

Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

by
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Middle-class careers in 19th - and 20th -century Debrecen

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I. The topic of the dissertation

The dissertation intends to present the historical material available on renowned rising middle-class families of Debrecen, members of which had outstanding careers from some point of view. This study in career history is suitable for considering individuals from diverse aspects, who were well-known members of the local society, and not primarily due to their family background or ancestry. The most interesting among them are those who became both members of the capitalist upper middle class and leading personalities of the local society at the same time. Therefore, people are considered who were not only leading figures of the economy but also of society, since a real career is associated with those primarily whose activity was influential in both spheres of life.

The chosen topic is the comparative analysis of careers emerging in the modern middle classes of Debrecen, which seems a suitable method for presenting the society of the city through the careers of individuals, thereby helping us better understand the human aspects of the era. The final objective of the research project is to demonstrate the important and sometimes also contradictory role that members of this group played in the economic and social transformation of the city and its environment, in modernization. A more precise and better understanding of this role can be obtained by way of micro-historical analyses placed in the context of the historical processes of the city, as well as by comparisons with examples from other market centers of the country (including the duality of Debrecen and Nagyvárad/Oradea as regional centers). The examination of the local history of enterprises can facilitate the exploration of these processes. The study of the local entrepreneurial history can facilitate the exploration of these processes, since the individual businesses may represent different directions of development of the regional economic and social development.

In the selection of the personalities and families examined, the following considerations were guiding: the individual had to have been a member of the economic and/or social leading circles, and played a central role in some area of life in the community. At the same time, major differences were found among the chosen individuals: they (or their families) settled in the city at different times, and they also came from diverse social layers, nationalities and religious denominations. Combined with the opportunities offered by Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the development in the city between the two world wars, this made the assumption of different roles possible in society and economy. The realized part of these possibilities serves as the basis of the comparisons.

As can be seen from the above, the dissertation sets out to examine the ways the selected personalities and families gained ground economically, their opportunities developed, their roles and positions in the regional economic structure changed, as well as the actual results they achieved during their

careers. The influential personalities directly in contact with the leading economic and political elite, as well as the leading social and cultural groups of the local/regional society, constituted the primary subject of this investigation. The various groups of occupations were not dealt with extensively; however, the characteristic features of the social development of the city in the capitalist era were examined, in comparison with general trends across the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In this process, mainly those elements were focused on that are somehow associated with the leading circles.

The structure of the dissertation, after the introduction, consists of two separate parts. In the introduction, an attempt was made to define the concepts of the categories and processes related to the era and the topic, by way of a description and evaluation of the various theories available on these. Next, the changes in the middle-class society of the era were outlined in the manner described above. The chronologically arranged chapters of the first unit, based on original research, discuss the history of some outstanding members of the capitalist middle classes in Debrecen, including their historic circumstances and opportunities. The second larger unit then surveys the history of enterprises (companies) in Debrecen, highlighting the level of organization of these businesses. These may provide some basis and samples for comparisons with the tendencies examined, in terms of the fundamental nature and changes in attitudinal, economic, intellectual-educational and mobility factors of success, as well as the importance of individual traits contributing to the same. The aim was to provide the most comprehensive and accurate representation of the activities, environment and circumstances of the above mentioned group.

In connection with the above objective, it was necessary to examine the economic and social mobility of the individuals concerned, as well as their methods and opportunities for the accumulation of capital, and the characteristic features of their careers. This was problematic because of the extensive nature and the very circumstances of the social, political, economic and family relationships, although the relatively closed nature of the social urban groups also made it easier to accurately survey them. This was also valid for the members of the economic, social and intellectual-cultural elite. Therefore, the fundamental method was the specific examination and discussion of the processes of rising in case of individuals and families, followed by comparisons with other examples (including each other). This could then provide an answer to the questions: what factors can we generalize on in connection with their stories, and can these be identified as factors associated with the attitudes of a successful middle-class citizen and universally accepted as characteristic? The question was also raised whether this was manifested as a conscious form of attitude, as a strategy, on their part, or it was determined by historic necessities. Also, it was examined which individual traits of the personalities examined contributed to the recognition and successful utilization of their opportunities.

