitarian paper—i.e., the main goal of which was the end of the communist regime in Hungary—in which many intellectuals, some social democrats, some not, published. She herself wrote the editorials and many articles. It differed substantially from the traditional trade union newspapers of the Horthy era—such as the newspaper of private employees, the *Journal of Private Clerks* (*Magántisztviselők Lapja*), which were essentially confined to the internal workings of the union—in that it had a strong focus on international affairs. Although she continued her commitment to trade unionism and workers' rights, Kéthly was vigorously attacked by the Kádár regime's press organs, which depicted her as a renegade fighting for capitalism.

The condition of the workers in Hungary was nevertheless a regular element in *Voice of the People* (London), as illustrated in an article of 1 June 1958 about the comparison between “The Brussels exhibition and Hungarian reality.”<sup>80</sup> From 1956 to 1959, Kéthly also campaigned to exclude Kádár's Hungary from the ILO and, of course, lost.<sup>81</sup> On 1 May 1961, in an article with an evocative title, she presented Hungarian workers as “real slaves”—comparable to those of the pharaohs in ancient Egypt<sup>82</sup>—of the colonized states of Eastern Europe whose “official unions” were led by civil servants who exploit workers.

She had no illusions about the Western ruling classes' commitment to anti-communism: she thought that big industry would push governments toward moderation and peaceful coexistence, particularly the government of the United States.<sup>83</sup> Until the end of her life, Kéthly received information about the experiences and conditions of Hungarian workers. She maintained that the tragedy of communism was that it was unable to raise living standards and labour conditions of the workers; for example, in the large workers' district of Csepel in the Hungarian capital city Budapest. The state-socialist regime presented Csepel as a model development, but according to Kéthly, “[t]housands

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13, Strassenreiter Erzsébet [Erzsébet Strassenreiter papers] 307, Személyi gyűjtemények, visszaemlékezések [Private collections, Memoirs], Institute of Political History, Budapest, Hungary.

80 Kéthly 1958b, 1.

81 Letter from Anna Kéthly to the Sekers family, 2 September 1959, Kéthly 2007, 158.

82 Kéthly 1961b, 1.

83 See Letter from Anna Kéthly to József Schöller, 23 May 1963, Andor Bölcsföldi papers, Anna Kéthly 469/590, Manuscripts collections, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár [National Széchényi Library], Budapest, Hungary.

of flats are missing, thousands of workers are living in barracks, many machines in the factories are more than fifty years old.”<sup>84</sup>

This type of analysis was quite common in the circles of the democratic left during the Cold War. The main problem was that proponents of this view remained silent on (at least a segment of) the population’s obedience to or, at minimum, non-confrontational stance toward the Kádár regime, which was facilitated by the recognition of a minimal sphere of freedom in the private domain and the economic sphere. Kéthly was not able to produce a proper analysis of the totalitarian phenomenon—defined as a distinctive modernist political phenomenon defined by the absolute control over civil society by the state or a single party—and the dangers even the slightest signs of an open society posed to it. Strikingly, she applied the same language to describe Horthy’s regime and communist totalitarianism. She was trapped in patterns of thought based on a mixture of a somewhat unnuanced Marxism (e.g., the Horthy regime as “fascist or semi-fascist”) and left-wing patriotism/nationalism, as we can see, for example, in an article in *Voice of the People (London)*.<sup>85</sup> Here, she lamented the Hungarian people’s historical oppression and entitled her article after a famous verse from the *National Song (Nemzeti Dal)* written by the poet Sándor Petőfi during the Hungarian Revolution of 1848.

#### 4 Conclusion

Anna Kéthly’s life path was truly unusual for a female politician in Hungary and, more generally, in Central Europe. Born in the Habsburg Empire in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Kéthly was member of the leadership of a socialist feminist organization at the age of thirty, a member of Parliament at thirty-three, and a trade union leader at around the same age. If she failed to reach the highest echelons of power (except briefly after World War One), this had nothing to do with her gender but everything to do with the perpetual minority position of the noncommunist left in twentieth-century Hungary. Her ideological trajectory, despite turns and diversions, remained deeply rooted in her intellectual apprenticeships and youthful experiences, which explain both her limits and her greatness.

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84 Letter from József Schöller to Anna Kéthly, 4 June 1974, Andor Bölcsöldi papers, Anna Kéthly 469/590, Manuscripts collections, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár [National Széchényi Library], Budapest, Hungary.

85 Kéthly 1961a, 1.

Regarding her limits, Kéthly never really engaged in an in-depth critical analysis of the regimes she fought. Informed by Marxist ideas at the very end of World War One, she was part of a mental universe in which an authoritarian regime like that of Regent Miklós Horthy could only be understood as a “reaction” or “(semi)fascism,” that is, a more violent and brutal form of the Bach regime imposed by Austria after the failure of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848.<sup>86</sup> In turn, communism in Hungary, of which she had had a glimpse in 1919, was merely a form of “colonial oppression.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, she saw the Kádár regime as a puppet regime based on Hungarian workers’ exploitation for the benefit of the Russian Empire, now renamed the Soviet Union. In Kéthly’s writings and speeches, she invariably reverted back to images and metaphors based on parables from Egyptian antiquity or the Bible whenever she criticized the authoritarian or totalitarian political system. She sketched elaborate scenarios for the aftermath the regime but never thought about *how* these regimes might collapse.

As to her greatness, her stubborn fidelity to the ideals of her youth *a contrario* explains her constant stance throughout her long life of militancy: She remained an *observer*, directly or indirectly, confronted with many infringements on workers’ rights. Her notes on the condition of workers under the Kádár regime, which were based on information sent to her by correspondents and friends who remained in the country, were perhaps still the most vivid and dynamic part of her existence and her memory. She remained exemplary as a woman *labour activist* until the end of her life, an identity that moved beyond her unwavering commitment to freedom and democracy in her country.

Summing up Kéthly’s activism as it pertained to women workers, it should be remembered that from 1919 on, it was rooted in a singular awareness—both theoretical and practical and nourished by the writings of Rosa Luxemburg—of the exclusively male-dominated power structure within her party. The struggles she waged in the *Voice of the People* and through her cooperation with the FA were aimed at “denaturalizing” male domination and introducing the theme of equality between men and women in Parliament, of which she was a member starting in 1922. After the establishment of the communist regime in 1948, she decided to choose “the most important struggle” of the moment, namely the struggle for freedom. Nevertheless, she remained conscious of gender inequality, and in an article published in 1975, which can be considered her intellectual treatise on gender relations, she advocated for financial

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86 Alexander Bach was a brutal Austrian Minister of the Interior, who repressed Hungary from 1849 to 1859.

87 *Gyarmati elnyomatás* in Hungarian; a term used by Kéthly. Kéthly 1961b, 1.

compensation for women's domestic work, which echoed similar activist efforts by leftist women associated with the women's liberation movement. According to Kéthly, women's struggles are always aimed at improving their condition in the most concrete and effective way possible. In this sense, she undoubtedly can be considered a life-long feminist activist.

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