The history of Hungary in the fifteenth century has been investigated by some of the most prestigious scholars of this century. This article is indebted to the work of these specialists. The complex interlocking web of high politics and the ideals of statecraft, the interwoven fortunes of adjacent realms in Central Europe — Bohemia, Austria, Poland, and Hungary — provide the broader context for the events analyzed here. The focus of this essay, however, is chronologically narrow, specifically the period from October 27, 1439 to May 15, 1440. The subject, too, is limited to the actions, motives, and character of two women of contrasting talents and status. Elizabeth of Luxemburg, queen of Hungary and Bohemia, empress of Germany, duchess of Austria, and margravine of Moravia, was the last scion of a princely dynasty that since the early years of the fourteenth century had participated in shaping the political world of Europe. Her attendant and some time confidante, Helene Kottanerin, was the daughter of a member of the Viennese lesser nobility. At court, she functioned primarily as nurse-governess to the four-year old princess Elizabeth, the queen’s second child. Helene Kottanerin was a conscientious and respectable matron who, like so many other medieval women of her station, might otherwise have been consigned to oblivion had the events of 1439-1440 not thrust her to prominence and, importantly, had she not also left an autobiographical memoir.

For Elizabeth of Luxemburg, the historian must rely on contemporary official documents and narrative chronicles written by others after the events they describe. For Helene Kottanerin, who is an invaluable source for the study of her mistress, the historian has the benefit of a first person account set down only a decade or so after the events. Her Denkwürdigkeiten constitute the first literary contribution in the German language by any

1. Among the leading specialists in this century are György Bónis, Pál Engel, Erik Fügedi, András Kubinyi, Elemér Mályusz, and especially János M. Bak whose König-tum und Stände in Ungarn im 14.-16. Jahrhundert (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1973) has been both guide and inspiration for this essay.
woman and for that reason alone, ought to be better known.\(^2\) Hers is an authentic voice, vital and direct.

**Succession Crisis Averted**

When Sigismund of Luxemburg died in Moravia in December 1437, an eventful fifty-year reign as king of Hungary came to an end. As a prudent monarch — at least in this matter — Sigismund many years earlier had provided for the orderly transfer of royal authority after his death.\(^3\) Within two years of the birth of his only child in 1409, he betrothed his daughter Elizabeth of Luxemburg to Duke Albert of Habsburg and followed this in 1421 with a festive wedding ceremony in the New Palace (*Friss Palota*) in Buda.\(^4\) In subsequent years, Sigismund compelled the Hungarian magnates to acknowledge Albert and Elizabeth as his heirs and even entertained the idea that Elizabeth should be crowned in his lifetime.\(^5\) Sigismund himself had acquired the royal dignity through the successive processes of marriage, election and coronation. The arrangements he made for Albert and Elizabeth appear to replicate his own experience.

King Sigismund's body was brought back to Hungary, "not without copious weeping" according to one source,\(^6\) where it was interred at Nagyvárad next to the shrine of St. Ladislas.\(^7\) The symbolism here is significant. The eleventh-century Árpád king Ladislas I was one of the Hungarian "Holy Kings." He in particular had become the center of a late medieval chivalric cult no doubt because his twelfth-century *legenda* erroneously credits him


\(^4\) The date of the marriage is variously given as 1421 or 1422. Erik Fügedi, *Castle and Society in Medieval Hungary (1000-1437)* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986), p. 130, suggests the reason for the completion of the New Palace at Buda was that the old palace had proved inadequate for the celebration of Elizabeth's and Albert's betrothal ceremony in 1411.


\(^7\) Although not the usual royal necropolis, Nagyvárad was the burial site of King Stephen II (1116-1131) and, significantly, of Sigismund's first wife Queen Mary (1382-1395).