II. Sources and methods

The factors mentioned above that are decisive in their diversity can be best described and compared with the methods of micro-historiography within the frameworks of narrative municipal history-writing and the history of mentality. The method may raise many problems, since its very definition was the subject of many debates in the past. The sources are also often incompatible, since different types of sources are available (or dominated) in the archives, and the generally used conceptual categories are also difficult to use when comparing individuals in the diverse regions and regional centers and their achievements. Yet, this method was found as the most suitable for exploring and demonstrating the general features and differences investigated, because they yield a more detailed and more unified body of knowledge on the issue at hand.

The dissertation is based mainly on archival sources, including family and personal documents, family and official correspondence, diaries, accounting books, inventories of estates and contemporary newspaper articles in the first unit. The second unit also uses similar sources including documents from company courts, balance and profit statements of businesses, minutes of the meetings of shareholders or boards of directors, and company correspondence. The introduction relies on some texts discussing and analyzing primary sources. This provided an opportunity for comparisons to be made, but at the same time major problems were generally encountered by the fragmentary nature or absence of secondary sources, central (and local) statistics (randomly surviving taxpayers' lists, compasses, tax return forms, credit information records and other relevant lists), which could have improved the accuracy and overall authenticity of the data. All this resulted in a diverse and complex base of sources, in which different types of sources dominated for the careers of the examined individuals, also with many gaps in, or only scarce references to, certain sources.

For the analysis of the historical sources and the exploration of the socio-theoretical circumstances, various groups of literature had to be surveyed. General works discussing the history of the capitalist upper middle classes served as the starting point. Previous scholarship on the antecedents of the period examined provided important assistance in the specific points of connections at the beginning of the era. Works by Hungarian and foreign authors expanding the horizons of the topic should be mentioned as contributing to a better understanding of the narrower topic of the above research project. Monographs on the history of city and yearbooks of public collections were also an excellent source for gaining knowledge on the local circumstances, and proved indispensable in surveying the immediate social and economic environment accurately and in details.

III. The results of the dissertation

The answers found in response to the questions raised in connection with the dissertation topic could be summarized as follows:

- 1) The introduction defining the basic concepts and summarizing the historical circumstances provides a comprehensive overview of the status of the group examined, in the context of the Monarchy, Hungary and the city of Debrecen, on the basis of notions derived from the most reliable opinions. The majority of the available collections on family and industrial history are utilized here as primary sources.
- 2) On the basis of the results of the research, the middle-class personalities and their careers may be characterized and categorized into several types. These are primarily determined by their attitude to their acquired wealth and their activities for generating additional income, which is also related to their diverse opportunities for assuming social roles. The individual variations of these factors may characterize their concept of the world, their individuality, and the basis of a conscious way of life.
- 3) The success of the individual personalities was directly or indirectly influenced by a number of factors, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes weakening each other. First and foremost, the local and regional economic environment determined the distribution and movements of capital between economic sectors, as well as the intensity of capital accumulation and forms of enterprises. At the same time, the social environment determined the forms of livelihood available, and raised requirements of education and qualification for those wishing to rise in society, while changes in national and international economic trends had a decisive influence on all of the above, and cannot, therefore, be ignored. Equally important in successful middle-class careers was the role of family background as the basis for getting ahead, including the forms and extent of capital accumulation in the 18th and 19th centuries, the general characteristic features of, and in particular the level of urbanization, the religious background and the level of social assimilation in their places of origin.
- 4) The range of occupations available to the modern middle classes included the ranks of clerks and entrepreneurs, prosperous artisans and merchants, as well as intellectuals; therefore, this group consisted of individuals who consciously chose the modern, emerging professions of the period examined or

working in occupations that were thriving at the time. The individual careers in the families depicted serve as a good example of how someone with talent and ambition for a profession could realistically become highly successful in it. The layer that could be most characteristically considered as part of the middle classes in Debrecen predominantly consisted of merchants, intellectuals and modern-type entrepreneurs, who can be well characterized on the basis of the examples highlighted. In generalization, we can conclude that among the most important values of “career development” we find the ability to recognize and evaluate situations, propensity for innovation and enterprising, sense of responsibility, commitment to continuous self-education, comprehensive interest and knowledge about the world, and openness to new things. This is coupled with good communication skills, which is necessary for establishing a broad range of diverse personal and professional relationships. These were the most important characteristic features that we can find in case of all major individuals studied. Rising in one’s career always happened through personal efforts, usually as a consequence of conscious and pre-planned considerations, with the least possible risks assumed and also calculating with realistic profits. Together with the traits listed above, this endeavor for growth guaranteed success and getting ahead.

- 5) From the data gathered it can be concluded that individual characteristics such as areas of interest, family and financial background, education and familiarity in their own social circles and with the surrounding world made it possible for these people to pursue their unique and individual careers. They worked adapting to and fitting into the contemporary social, economic and political circumstances, and thereby became characteristic representatives of the era. The almost (with minor interruptions) continuous economic development during the century and the social transformation from the feudal to the capitalist system, as well as the political balance and stability also greatly contributed to the fact that these individuals, emerging in a calm, middle-class environment, were able to find the path to their objectives, stabilized their activities and operations, and achieved their outstanding results.
- 6) The commercial firms, industrial companies and professional clienteles established in the 19th, but still functioning well in the 20th century, suited the expectations of the age and the requirements of modernization so well that no radical changes were necessary. Businesses following traditions remained among

the leading commercial entities of the developing city in such a way that the self-evident, continuous development of business management, and the adjustment of the stocks, orders and prices to the market conditions became a well-established tradition. They always insisted on modern and up-to-date management methods, thereby preserving trust and confidence among the customers of the business. Implementing these basic principles in the daily practice was sufficient for maintaining efficient and successful businesses. The careers of the various leading personalities steering these companies mainly manifested in the fact that, in comparison with others, they were able, even despite the often radically changing circumstances, to manage and develop their businesses in an exemplary way, thereby running the most modern and leading companies of the city and the region. Market research was important in all environments: businesses providing for general needs or filling in market gaps were able to operate more successfully even among generally bad economic circumstances, because their leaders were in possession of significant experiences, and their capital was organized in an additive stock-like manner, which meant that they were easily adaptable. International-sized companies were also organized along these principles: satisfying the cyclical needs of economic booms was a capital-generating activity, but after such periods of prosperity they switched to meeting more general demands. They strove for diversification by way of the modernization of their products, expertise, transportation possibilities and infrastructure, in order to maintain their adaptability.

- 7) It is valid for all industrial companies that they could be really successful when providing products and services that were in short supply. If, however, they received competition from other companies and were unable to make a breakthrough with some unique opportunity, then their tendency for success began to fluctuate. Merchants in Debrecen did not usually venture into industrial production, because a significant amount of liquid capital was necessary, and they rather based and developed their businesses on mobile capital. As a result, they had little or no capital surplus that could be invested for long periods of time. When they sometimes decided on long-term investments, they always endeavored to secure safe returns. From this point of view, it was more profitable to purchase landed property or to buy into a bigger business as a shareholder, where the expertise was already available. This attitude was less typical in other parts

of the country better endowed with the natural resources necessary for industrial production.

- 8) The attractiveness of land ownership was mainly due to the fact that land preserved its value securely, and was therefore a favorable form of investment. It provided less risky, more permanent, even though on the whole less profitable income, but it always created a basis for livelihood year after year. In the second half of the 19th century, the dominant trend of agricultural boom turned the production of cereals and animal feed, and thanks to the improvement of stocks, also animal breeding, into quickly developing fields. Incomes from the agricultural sector increased considerably, and an appropriate estate guaranteed constantly growing incomes for its owner. In Debrecen, this was further accentuated by the structure of the local economy, which was also predominantly built upon agriculture and created an increasing demand for agricultural raw materials. As a result, the milling and distilling industries and meat processing, to mention a few, were the economic drivers of agricultural production in the region, and also resulted in a quick development of the machine industry, mainly the production of agricultural machinery. This exercised an influence on small and very careful investors, as well as on businessmen with extensive capital resources. Commercial risks were increased by the emergence of the competition, which was generated by the spread of trade schools, as well as by the appearance of cheap products and the widening of the scales of quality. All this required an increase in the level of expertise brought to the business, which made professional interest and a certain level of commitment indispensable. Therefore, those who were lacking in these qualities found it safer to invest in landed properties than anywhere else, since personal expertise, care or control were indispensable for making a profit from this sector.
- 9) Merchants, entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs all considered intellectual professions as the future for their children. Not only the members of the upper layers, sometimes experiencing a narrowing of opportunities, but also those from lower social ranks also regarded the level of education and livelihood associated with white-collar professions as more attractive, since it offered a more secure and balanced way of life with less effort. Intellectual careers provided the most high-standard job opportunities, either independently or as employees. The status of intellectuals, however, frequently took a turn similar to merchants. Their financial status was greatly influenced by the

general economic situation of the country, regardless of whether they were public servants or self-employed. Their professional progress, however, was reflected not only in their financial circumstances, but also in their accumulation of official titles, recognitions and the other positions they filled. The real recognition of intellectual careers available to middle-class intellectuals started to increase from the 1880s, when the names of more and more white-collar workers appeared in the largest taxpayers' lists. Intellectual professions, however, really became generally recognized and accepted as part of the social elite only from the 1910s and 1920s, when the loosening of historical traditions made it possible for a truly middle-class type of intelligentsia to emerge. Up to that time, the old social boundaries were only theoretically dismantled, but the feudal, descent-based traditions cut across the actual social groups/categories. The 1930s, the years of the economic depression and the subsequent period of tranquility also had an impact on the lifestyle of intellectuals. Multitudes of white-collar workers also lost their jobs in consequence of the depression, even though those with a private practice generally fared better than employees. The changes brought about by the altered times and circumstances can also be traced in the fates of the families studied. All family members chose their professions at their own option. They all entered respected, gainful, "elite" professions, which guaranteed, by definition, recognition and status to their holders. Their reputation was provided by their roles among their peers, with scholarly achievements, their wealth gained and professional recognition as the most important factors. On the basis of the data and family histories studied, all of them had successful professional careers, which was only hindered by the two world wars and the intervening economic crisis. Family and financial background was less important in their careers than in the case of merchants, but talent and commitment were at least as significant. Perhaps it was due to this fact that they enjoyed more freedom when choosing a career than those born into a family business, who had to carry it on almost as a rule, but in intellectual families there was an even stronger endeavor to ensure that male descendants continue the tradition of choosing an intellectual profession.

- 10) In the examination of the families, the following factors proved to be universally valid: as demonstrated above, the most important aim for all families was to ensure the best possible education for their progeny and to assist them in choosing an

appropriate profession, perhaps even helping them get started in it. The rest was left to their individual decisions and talent. They were able to direct their own lives subsequently and to build their individual careers. The family ideal was for their offspring to be "...actual top students, ambitious, adaptable, quiet and industrious..." who would "always pay attention trembling and almost yearn to be eminent students and receive straight A-s."¹ In the course of the examination of some prominent families and their histories, the old observation is reinforced that individuals with outstanding talent may, as a result of their strong characters, push their offspring or siblings on parallel professions into the background. The careers of the families exhibit fluctuation that could even be charted, partly reflecting the influence of some family members of strong personality, and partly the individual features and opportunities of the generations and their modes of exploitation. In many cases one can witness the phenomenon discussed by Thomas Mann in his novel *Buddenbrooks*, as he also described the individual career types, the available career paths in a family from the rise to the fall. There are, of course, exceptions, and the majority of the cases discussed in the dissertation also belong here. Most families exhibited a continuously rising and developing initial tendency, which was followed by periods of stagnation or fluctuation due to the changes in the economic and social circumstances (the world wars and the economic depression), but the general tendency of flourishing was not usually broken until the nationalization of private enterprises after World War II. By that time, all families insisted on the stable prosperity maintained in their own, individually selected way. There were few families that could be characterized by a long period of ascent followed by subsequent decline, i.e. the curve described in the "Buddenbrook-effect."

The rise and prosperity of the families described in the dissertation, as well as the individual careers of their most outstanding members, can serve as excellent examples for the modes of emergence and opportunities of talented members of the middle classes in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their careers provide a series of lessons to learn from even today, mainly in terms of their economic, moral and social attitudes. Their stories are still topical these days from many points of view.

The influence of middle-class careers on the economic and intellectual life of Debrecen was quite significant. Their merits are outstanding because they are exemplary even to this day.

¹ Thomas Mann: *A Buddenbrook ház. Egy család alkonya*. Budapest, 2003. p. 505.

Middle-class mentality was able to survive in society, and its reappearance was also to be expected to a certain degree. Its values were preserved as ideologies, and are assets of public wealth along with the merits of commendable business behavior. These latter (including the undertaking of a public role, as a citizen active in local politics, strong commitment to charity, and a sense of responsibility for the entire society), however, are rather the principles of the middle-class intellectuals today than for the new enterprising layer of society.

Publications by the author of the dissertation:

- 1) Egy polgárcsalád karrierje a 19-20. századi Debrecenben [The career of a middle-class family in 19th - and 20th-century Debrecen]. In: *Történeti Tanulmányok [Studies in History] IX. (Acta Universitatis Debreceniensis Series Historica LIII.)* Debrecen, 2001. pp. 203-215.
- 2) A debreceni Vásáry család története: a tőkés polgárosodás kiemelkedő példája [The history of the Vásáry family of Debrecen: An outstanding example for the achievement of capitalist middle-class status]. In: *A Debreceni Déri Múzeum Évkönyve [Yearbook of Déri Museum of Debrecen]*, 2002-2003. Debrecen, 2003. pp. 193-202.
- 3) Egy cívis gazdálkodó család története a tőkés polgárság korában – a Zöld család [The history of a “Cívis” farming family in the age of capitalist bourgeoisie]. In: *A Hajdú-Bihar Megyei Levéltár Évkönyve [Yearbook of the Hajdú-Bihar County Archives]*, XXIX. Debrecen, 2002-2003. pp. 321-344.
- 4) Dragota Ignác, Debrecen egy korai tőkés polgára [Ignác Dragota, an early capitalist citizen of Debrecen]. In: *Történeti Tanulmányok [Studies in History] XI. (Acta Universitatis Debreceniensis Series Historica LV.)* Debrecen, 2003. pp. 143-154.
- 5) Tőkés polgári vagyonnal a társadalmi rangért – a Dragota család felemelkedésének útja [Capitalist middle-class wealth for social rank: The rising career of the Dragota family]. In: *A Déri Múzeum Évkönyve [Yearbook of Déri Museum of Debrecen]*, 2004. Debrecen, 2005. pp. 171-203.
- 6) Vázlat a debreceni cégek sorsáról a tőkés polgárság korában [An outline of the history of Debrecen businesses in the age of capitalist bourgeoisie]. *Rálátás [Outlook]*, vol. VI. no. 1.

Publication pending:

- 7) A Nagybákay-Sesztina család sorsa és a Déri Múzeum [The career of the Nagybákay-Sesztina family and Déri Museum]. In: *A Déri Múzeum Évkönyve [Yearbook of Déri Museum of Debrecen]*, 2005.